Why did the American Revolution occur when it did, and why, of the many British colonies in North America and the Caribbean, did these thirteen choose to separate from the mother country? A potential answer that has gone largely unnoticed in the scholarship is the development of colonial “time-consciousness,” as the improvements made in transatlantic communication transformed colonists’ expectations for timely communications.

For most of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, local clocks ticked largely in isolation from the metropole. Things began to change in the middle of the eighteenth century, however, with the establishment of monthly mail packet ships and the development of serial print on both sides of the Atlantic. By the 1760s, American colonists could glimpse at the metropolitan public sphere as observers with their noses pressed to the transatlantic window. For colonists eager for parity and participation, this was simultaneously not enough to satisfy their new expectations and too much to remain oblivious. The metropolitan timeline interrupted, complicated, and overturned local timelines more than ever before.

Consider, for instance, the temporal bind that faced Boston artist John Singleton Copley in 1766. To gain the respect of the art world, Copley needed to participate in the annual London exhibition each April. To be eligible, Copley’s painting had to arrive in London by February, which meant it needed to be shipped by late fall. However, critiques from the last year’s exhibition would not arrive in Boston until the fall at the absolute earliest, leaving Copley no time to incorporate the feedback before it was time to ship off his next piece. Little wonder that, after struggling to beat the metropolitan clock for three years, Copley had given up by 1769.¹

The rhythms of transatlantic communications profoundly shaped how colonists understood political events and, in turn, politicized the problem of time. Beginning with the 1752 calendar controversy that occurred when the British Empire moved from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, my dissertation connects traditional turning points such as the Stamp Act Crisis and the Townshend Acts to less well-known events that centered on the issue of time, such as the administrative battles over the “suspending clause” in colonial legislation and the colonial outrage at royal disallowances made by the Privy Council. I conclude by examining how, at the beginning of the revolutionary war in 1775, the temporal balance of power shifted from the center to the periphery as imperial decisionmakers struggled with the consequences of time lag.