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Chapter 3

The Crisis Deepens

Although the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766 removed the piece of legislation the colonies found most irritating, it did not resolve the constitutional issue that had risen with act's passage. In fact, Parliament quickly responded to the arguments the colonists made about its powers. In the Declaratory Act, passed in March 1766—at the same time that the Stamp Act was repealed—Parliament asserted its right to pass legislation affecting the colonies. Prominent Virginian landowner George Mason, in his “Letter to London Merchants,” argued with businessmen in Great Britain who had taken it upon themselves to reprimand the colonists for resisting parliamentary authority. As late as 1768 the London-trained lawyer John Dickinson was restating the colonists’ constitutional position in his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. In 1773 Benjamin Franklin recognized how far the relationship between the

mother country and her colonies had degraded in his satirical essay “Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One.”

Townshend Proposes New Taxes

By the time the Declaratory Act was passed, George Grenville, the man responsible for the Stamp Act’s passage, was gone, dismissed from office by George III. The idea that the colonists should be taxed to support the work of empire was taken up by Charles Townshend, one of Grenville’s successors as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Townshend proposed to raise money through a series of indirect taxes on items imported into the colonies, such as lead, paint, paper, and—infamously—tea. Since these taxes were levied on items exported from Britain and imported in the colonies, Townshend expected that the colonists would not object to them.

Townshend was wrong. Almost immediately the colonists revived the systems of protest that had begun during the Stamp Act resistance, urging colonial citizens to boycott British goods. An anonymous author, contributing to *Boston Post-Boy & Advertiser* newspaper in mid-November 1767, called for an overall boycott of British goods in order to impress on British commercial interests the power of colonial consumption. In an “Address to the Ladies” appearing in the same paper, another anonymous contributor both recognized the contribution that women made to the colonial economy and urged women to wear clothes made from homespun cloth.

The presence of British troops in Boston proved to be a ticking bomb. Conflicts between citizens and soldiers flared continuously, often resulting in violence. Late in February 1770, though, the rate of violence began to accelerate. During an attack on the house of a man accused of violating the city’s nonimportation agreement, an eleven-year-old boy named Christopher Seider was killed. Patriotic feelings ran high in the days following Seider’s burial. The relatively unknown youth was taken to his grave accompanied a crowd that may have reached several thousands in size.

The Boston Massacre

On March 2 a British private soldier named Patrick Walker visited a rope factory in the city, looking for odd jobs in order to make some spending money. The workers there drove Walker away, but the soldier returned with friends later in the day, determined to make a fight. Although the free-for-all was inconclusive, there was a strong sense that the battle was going to continue.

March 2 was a Friday in 1770. Saturday nothing of note happened, and Sunday—as would be expected in a town that still observed the Sabbath strictly—was a day of peace. On the evening of Monday, March 5, however, a British sentry near the customs house found himself surrounded by a crowd of angry citizens. They started by throwing snowballs at him, but soon they progressed to prying up the cobbles in the street and throwing those as well. His life in danger, the soldier summoned his captain and his squad. Within minutes the soldiers began firing into the crowd. By the end of the evening five colonists were dead, one more was dying, and a seventh was badly wounded.

It is not clear what exactly happened to make the soldiers fire into an unarmed crowd. The Patriot party, however, used what became known as the Boston Massacre to their advantage. The *Boston Gazette* published a long report on the incident only a week later. The Boston silversmith Paul Revere, who was also an artist, produced an engraving of the incident that substituted patriotic fervor for historical accuracy but that became extremely popular. For years after the massacre, prominent citizens of the city gave public speeches commemorating the occasion. In 1772, for instance, the address was given by Dr. Joseph Warren. Three years later, Warren would give his life for his cause, dying in the battle of Bunker Hill.

In the meantime, both colonists and British officials made some efforts to smooth over the cracks in the imperial system that the Boston Massacre had revealed. The colonists gave the British soldiers a fair trial; the Massachusetts lawyer John Adams served as consul for Captain Thomas Preston and eight of his soldiers. Adams won acquittal for the captain and six of his men. For their part, the British rolled back most of the objectionable taxes, with one exception: the tax on tea.

There were some other disturbances between the British and the American colonists in the period between the early spring of 1770 and the early winter of 1773. In March 1772 an overzealous Royal Navy officer provoked an incident with the governor of Rhode Island. When the officer ran his vessel, the *Gaspee*, aground later that summer, a band of colonists boarded the vessel and burned it. During the same period Franklin, who was serving as a colonial representative in London, obtained letters written by the royal governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson. Hutchinson in those letters called for Parliament to expand its powers over the colonies rather than restrain them. Franklin sent them to Massachusetts to be published, and in doing so rekindled the passions that had largely characterized the previous decade.

The Tea Act and the Boston Tea Party

That was how matters stood in 1773, when Parliament passed the Tea Act. The act was intended to bail out the British East India Company, which was on the

verge of bankruptcy, by giving it a monopoly on importing tea to the colonies. To the colonists, however, that made little difference: the Tea Act was another example of government overreach by a body that had already tried to curtail American liberties. As had been done in the earlier Stamp Act and Townshend Act crises, the colonists launched campaigns of resistance based on nonimportation and nonconsumption.

The campaigns were effective in some parts of the colonies. Both Philadelphia and New York sent their consignments of tea back to Britain still loaded in the ships that carried them. Some tea was successfully landed in Charleston, South Carolina, but the entire cargo was seized by the colony's governor and stored instead of sold. In Boston, however, matters were more complicated. Governor Hutchinson was determined to land the tea; the Patriot leaders of the town were equally determined to prevent it. The disagreement kept the tea stuck on board the ships in Boston Harbor for several weeks. Finally, on the night of December 16, 1773, when hope of an agreement had failed, a band of colonists thinly disguised as Native Americans boarded the three tea ships in the harbor and threw the tea overboard.

The Boston Tea Party was an act of political protest rather than a riot. The article "Tea, Destroyed by Indians," published some weeks afterward, celebrated it as a blow struck for liberty against tyranny. Tea Party participant George Robert Twelves Hewes, in a story related more than half a century later, recalled that the destruction of the tea was conducted in good order. Only the tea itself was targeted; private property was left strictly alone or replaced if it was damaged by accident.

Women Join the Struggle

The fact that a clandestine operation could be planned and executed by a nongovernmental organization like the Patriots showed how far the Americans had progressed along their path toward liberty and independence. In addition, although the Sons of Liberty were by definition male, women also joined in the struggle. The Edenton Tea Party, launched in North Carolina in October 1774, did not involve destruction of property; it took the form of a petition to King George. The Edenton document was notable because it was organized entirely by women, and fifty-one women signed it. The Edenton group was satirized in a cartoon published in England. It was a sign that the struggle that was coming would be a war of all Americans, male and female.

Further Reading

Books

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“Save Your Money, and Save Your Country!”

Author

Anonymous

Date

1767

Type

Letters/Correspondence; Essays, Reports,
Manifestos

Significance

Exemplified the arguments put forward in Boston for boycotts and nonimportation of British goods

Overview

By 1767, both the American colonies and the British government had learned lessons from the failure of the Stamp Act a few years before. The colonists had discovered that a united opposition could win recognition of their right to dispose of their own property in ways they chose. The British government assumed that even if the colonies would not accept a direct tax, as the Stamp Act had been, they would accept import and export taxes. They were wrong.

In the last half of 1766, Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend had spread word that he knew how to extract money from the colonial economy. Townshend proposed increasing import duties on a series of items—including glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea—that the colonies could import only from England. In addition, Townshend suggested that the

taxes should be collected in the colonial ports, giving the appearance of allowing the Americans to tax themselves. To facilitate the collection of these taxes, Parliament created a Board of Customs Commissioners to be located in Boston, Massachusetts.

The leading citizens of Boston quickly realized what Parliament had done and began working to organize resistance to the new, more aggressive forms of taxation. The open letter given below appeared in the weekly *Boston Post-Boy & Advertiser* newspaper on November 16, 1767. The paper's editors, John Green (1727–1787) and Joseph Russell (1734–1795), are referred to in the introduction to the letter. The letter reflects the increasingly difficult financial situation of the colonies—especially Massachusetts, which relied on trade for much of its income—toward the end of the 1760s.



Charles Townshend's propositions to increase import duties and taxes resulted in this letter.
(Joshua Reynolds)

Document Text

Messrs Green & Russell.

Please to insert the following, and you'll oblige one of your constant Readers.

My Dear Countrymen,

YOU having been of late years insensibly drawn into too great a degree of luxury & dissipation, not only in the West and East-India productions;

but likewise in the unnecessary superfluities of European, enumerated in a late Vote of the Town of Boston, with many others that I cannot but think that the inhabitants of this and most of the other colonies have the highest reason to acknowledge their obligation to the Town of Boston, for setting so laudable an example, as by every prudent and legal measure, to encourage the produce and manufactures of this province, and to lessen every superfluous expence as much as may be; by these means, if possible, to prevent the threatened loss of the whole medium of the province, partly by the remittances to Great-Britain of the duties laid upon many of our imports, and partly by the much larger export, thro' the hands of our merchants, of our gold and silver, in return for British commodities, many of which are absolutely needless, and with great part of the remainder we are indisputably capable of supplying ourselves; and tho' they are not so well dress'd off as those of Europe; since they cost us nothing but the labor of our head and hands, we ought with the [utmost?] thankfulness to use them, till our artists shall become more skilfull; in which we have the shining examples of our mother country, and other European states, at their respective commencement of providing necessaries for themselves; which all are under as well a natural as moral obligation to do, as far as in their power.—We would heartily, for this reason, recommend to every Farmer the growth of Hemp and Flax, that the linen manufactures may be especially promoted and encouraged by all ranks of people.—Further, if we may be excused, we think it our duty to add, the most sincere recommendation of the disuse of the most luxurious and enervating article of BOHEA TEA, in which so large a sum is annually expended by the American colonists altho' it may be well supplied by the Teas of our own country, especially by that called the Labrador, lately discovered to be a common growth of the more northern colonies, and esteemed very wholesome to the human species, as well as agreeable.

Thus my countrymen, by consuming less of what we are not really in want of, and by industriously

cultivating and improving the natural advantages of our own country, we might save our substance, even our lands, from becoming the property of others, and we might effectually preserve our virtue and our liberty, to the latest posterity. Bless-

ings, surely, which no man, while in the exercise of his reason will contentedly part with, for a few foreign trifles.

Save your Money, and save your Country!

Glossary

bohea tea: a blend of black teas from China's Fujian province; it was so popular in Britain and the American colonies that the word "bohea" became a kind of synonym for tea itself

expend: variant spelling of expense

"Teas of our own country, especially . . . Labrador": Labrador tea is not actually a true tea (part of the *Camellia* family, found in Asia), but from the *Rhododendron* family. The plants are native to North America, and Labrador tea was used by Native Americans as a medicine.

"unnecessary superfluities": an example of eighteenth-century rhetoric: "unnecessary" means that an item is not needed, and "superfluities" are items that are overabundant; the words together throughout the letter emphasize the idea that colonists should neither want nor need imports

Short-Answer Questions

1. What particular items are listed in the letter as either "superfluous" or "unnecessary"?
2. What types of crops does the author of the letter recommend local farmers cultivate? What would those crops be used for?
3. What would the consequences of the nonconsumption of British imports be for the colony?