

Navigating Federalism: Federalists, the Boston Marine Society, and the Establishment of Federal Authority in Boston, 1789-1792

Matthew McKenzie*

Peu après la ratification de la Constitution des États-Unis en 1789, les nouvelles autorités fédérales ont fait face à la tâche délicate de prolonger leur juridiction dans des secteurs toujours méfiants d'une forte gouvernance centrale. À Boston, les autorités fédérales ont navigué ce défi en collaborant brièvement avec un groupe local de capitaines retraités - la Société Marine de Boston - en améliorant les aides à la navigation régionales. Une telle coopération a aidé les agents fédéraux et les membres de la société, mais pas toujours comme prévu. Conscient de son rôle comme intermédiaire important, la Société Marine de Boston a obligé les fédéralistes de New York à embrasser aussi bien les questions locales que fédéralistes. Malgré ces négociations, ce partenariat avec un groupe localement respecté a permis aux fédéralistes de promouvoir leur agenda constitutionnel et de dissiper les craintes prolongées d'un gouvernement aussi tyrannique qu'éloigné. Pour la Société Marine de Boston, ces liens avec le nouveau gouvernement fédéral a aidé à perpétuer l'image de la Société comme "pères du peuple maritime".

In October 1789, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton sought information. Two months earlier, Congress had approved Massachusetts Senator Elbridge Gerry's bill calling for the transfer of lighthouses, buoys, piers and other port improvements from local maintenance to federal control. In order to extend federal jurisdiction into Boston's port management, Hamilton needed to know local needs for navigational aids, channel buoys and light stations – in short the navigational infrastructure that would help ensure the safety of overseas trade through this most important port in the newly independent United States.¹

* History Department, University of Connecticut, Avery Point

¹ Alexander Hamilton, Treasury Circular, 5 October 1789. For the Boston Marine Society's response to Lincoln communications, see Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Boston Marine Society, Minutes, 1754-1833 3 November 1789, mfilm reel P-377. Hereafter referred to as BMS Minutes.

Such a task was not as simple as it appeared, however. While a regularized system of navigational aid support would fundamentally improve the safety and reliability of Boston's overseas trade, federal control over local port facilities represented the first direct extension of national power into local communities since the divisive constitutional ratification debates two years earlier. Just months after Federalists and Antifederalists split the electorate into opposite camps, Hamilton was well aware that federal assumption of lighthouses and port facilities could easily resurrect Antifederalist fears of a distant government imposing its rule over local affairs. While local information was essential to ensure the safety of merchant ships entering Boston, gaining such information – and extending this authority – was anything but safe to the Federalist ship of state.

To help him in this task, Hamilton turned to Boston's port collector, Benjamin Lincoln. A retired general from the Revolution, Lincoln's war service and connections to prominent Federalists had helped him secure this lucrative post after the war. In Lincoln, Hamilton had a well-connected contact in Boston, one whose political skills led him to see the political implications of Federal lighthouse assumption.

When Lincoln received Hamilton's request for information, the port collector immediately enlisted the Boston Marine Society (BMS), a prominent group of retired ship captains who had been active in managing the port for several decades. In doing so, Lincoln began a series of exchanges that permitted the BMS to exchange their support for Federalists' agenda in Boston, for Federalists' support for the Marine Society's agenda in New York. And in doing so, Lincoln created the means by which Hamilton overcame the political challenges Federalists faced in Boston. Throughout the 1790s, the Marine Society's technical support allowed Hamilton and Lincoln to highlight how locally responsive and effective a strong central government could be in addressing local concerns. Such cooperation also allowed Hamilton to push through Congress a constitutional agenda bolstering federal powers. Securing federal support for these improvements also allowed the Boston Marine Society members to demonstrate their continued role as fathers of Boston's maritime people by improving local port facilities and securing national support for local improvements beyond what the port could afford on its own.

How Federalists extended their new authority into distant polities has recently received significant attention from scholars of the early American republic. Whereas earlier scholarship has seen the establishment of the 1789 Constitution as a given once ratification was assured, recent studies of Federalism and Federalists have questioned how Federalists ensured local support for their new government. For example, Rogers M. Smith has argued that Federalists were far from the confident victors of the ratification battle. In fact, as a new party in a new political landscape, both national and local leaders were acutely aware of local scepticism of new institutions and the consequent partisan challenges that they faced in solidifying their national authority.² Similarly, David Waldstreicher has shown that local ruling elites in the 1790s turned to

² Rogers M. Smith, "Constructing American National Identity: Strategies of the Federalists," in Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg (eds), *Federalists Reconsidered* (Charlottesville, 1998), 19-40.

such public celebrations as parades and festivals to symbolically link the local people to the larger nation, cementing their own positions in the process.³ Andrew R.L. Cayton claims that “Indeed, many saw the efforts of nationally oriented men to attach people to the new republic as essentially radical innovations designed to undermine traditional social relationships. Not only were Federalists elevating imperial authority over local authority [*sic*]. By privileging abstract impersonal principles above particular ties, they were redefining the nature of social and political relationships.”⁴ Rather than older interpretations that saw Federalists as confident victors of the only logical response to the unstable Confederation period, these new studies present Federalists as insecure politicians seeking to justify their new government in the face of significant popular scepticism.

Scholars have also recognized that developing infrastructure improvements of the types that Lincoln and Hamilton sought in Boston also proved a political battleground that vetted the Federalist party.⁵ John Lauritz Larson has demonstrated clearly that canals, turnpikes and railroads carried important political significance to emerging definitions of the American republic. These projects, in many instances, pit Federalist agendas against local concerns and traditional understandings of how government related to local interests.⁶ Furthermore, Larson has shown that Federalists addressed these concerns with the concrete political tools that such developmental projects made available. While lighthouse construction projects did not generate the heated Congressional and public debates that Larson associated with later internal improvements, Hamilton’s assumption of port facilities suggests that port improvements were just as important, and carried as much political significance, as later development schemes. And the extent to which Hamilton and Lincoln were willing to acquiesce to the Marine Society’s desires reveals the extent to which these Federalist leaders were eager to secure local aid in their political task.

For indeed, stewardship over a port’s infrastructure represented a political as much as a utilitarian task. Frequently constructed with funds raised from town merchants and mariners, lighthouses in eighteenth-century New England symbolized a town’s dedication to the safety of its mariners and its ties to the metropolitan core of Great Britain’s trading empire. Navigational aids provided an obvious aid to shipping by making it easier for foreign vessels to arrive safely in port. By providing a fixed mark on shore from which to base surveys, navigational aids helped hydrographers make more reliable coastal charts that reduced maritime accidents. These improvements also

³ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

⁴ Andrew R.L. Cayton, “Radicals in the ‘Western World’: The Federalist Conquest of Trans-Appalachian North America,” in Ben-Atar and Oberg, *Federalists Reconsidered*, 78.

⁵ For overviews of earlier interpretations of the early Federalists, see Dorn Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg, “The Paradoxical Legacy of the Federalists,” in Ben-Atar and Oberg, *Federalists Reconsidered*, 1-16. See also Alan Taylor, *William Coopers’ Town* (New York, 1995), 141-169.

⁶ John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, 2001).

translated into lower insurance costs.⁷ Furthermore, any navigational aids erected would be discussed in published charts and sailing directions sold overseas, which – quite literally – put American port towns on the map.

Domestically, lighthouses also symbolized the concern local mercantile elites held for their seafaring neighbours. In July 1791, William Bentley saw this commitment first hand: “Yesterday the intended Beacon at Baker’s Island [in Salem Sound, Massachusetts] was raised by a large and jovial party of our Mariners. It is to be forty feet in height. Every exertion of this nature is to be considered as favourable to the public happiness, & as a source of our good hopes for the improvement of our navigation.”⁸ Nor was Bentley alone in seeing the importance of good navigational aids to public betterment. If the debates over the lighthouse’s colours, construction and flag system that Bentley recorded in the following weeks serve as an indication, the appearance, operation and maintenance of Salem’s navigational beacons appealed to many of Bentley’s neighbours.⁹

As the “jovial” mariners celebrating the Baker’s Island beacon also recognized, lighthouses and beacons symbolized a town’s dedication to its maritime workers. The benefits enjoyed by a beacon or lighthouse were not limited to master mariners or traders. Lighthouses and beacons helped smaller coasting and fishing vessels, and also reduced the chance of casualties through storms or shipwrecks. While these benefits translated into profits for a town’s merchants and traders, improvements in navigational aids also showed local merchants’ concern for the safety and well-being of the entire maritime population. In New England’s trading ports, where mariners were often friends, family or neighbours, such largesse helped masters return loved ones home safe and recruit new crews.¹⁰

These practical, imperial, economic and political benefits drove Massachusetts towns to build several light stations throughout the eighteenth century. Boston residents constructed a lighthouse there in 1713, while Nantucket residents built one in 1746. Plymouth built two in 1768, and Cape Ann residents built one in 1771. By the Revolution, Massachusetts had more lighthouses than any other British North American colony.¹¹

Despite their utility and popularity, however, lighthouses had a troubling history in the American colonies. If local need compelled residents to build lighthouses, local

⁷ *Directions for Sailing in and out of Plymouth Harbour*. ([Boston], 1768; Boston, 1785); John Sellers, *The English Pilot: The Fourth Book* (London, 1737).

⁸ William Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, Alice G. Waters (comp.), Volume I (4 vols., Gloucester, Mass., 1962), 281.

⁹ *Diary of William Bentley*, Vol I, 283-296.

¹⁰ See Daniel Vickers and Vance Walsh, “Young Men and the Sea: The Sociology of Seafaring in Eighteenth-Century Salem, Massachusetts,” *Social History* 24:1 (January 1999), 17-38, for discussion of maritime workers as part of the community.

¹¹ Francis Ross Holland, *America’s Lighthouses: Their Illustrated History Since 1716* (Brattleboro, Vt, 1972), 16. Malcolm Willoughby, *Lighthouses of New England* (Boston, 1929), 153-156.

support structures caused many problems.¹² Constructed with funds generated by local subscription, continued staffing and operation relied upon fees levied on vessels entering the harbour. Lighthouse upkeep thus depended upon local traffic and not on a regular support schedule.¹³ In addition, colonial lighthouse keepers often faced sporadic government reimbursement and consequently pursued better paying occupations, such as cattle grazing or pilot services, that distracted them from their lighthouse duties.¹⁴ Consequently, local shipping volume, and not navigational necessity, drove and sustained Massachusetts light stations. As a port's shipping volume declined, so too did the support for an important element in bring shipping to that harbour.

Given these problems, light-keeping positions and oil contracts for beacons were two gems of local political patronage. Lighthouse lamp oil contracts, for example, promised ready markets for well-connected local merchants and helped political leaders tie such centres of wealth to the town. In Massachusetts, with six of the nation's ten lighthouses, the value of those contracts was considerable.¹⁵ In addition, with lighthouses traditionally staffed by local residents familiar with local shipping patterns and routes, lighthouse-keeping positions represented important sources of patronage to local governments. Keepers not only received cash fees from passing vessels, they also received free housing, free pasturage on lighthouse lands, and the potential for more cash revenue from pilot services.

Given the importance of these installations, it is not surprising that Congress turned its attention to improving harbour facilities and lighthouse support early in its first session. Most of the nation's lighthouses were destroyed or heavily damaged during the Revolution, and in the spring of 1789 Congress took an interest in rebuilding, repairing and better supporting coastal navigational aids. Despite his concerns about the power represented in the new central government, former Antifederalist Elbridge Gerry proposed a bill calling for federal assumption of lighthouse maintenance and construction. As a condition to this help, states had to cede to federal jurisdiction the immediate land surrounding the light stations. The son of an established and wealthy fish-merchant family from Marblehead, Massachusetts, Gerry had seen the need for navigational improvements firsthand when, in the winter of 1769, a single storm killed

¹² The practice of petitioning colonial governments for lighthouse construction was not limited to Massachusetts. In both New York and New Hampshire, local residents appealed to Crown governors for lighthouse construction. In New Hampshire, the Portsmouth Marine Society actively appealed to the Royal government for support for the Portsmouth light that was erected in 1771. See Holland, *America's Lighthouses*, 15; Ronald Quilici, "The Portsmouth Marine Society: Social Diversity in a Colonial Maritime Community," *Historical New Hampshire*, 30 (1975), 101-112; and Dennis Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers: The U.S. Lighthouse Service and Its Legacy* (Annapolis, Md: 1997), 5-7.

¹³ For the local nature of lighthouse support, see Holland, *America's Lighthouses*; Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*; and Willoughby, *Lighthouses of New England*.

¹⁴ The intermittent, yet consistent petitions of Robert Ball for back pay and cost reimbursements represent the haphazard attention given to lighthouse maintenance during the colonial period. See Robert Ball's petitions to Massachusetts General Court, vol. 64, 26-28, 54, 197, 202-203, 239, 340; vol. 66, 14-15, 254-255 (Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Mass.).

¹⁵ Harold C. Syrett (ed), *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (27 vols., New York, 1961-1967), VI, 43.

seventy of Marblehead's fishermen and left 155 children orphaned.¹⁶ While government could do little to prevent storms, Gerry did see that improved navigational aids would bring the greatest good to the greatest number of citizens.¹⁷ Lighthouses and port improvements, therefore, were one way – and perhaps the most benign way – that the new government could demonstrate its concern for the happiness and well-being of all its citizens.

Lighthouses also appealed to Gerry's former Federalist rivals. Alexander Hamilton, developing his ideas in 1789 for a new national political economy based upon foreign trade, saw benefits from improved navigational aids as well. With vast stores of natural resources, a growing population and numerous good harbours, the new United States was poised to become a great trading nation.¹⁸ If Gerry saw lighthouses as bringing the most good to the most people, Hamilton saw lighthouses as helping the most important class of citizens – merchants and traders – develop markets, increase capital and promote American exports.¹⁹

Despite Gerry's good intentions, the lighthouse bill's requirements posed real threats in the eyes of Antifederalists wary of the new government. Most troubling was the requirement that states cede lands surrounding lighthouses to federal jurisdiction. For some, this represented the thin end of the wedge by which all public land – and perhaps private as well – would be ceded to federal jurisdiction in exchange for services already managed locally. Such a threat was quite real to a hesitant New Hampshire legislature. This state only ceded the Portsmouth lighthouse land to federal control on condition that the state could reclaim the land should the federal government fail in its navigational duties. Furthermore, all New Hampshire writs, warrants and executions retained – and still retain – jurisdiction on the ceded land.²⁰ Nor was New Hampshire alone in its hesitation. As late as January 1793, Tench Coxe, then in charge of lighthouses, complained to Hamilton of Massachusetts and New York both passing state laws contradicting the federal act.

Antifederalists in New Hampshire, Massachusetts and New York were quite right to be suspicious of such an obvious public good. Federal assumption of lighthouses also offered Federalists opportunities to push their constitutional agenda. In 1789, the precedent of federally supported lighthouses became part of the constitutional debate about whether or not the federal government had the right to raise revenue by imposing customs duties. James Madison, defending the government's rights to collect customs duties, saw lighthouses as a utilitarian justification for a centralized impost.²¹ If customs

¹⁶ George Athan Billias, *Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* (New York, 1976), 15.

¹⁷ Billias, *Elbridge Gerry*, vii, 203-204.

¹⁸ For more discussion of Hamilton's plans, see Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

¹⁹ For more on Hamilton's economic visions, see McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, chapter 3, and Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York, 1993), 92-132.

²⁰ Albert Stillman Batchellor and Henry Harrison Metcalfe, *Laws of New Hampshire Including Public and Private Acts, Resolves, Votes, etc* (10 vols., Manchester, New Hampshire, 1904-1922), V, 685-686.

²¹ Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 67.

revenue was dedicated to navigational improvements, then the principle of federal jurisdiction over interstate and foreign trade would be more palatable to adversely inclined merchant interests. And through a series of debates in April and May 1789, Madison defeated motions against the impost and successfully used the utilitarian case for federal lighthouse support to defend the federal government's ability to raise revenues.²²

For all these reasons, federal assumption of lighthouses threatened to resurrect Antifederalist fears of strong distant government. And nothing in 1789 suggested that Boston would emerge as a solid centre for Federalist politics and policies within the next three years. In 1783, Boston merchants had initially opposed a centralized tonnage duty that Madison resurrected in 1789. Furthermore, ratification in Massachusetts had split Boston's politicians. Important leaders like Samuel Adams, James Warren, Nathan Dane, James Winthrop, Benjamin Austin, and Samuel Osgood all sided against the new federal government. Most significantly, Governor John Hancock, while chair of the ratification convention, remained silent.²³ In January 1788, when the delegates assembled to deliberate, Antifederalists dominated the group. Through the deliberations Samuel Adams and John Hancock, both locally popular among Boston's maritime community, emerged as key swing delegates, and ultimately supported the document after political arm-twisting and enticing promises of future positions.²⁴ In the end, the document passed, although, according to Jackson Turner Main, "It seems clear that a majority, though not a large one, of the citizens of Massachusetts opposed the Constitution when it was ratified, and it is probable that a majority continued to oppose it."²⁵

Antifederalists were by no means defeated after the 1788 ratification debates. As late as January 1789, they continued to control the Massachusetts House of Representatives, a position perpetuated by support from Boston mariners suffering from a continued depression in the maritime trades.²⁶ Antifederalist Senator Benjamin Austin, for example, used this crisis in 1790 to attack Federalist policies. In 1792, Austin's Antifederalists stole a vote on Boston police reform. According to a disgusted John Quincy Adams, Austin, "with the utmost degree of vehemence and absurdity," and using a long speech that was to Adams a "farrago of nonsense and folly," managed to sidetrack Federalist reforms. According to Adams, "Seven hundred men, who looked as if they

²² Linda De Pauw, Charlene Bangs Bickford and Lavonne Siegel Hauptman (eds), *Debates in the House of Representatives, First Session: June-September 1789* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992), Vol. X, 223-242.

²³ Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (New York, 1961), 200-201.

²⁴ Samuel B. Harding, *The Contest Over Ratification of the Federal Constitution in the State of Massachusetts* (Da Capo Press: New York, 1970 [1896]), 96-97. For a more complete narrative of the political maneuverings around Massachusetts' ratification of the Constitution, see Main, *Antifederalists*, 204-208, from which the preceding narrative is derived. See also Harding, *Ratification*, 83-89.

²⁵ Main, *Antifederalists*, 201-209.

²⁶ Main, *Antifederalists*, 208-209.

had been collected from all the Jails on the continent, with Ben Austin like another Jack Cade at their head outvoted by their numbers all the combined weight of Wealth, Abilities, and Integrity of the Town.... From the whole Event I have derived a confirmation of my contempt for democracy as a Government.”²⁷

In many ways, the Marine Society was ideally suited to help Hamilton and Lincoln import the new Federal government into Boston. The Society formed in the 1740s as a mutual aid organization for local master mariners, with regular membership dues supporting members’ families during times of need. In 1754, the Marine Society added navigational research to its other interests as a condition of receiving acts of incorporation. With this new mandate, regulations now required all members to keep close navigational observations during their voyages and return them to the society’s Committee of Observations for analysis, review and dissemination.

Through their work collecting, analyzing and disseminating coastal knowledge, the Marine Society soon gained regional recognition for their expertise. For example, British General Robert Monckton commented favourably on future BMS member Captain Hector McNeil’s manuscript chart of the Bay of Fundy – a chart that allowed McNeil to convey British forces to Fort Beauséjour in 1755. Thirteen years later, the Massachusetts General Court looked to the Society for new sailing directions incorporating the recently built Gurnet Point lighthouse that marked the entrance to Plymouth Harbor and replaced those more commonly in John Sellers’ *The English Pilot: The Fourth Book* (1698).²⁸ By 1774, the BMS’s reputation had grown sufficiently for Bernard Romans, former surveyor to the Board of Trade, to submit his chart, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York, 1774), to the society for review and public recommendation. Finally, in 1780, with Boston’s harbour only just emerging from British occupation and war, the state granted the Marine Society authority to select and manage harbour pilots.²⁹ Thus, by the mid-1780s, the Marine Society represented the most experienced and respected centre for navigational knowledge for New England waters.

Not only did the society wield significant scientific authority among Boston’s maritime community, it had also emerged from the Revolution with significant political influence. Marine Society members had been prominent in the political controversies leading to the war in the 1760s. For example, about a dozen Marine Society members had joined the radical Boston Society for the Encouragement of Trade and Commerce – a group that helped organize Boston’s inflammatory non-importation agreements and that terrorized merchants who had refused to comply.³⁰ In 1775 a few prominent Marine Society members also enjoyed trans-Atlantic reputations as radicals. In April, an

²⁷ William Welch, “The Virtuous Republic of Benjamin Austin, Jr.,” *Locus*, 8 (1995), 32-34.

²⁸ The BMS directions for Plymouth were also republished in 1783.

²⁹ BMS Minutes, 3 June 1783. The Boston Marine Society still reviews and recommends applicant pilots for the state, and remains the only private organization to retain these important roles in the country.

³⁰ See Matthew G. McKenzie, “Vocational Science and the Politics of Independence: The Boston Marine Society, 1754-1812” (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 2003), 82-88,

anonymous London writer included several BMS members in an attack on Boston Whigs. The author characterized William Davis as “of small importance & great conceit”, John Bradford as “a Brave & Valiant sea commander only a little bashful which is well known to the underwriters in London,” and John Pulling as “Bully of the Mohawk Tribe,” suggesting some involvement with the Boston Tea Party. The author also singled out Job Prince as “Remarkable for his pretended hospitality to strangers” and indicted Caleb Hopkins as “The northern politician [who] talks on both sides of the Question occasionally.” Edward Davis finished the list, characterized as “a Tatler [that] minds every Body’s business but his own.”³¹ Finally, Marine Society members filled naval roles as officers in Washington’s Navy, aboard privateers and served as prize agents for the Continental Congress.

After the Revolution, the Marine Society remained politically engaged during the crises surrounding Shay’s Rebellion – a conflict that pitted Massachusetts’ western farmers and agrarian interests against more commercialized coastal towns in 1786 and 1787. To counter Shaysite attacks on coastal political power – and to make a case to unemployed mariners who might join in Shay’s challenge – the Marine Society began making public processions and appearances with increasing confidence as caretakers for the town’s maritime interests. Beginning in 1786, the BMS made public the “feasts” that coincided with their annual meetings. At these annual dinners, the BMS elected officers and inducted new members. In the past, these affairs had taken place in private meeting rooms that the society rented in local coffeehouses. In November 1786, however, the society voted that three members form a committee “to manage the [BMS public dinner] and that they publish the proceedings of this annual Meeting, with a list of the new members also the standing vote of the society relative to the communications of observations on coasts and Bays.” The committee was instructed to “invite such gentlemen to the Feast as they may think proper.”³²

In 1787, the Marine Society also expanded its charitable work beyond members and their families. Approached by Reverend John Clarke, Dr John Warren, and Dr Aaron Dexter of the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Marine Society agreed to help guide the Humane Society’s efforts in building three shelters for shipwrecked mariners in more remote areas surrounding Boston harbour. These shelters promised some protection for shipwrecked mariners until help could arrive. In responding to the request, the Marine Society stated, “[B]eing in a degree the Representatives of the Maritime part of the community[, we] feel a very warm sense of the benevolent design of the Humane Society & return their most cordial thanks for their truly human[e] attention to so exposed & valuable part of the citizens of this state as the seamen are [*sic*] most certainly are.”³³

By the late 1780s, the Marine Society was as interested in stabilizing Boston’s volatile political climate as it was in improving the port’s infrastructure. By making

³¹ “Tory Account of Boston Whigs,” 18 April 1775, Ms-L (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.).

³² BMS Minutes, 7 November 1786.

³³ BMS Minutes, 2 January 1787.

public its efforts on behalf of Boston's mariners – from safer navigation to shipwreck shelters – the Society demonstrated their interest, authority, and efforts in maritime affairs. Yet the Marine Society made its case not through partisan politics. Unlike politicians such as Lincoln and Hamilton, whom many saw by the mid-1780s as corrupt and self-serving, the BMS's standing stemmed from its interests in promoting the collective good. The Marine Society had decades of social leadership and influence behind it that gave the Society a public legitimacy the newly appointed Customs Collector had yet to accrue. With an authority resting outside politics, the Marine Society enjoyed the allure of Republican virtue and the appearance of true disinterestedness.³⁴ Lincoln, on the other hand, while well-regarded for his Revolutionary War service, received his collectorship through his political connections with the Federalist party, and was thus part and parcel of the new political structure that reconstituted a distant centralized government.

Consequently, the Marine Society offered technical expertise, non-partisan political influence, and like-minded allies for Lincoln and Hamilton's task of establishing federal authority over Boston's light stations, and Lincoln intended to use it. When Hamilton's letter arrived in October 1789, he immediately thought of the Marine Society, and Hamilton's queries about Boston's maritime infrastructure to the Society for consideration. The Marine Society quickly recognized its powerful position, and used contact with Lincoln to push its own agenda. In replying to Lincoln's request, for example, the BMS took the opportunity to leverage national support for Boston harbour pilot reform, and wrote to Hamilton: "A very respectable body of Merchants from this Metropolis [have] thought it proper to communicate to us, the Members of the Boston Marine Society, a Copy of their proposed application to the President of the United States on the subject of the Pilotage of this Bay and Harbour.... We find ourselves compell'd by Motives of Publick Duty to observe to you Sir, that a Reform is necessary in the Pilotage, &c. of the Harbour."³⁵

After this communication, Hamilton, Lincoln and the Marine Society exchanged technical expertise for political influence on several occasions between 1789 and 1792. In November 1790, for example, Lincoln requested design recommendations for a revenue cutter then under construction in Newburyport. In addition to providing the recommended dimension, the Society pushed the federal government to take better care of Boston's mariners. At a special meeting called for the purpose of responding to Lincoln's request, the Society, "[A]lways... ready to aid & assist the trade so as to promote the general good," also voted a committee to investigate possible locations around Boston for a hospital for sick and injured mariners.³⁶ After investigating different methods for funding the institution, and selecting "some spot on the heights of Charlestown, East of the Town as the most eligible situation for such a building," the

³⁴ See Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 40-60; and William Cooper's *Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 141-169.

³⁵ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, V, 517-518, 518 note 1.

³⁶ BMS Minutes, 12 October 1790.

Society voted a committee the following month to draft a petition to Congress “setting forth the utility of a marine hospital & pointing out the means of supporting one.” To help further its petition along, the society invoked its rarely used provision allowing non-mariners to be elected honorary members, and voted Benjamin Lincoln a member.³⁷

While Hamilton considered his position on marine hospitals, the Boston Marine Society continued its demands for local navigational aids. In February 1792, and in response to requests from the Humane Society of Massachusetts, the Marine Society petitioned Massachusetts Governor John Hancock to ask Congress to build a lighthouse on Cape Cod to help mariners navigate those dangerous waters. Other regional marine societies joined with Boston as well: at about the same time, the Marine Society at Salem also voted to petition Congress for a lighthouse on Cape Cod. To solicit support the Salem group had sent letters to both Boston and the Newburyport Marine Society enlisting their aid in the campaign. By the end of February the brunt of this organized campaign reached Congress.³⁸

The Boston Marine Society was making more demands by the summer of the same year. Again seeking to use its contacts in government for local improvement, the Marine Society formed a committee in August to request that Hamilton mark a dangerous ledge called Harding Rocks that lay off Hull, Massachusetts. To add more clout to its petition, the Society enlisted the support of Federal Revenue Cutter Captain John Foster Williams who was soon made a member in exchange for his troubles.³⁹

On a national level, Hamilton recognized the importance of respecting and preserving local port management authorities. Rather than replacing incumbents with selected Federalist allies as he had done with the customs service, Hamilton recommended to Washington in January 1790 that serving lighthouse keepers be retained in all cases.⁴⁰ These recommendations included retaining Hannah Thomas, the late General John Thomas’ widow, in her post as the keeper of the Gurnet Point Light in Plymouth, Massachusetts.⁴¹

“It is understood, that the widow of the late General [Thomas] has under the State had the superintendance [*sic*] of the Light house at Plymouth; but whether this has been nominal or real is not known, nor how far public considerations may cooperate with personal ones to recommend a continuance of the arrangements.⁴²

Beyond obvious utilitarian reasons for retaining local lighthouse keepers, however, federal assumption of responsibility for lighthouses provided an important precedent for

³⁷ BMS Minutes 2 November 1790.

³⁸ BMS Minutes 15 February 1792.

³⁹ BMS Minutes, 1 May 1792 and 7 August 1792.

⁴⁰ Carl E. Prince, “The Passing of the Aristocracy: Jefferson’s Removal of the Federalists, 1801-1805,” *Journal of American History*, 57 (1970-1971), 563-575.

⁴¹ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, VI, 45. General John Thomas died of smallpox at Chambly in 1776 commanding the remnants of Montgomery’s force that had taken Montreal.

⁴² Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, VI, 297.

establishing a loose constructionist interpretation of the Constitution that in turn would allow Hamilton to move forward with key components of his financial plans. In February 1791, Hamilton cited federal action to take charge of lighthouses to argue for Congress's authority to charter a national bank. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and others, however, saw the establishment of a national bank as interpreting Congress' powers in too liberal a manner, and charged that Congress did not have this authority. In responding to Jefferson's attack, Hamilton invoked the utilitarian benefit of lighthouses to justify his loose interpretation of the constitution just as Madison had done two years prior:

The practice of government is against the rule of [strict] construction advocated by the Secretary of State. Of this the act concerning light houses, beacons, buoys, & public piers, is a decisive example. This doubtless must be referred to the power of regulating trade, and is fairly relative to it. But it cannot be affirmed, that the exercise of that power, in this instance, was strictly necessary; or that the power itself would be nugatory without that of regulating establishments of this nature.⁴³

Ultimately, Washington signed the Bank of the United States into law in February 1792.

Hamilton also used Boston Marine Society petitions to push forward other ideas. Arriving in Congress in January 1791, the Marine Society's marine hospitals petition demonstrated the popular support for such a measure, and gave Hamilton an opportunity to argue for greater overseas trade and a stronger military. He argued that "The establishment of one or more Hospitals in the United States is a measure desirable on various accounts. The interests of humanity are concerned in it, from its tendency to protect from want and misery, a very useful, and, for the most part, very needy class of the Community."⁴⁴ In addition, federal support for marine hospitals enticed trained mariners away from other nations' merchant services. Hamilton testified, "The interests of navigation and trade are also concerned in it, from the protection and relief, which it is calculated to afford to the same class; conducing to attract seamen to the country."⁴⁵ Hamilton also saw marine hospitals representing similar local political benefits as lighthouses and buoys. "The benefit of the fund ought to extend, not only to disabled and decrepid [*sic*] seamen, but to the widows and children of those who may have been killed or drowned, in the course of the service as seamen."⁴⁶ In addition, the hospitals could also offer continued aid to its former patients: "It will probably be found expedient, besides the reception and accommodation of the parties entitled, at any hospital which may be instituted to authorizing the granting pensions, in aid of those who may be in condition, partly to procure subsistence from their own labor. There may be cases, in

⁴³ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, VIII, 104. For more on the responses to Hamilton's economic plans, see McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, chapter 6, and Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 226-233.

⁴⁴ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, XI, 295.

⁴⁵ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, XI, 295.

⁴⁶ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, XI, 295.

which this mode of relief may be more accommodating to the individuals, and, at the same time, more economical.”⁴⁷ As essential to his vision of a nation with strong overseas trade, Hamilton pushed the Marine Society’s petition forward as an auxiliary to his developmental ideas.⁴⁸

This partnership between Hamilton and the Boston Marine Society lasted only for a few years, however. As long as the secretary had items that the society could help promote, he would listen to and promote its plans. As Federalist rule became more accepted – and as the threat of Antifederalist backlash ebbed – Hamilton’s need for the BMS waned. In 1792, for example, Marine Society requests for a lighthouse on Cape Cod fell upon deaf ears at the Treasury and in Congress.

Hamilton’s changing political fortunes also helped erode Marine Society influence on a national level. By early 1792, Jefferson and Madison began to question Hamilton’s pro-British developmental policies and his own public virtue. During the debates over the Bank of the United States in 1791, Jefferson and Madison united in opposition to Hamilton’s favourable policies towards Great Britain.⁴⁹ Hamilton faced the Virginians again in 1792 when the nation’s first bank panic raised questions about Hamilton’s integrity in handling national monies.⁵⁰ As the Boston Marine Society demanded more navigational improvements, Hamilton was forced to defend the larger economic structure from which support for navigational aids emanated. Under these pressures, Hamilton named Tench Coxe to the new office of Superintendent of Lighthouses in 1792, severing the BMS’s direct tie to national power centres. Finally, by 1795, as many states proved uncooperative in ceding lighthouse lands on federal terms, Congress essentially accepted the states’ terms and backed down – further reducing the need for local allies such as the BMS.⁵¹

As a result of political changes at the national level, many of the Marine Society projects for Boston languished. Highlighting the BMS’s fall from pre-eminence, the campaign for a Cape Cod lighthouse required a major grassroots effort among Massachusetts marine societies and other organizations to compel Congress to revisit the issue. Attempting to wield influence they no longer held, the Marine Society reappointed a committee in 1795 to contact the Humane Society and call up support from the Boston Chamber of Commerce in a renewed effort to build the light. In December, the Newburyport Marine Society also weighed in and asked the Boston Marine Society to support its own petition to Congress for the lighthouse.⁵² In January 1796 the Marine Society at Salem added its voice to the outcry and presented its own petition.⁵³ In February, Newburyport’s Marine Society enlisted Congressional representatives to help

⁴⁷ Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, XI, 295.

⁴⁸ Marine hospitals would not be built until 1798 in Virginia, and 1800 in Boston – on the site selected by the Marine Society a decade earlier.

⁴⁹ Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 228-229.

⁵⁰ Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 279-282.

⁵¹ See Syrett, *Hamilton Papers*, XV, 430, note 19.

⁵² William H. Bayley and Oliver O. Jones, *History of the Marine Society of Newburyport, Massachusetts* ([Newburyport, Mass.], 1906), 75.

⁵³ Marine Society at Salem Papers, 28 January 1796, vol. 1 (Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.).

pressure Congress.⁵⁴ In July, the Boston Marine Society submitted its petition to Congress, and in November formed yet another committee to prod Congress further on the issue.⁵⁵ Finally, in 1798, after six years of petitioning, Congress approved the construction of Cape Cod Light, but the long struggle underscored the Marine Society's lost political influence.

While brief, the six-year partnership between Hamilton and the Boston Marine Society was more than an example of the first national party acceding to local concerns. In light of the challenges Federalists faced in Boston, the Boston Marine Society emerged as an essential ally that helped Hamilton sell his ideas to the local people. Already respected among both mariners and merchants, the Marine Society's support for Hamilton's plans helped both to steer national resources to local needs that yielded the best results, and to demonstrate that these resources were being directed by local institutions most aware of the city's needs. The Marine Society benefited by being able to show its local constituents that it had the power to direct federal resources to better the community as a whole.

Dealings between Alexander Hamilton and the Boston Marine Society also illustrate one road by which Federalists successfully established their rule after years of political instability and in the face of continued Antifederalist opposition. Far from neatly stepping onto a clean stage with full popular support, Hamilton recognized that he needed to enlist the support of local organizations in order to succeed in his plans. In Boston, this support was partially gained through the cooperation of the Boston Marine Society, whose knowledge and local influence helped frame federal policies, and helped remove the spectre of authority imposed from afar. Furthermore, Hamilton's cooperation with the Boston Marine Society also demonstrated that ties between local and national bodies were more than symbolic. Direct ties with real political and developmental results, in addition to symbolic rites, forged bonds that allowed both national and local leaders to excel in their roles. For the Marine Society, federal support for local improvements showed that it could indeed be effective "representatives of the maritime community." Access to locally respected organizations helped Federalists present legislation to Congress with the sanction of popular demand. With few able to debate the need and public benefit of improved navigational aids and support for mariners, Federalists were able to use lighthouses to help establish important legislative precedents essential for the success of the Federal experiment. By linking these precedents to practical, utilitarian, and locally requested infrastructure improvements, Federalists were able to avoid serious and potentially fatal opposition in Congress and in local communities.

⁵⁴ Bayley and Jones, *Newburyport Marine Society*, 75.

⁵⁵ BMS Minutes, 2 July and November [sic] 1796.