



Governed by a Spirit of Opposition (Studies in Early American Economy and Society from the Library Company of Philadelphia)

Jessica Choppin Roney

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During the colonial era, ordinary Philadelphians played an unusually active role in political life. Because the city lacked a strong central government, private individuals working in civic associations of their own making shouldered broad responsibility for education, poverty relief, church governance, fire protection, and even taxation and military defense. These organizations dramatically expanded the opportunities for white men—rich and poor alike—to shape policies that immediately affected their communities and their own lives.

In *Governed by a Spirit of Opposition*, Jessica Choppin Roney explains how allowing people from all walks of life to participate in political activities amplified citizen access and democratic governance. Merchants, shopkeepers, carpenters, brewers, shoemakers, and silversmiths served as churchwardens, street commissioners, constables, and Overseers of the Poor. They volunteered to fight fires, organized relief for the needy, contributed money toward the care of the sick, took up arms in defense of the community, raised capital for local lending, and even interjected themselves in Indian diplomacy. Ultimately, Roney suggests, popular participation in charity, schools, the militia, and informal banks empowered people in this critically important colonial city to overthrow the existing government in 1776 and re-envision the parameters of democratic participation.

Governed by a Spirit of Opposition argues that the American Revolution did not occasion the birth of commonplace political activity or of an American culture of voluntary association. Rather, the Revolution built upon a long history of civic engagement and a complicated relationship between the practice of majority-rule and exclusionary policy-making on the part of appointed and self-selected constituencies.

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