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Prelude to Conflict in the Colonies

The Colonies Organize to Resist Britain

The uprising at the Customs House illustrated the rising tensions between Britain and its American colonies. In order to finance debts from the French and Indian War, as well as from European wars, Parliament had turned hungry eyes on the colonies' resources.

THE STAMP ACT The seeds of increased tension were sown in March 1765 when Parliament, persuaded by Prime Minister George Grenville, passed the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act required colonists to purchase special stamped paper for every legal document, license, newspaper, pamphlet, and almanac, and imposed special "stamp duties" on packages of playing cards and dice. The tax reached into every colonial pocket. Colonists who disobeyed the law were to be tried in the vice-admiralty courts, where convictions were probable.

STAMP ACT PROTESTS When word of the Stamp Act reached the colonies in May of 1765, the colonists united in their defiance. Boston shopkeepers, artisans, and laborers organized a secret resistance group called the Sons of Liberty. One of its founders was Harvard-educated Samuel Adams, who, although unsuccessful in business and deeply in debt, proved himself to be a powerful and influential political activist.

By the end of the summer, the Sons of Liberty were harassing customs workers, stamp agents, and sometimes royal governors. Facing mob threats and demonstrations, stamp agents all over the colonies resigned. The Stamp Act was to become effective on November 1, 1765, but colonial protest prevented any stamps from being sold.

During 1765 and early 1766, the individual colonial assemblies confronted the Stamp Act measure. Virginia's lower house adopted several resolutions put forth by a 29-year-old lawyer named Patrick Henry. These resolutions stated that Virginians could be taxed only by the Virginia assembly — that is, only by their own representatives. Other assemblies passed similar resolutions.

The colonial assemblies also made a strong collective protest. In October 1765, delegates from nine colonies met in New York City. This Stamp Act Congress issued a Declaration of Rights and Grievances, which stated that Parliament lacked the power to impose taxes on the colonies because the colonists were not represented in Parliament. More than 10 years earlier, the colonies had rejected Benjamin Franklin's Albany Plan of Union, which

called for a joint colonial council to address defense issues. Now, for the first time, the separate colonies began to act as one.

Merchants in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia agreed not to import goods manufactured in Britain until the Stamp Act was repealed. They expected that British merchants would force Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act. The widespread boycott worked. In March 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act; but on the same day, to make its power clear, Parliament issued the Declaratory Act. This act asserted Parliament's full right to make laws "to bind the colonies and people of America . . . in all cases whatsoever."

THE TOWNSHEND ACTS Within a year after Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, Charles Townshend, the leading government minister at the time, impetuously decided on a new method of gaining revenue from the American colonies. His proposed revenue laws, passed by Parliament in 1767, became known as the Townshend Acts. Unlike the Stamp Act, which was a direct tax, these were indirect taxes, or duties levied on imported materials—glass, lead, paint, and paper—as they came into the colonies from Britain. The acts also imposed a three-penny tax on tea, the most popular drink in the colonies.

The colonists reacted with rage and well-organized resistance. Educated Americans spoke out against the Townshend Acts, protesting "taxation without representation." Boston's Samuel Adams called for another boycott of British goods, and American women of every rank in society became involved in the protest. Writer Mercy Otis Warren of Massachusetts urged women to lay their British "female ornaments aside," foregoing "feathers, furs, rich sattins and . . . capes." Wealthy women stopped buying British luxuries and joined other women in spinning bees. These were public displays of spinning and weaving of colonial-made cloth designed to show colonists' determination to boycott British-made cloth. Housewives also boycotted British tea and exchanged recipes for tea made from birch bark and sage.

Conflict intensified in June 1768. British agents in Boston seized the *Liberty*, a ship belonging to local merchant John Hancock. The customs inspector claimed that Hancock had smuggled in a shipment of wine from Madeira and had failed to pay the customs taxes. The seizure triggered riots against customs agents. In response, the British stationed 2,000 "redcoats," or British soldiers—so named for the red jackets they wore—in Boston.

Tension Mounts in Massachusetts

The presence of British soldiers in Boston's streets charged the air with hostility. The city soon erupted in clashes between British soldiers and colonists and later in a daring tea protest, all of which pushed the colonists and Britain closer to war.

THE BOSTON MASSACRE One sore point was the competition for jobs between colonists and poorly paid soldiers who looked for extra work in local shipyards during off-duty hours. On the cold afternoon of March 5, 1770, a fistfight broke out over jobs. That evening a mob gathered in front of the Customs House and taunted the guards. When Crispus Attucks and several dockhands appeared on the scene, an armed clash erupted, killing three men including Attucks, and fatally wounding two more. Instantly, Samuel Adams and other colonial agitators labeled this confrontation the Boston Massacre, thus presenting it as a British attack on defenseless citizens.

Despite strong feelings on both sides, the political atmosphere relaxed somewhat during the next two years until 1772, when a group of Rhode Island colonists attacked a British customs schooner that patrolled the coast for smugglers. After the ship accidentally ran aground near Providence, the colonists boarded the vessel and burned it to the waterline. In response, King George named a special commission to seek out the suspects and bring them to England for trial.

The plan to haul Americans to England for trial ignited widespread alarm. The assemblies of Massachusetts and Virginia set up committees of correspondence to communicate with other colonies about this and other threats to American liberties. By 1774, such committees formed a buzzing communication network linking leaders in nearly all the colonies.

THE BOSTON TEA PARTY Early in 1773, Lord Frederick North, the British prime minister, faced a new problem. The British East India Company, which held an official monopoly on tea imports, had been hit hard by the colonial boycotts. With its warehouses bulging with 17 million pounds of tea, the company was nearing bankruptcy. To save it, North devised the Tea Act, which granted the company the right to sell tea to the colonies free of the taxes that colonial tea sellers had to pay. This action would cut colonial merchants out of the tea trade, because the East India Company could sell its tea directly to consumers for

less. North hoped the American colonists would simply buy the cheaper tea; instead, they protested violently.

On the moonlit evening of December 16, 1773, a large group of Boston rebels disguised themselves as Native Americans and proceeded to take action against three British tea ships anchored in the harbor. John Andrews, an onlooker, wrote a letter on December 18, 1773, describing what happened.

"They muster'd . . . to the number of about two hundred, and proceeded . . . to Griffin's wharf, where [the three ships] lay, each with 114 chests of the ill fated article . . . and before nine o'clock in the evening, every chest from on board the three vessels was knock'd to pieces and flung over the sides. They say the actors were Indians from Narragansett. Whether they were or not, . . . they appear'd as such, being cloath'd in Blankets with the heads muffled, and copper color'd countenances, being each arm'd with a hatchet or axe. . . ." —quoted in 1776: *Journals of American Independence*

In this incident, later known as the Boston Tea Party, the "Indians" dumped 18,000 pounds of the East India Company's tea into the waters of Boston Harbor.

THE INTOLERABLE ACTS King George III was infuriated by this organized destruction of British property, and he pressed Parliament to act. In 1774, Parliament responded by passing a series of measures that colonists called the Intolerable Acts. One law shut down Boston Harbor because the colonists had refused to pay for the damaged tea. Another, the Quartering Act, authorized British commanders to house soldiers in vacant private homes and other buildings. In addition to these measures, General Thomas Gage, commander in chief of British forces in North America, was appointed the new governor of Massachusetts. To keep the peace, he placed Boston under martial law, or rule imposed by military forces.

The committees of correspondence quickly moved into action and assembled the First Continental Congress. In September 1774, 56 delegates met in Philadelphia and drew up a declaration of colonial rights. They defended the colonies' right to run their own affairs. They supported the protests in Massachusetts and stated that if the British used force against the colonies, the colonies should fight back. They also agreed to reconvene in May 1775 if their demands weren't met.