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The Boston Tea Party, 1773

Victory in the French and Indian War was costly for the British. At the war's conclusion in 1763, King George III and his government looked to taxing the American colonies as a way of recouping their war costs. They were also looking for ways to reestablish control over the colonial governments that had become increasingly independent while the Crown was distracted by the war. Royal ineptitude compounded the problem. A series of actions including the Stamp Act (1765), the Townsend Acts (1767) and the Boston Massacre (1770) agitated the colonists, straining relations with the mother country. But it was the Crown's attempt to tax tea that spurred the colonists to action and laid the groundwork for the American Revolution.

**Its all about
the tax, stupid.**

The colonies refused to pay the levies required by the Townsend Acts claiming they had no obligation to pay taxes imposed by a Parliament in which they had no representation. In response, Parliament retracted the taxes with the exception of a duty on tea - a demonstration of Parliament's ability and right to tax the colonies. In May of 1773 Parliament concocted a clever plan. They gave the struggling East India Company a monopoly on the importation of tea to America. Additionally, Parliament reduced the duty the colonies would have to pay for the imported tea. The Americans would now get their tea at a cheaper price than ever before. However, if the colonies paid the duty tax on the imported tea they would be acknowledging Parliament's right to tax them. Tea was a staple of colonial life - it was assumed that the colonists would rather pay the tax than deny themselves the pleasure of a cup of tea.

The colonists were not fooled by Parliament's ploy. When the East India Company sent shipments of tea to Philadelphia and New York the ships were not allowed to land. In Charleston the tea-laden ships were permitted to dock but their cargo was consigned to a warehouse where it remained for three years until it was sold by patriots in order to help finance the revolution.

In Boston, the arrival of three tea ships ignited a furious reaction. The crisis came to a head on December 16, 1773 when as many as 7,000 agitated locals milled about the wharf where the ships were docked. A mass meeting at the Old South Meeting House that morning resolved that the tea ships should leave the harbor

without payment of any duty. A committee was selected to take this message to the Customs House to force release of the ships out of the harbor. The Collector of Customs refused to allow the ships to leave without payment of the duty. Stalemate. The committee reported back to the mass meeting and a howl erupted from the meeting hall. It was now early evening and a group of about 200 men, some disguised as Indians, assembled on a near-by hill. Whopping war chants, the crowd marched two-by-two to the wharf, descended upon the three ships and dumped their offending cargos of tea into the harbor waters.

Most colonists applauded the action while the reaction in London was swift and vehement. In March 1774 Parliament passed the Intolerable Acts which among other measures closed the Port of Boston. The fuse that led directly to the explosion of American independence was lit.

Take your tea and shove it.

George Hewes was a member of the band of "Indians" that boarded the tea ships that evening. His recollection of the event was published some years later. We join his story as the group makes its way to the tea-laden ships:

"It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hatchet, which I and my associates denominated the tomahawk, with which, and a club, after having painted my face and hands with coal dust in the shop of a blacksmith, I repaired to Griffin's wharf, where the ships lay that contained the tea. When I first appeared in the street after being thus disguised, I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me and marched in order to the place of our destination.

When we arrived at the wharf, there were three of our number who assumed an authority to direct our operations, to which we readily submitted. They divided us into three parties, for the purpose of boarding the three ships which contained the tea at the same time. The name of him who commanded the division to which I was assigned was Leonard Pitt. The names of the other commanders I never knew. We were immediately ordered by the respective commanders to board all the ships at the same time, which we promptly obeyed. The commander of the division to which I belonged, as soon as we were on board the ship, appointed me boatswain, and ordered me to go to the captain and demand of him the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles. I made the demand accordingly, and the captain promptly replied, and delivered the articles; but requested me at the same time to do no damage to the ship or rigging. We then were ordered by our commander to open

the hatches and take out all the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately proceeded to execute his orders, first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as thoroughly to expose them to the effects of the water.

In about three hours from the time we went on board, we had thus broken and thrown overboard every tea chest to be found in the ship, while those in the other ships were disposing of the tea in the same way, at the same time. We were surrounded by British armed ships, but no attempt was made to resist us.

...The next morning, after we had cleared the ships of the tea, it was discovered that very considerable quantities of it were floating upon the surface of the water; and to prevent the possibility of any of its being saved for use, a number of small boats were manned by sailors and citizens, who rowed them into those parts of the harbor wherever the tea was visible, and by beating it with oars and paddles so thoroughly drenched it as to render its entire destruction inevitable."

References:

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How To Cite This Article:

"The Boston Tea Party, 1773," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2002).