

# 250th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party

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December 17, 2023



[W. D. Cooper, "Boston Tea Party," *The History of North America* (London: E. Newberry, 1789); Library of Congress, public domain. Accessed on Wikipedia Commons.]

Today is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, when 30 or more men boarded three trading vessels in Boston Harbor. They broke open 342 chests of tea and dumped about 90,000 pounds of the valuable leaves overboard.

The pointed destruction of a cargo worth about \$1.7 million in today's dollars escalated the ongoing struggle between the British government and thirteen of its North American colonies.

Trouble had been growing since the end in 1763 of what the colonists knew as the French and Indian War. That conflict dramatically expanded British possessions in

North America, but at the cost of badly stretching the Treasury. To raise revenue, the king's ministers and Parliament placed a number of taxes on the colonists, including the 1765 Stamp Act. This law hit virtually everyone by taxing printed material from newspapers and legal documents to playing cards.

The Stamp Act shocked colonists. At issue was not just money, but a central political struggle that had been going on in England for more than a century: could the king be checked by the people or were his powers unlimited? Colonists were not directly represented in Parliament and believed they were losing their fundamental right as Englishmen to have a say in their government. They responded to the Stamp Act with widespread protests.

In 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act but claimed for Parliament "full power and authority to make laws and statutes...to bind the colonies and people of America...in all cases whatsoever." This act echoed the 1719 Irish Declaratory Act, which asserted that Ireland was subordinate to the British king and Parliament. It also imposed new taxes.

As soon as news of the Declaratory Act and the new taxes reached Boston in 1767, the Massachusetts legislature circulated a letter to the other colonies standing firm on the right to equality in the British empire. Local groups boycotted taxed goods and broke into warehouses whose owners they thought were breaking the boycott. In 1768, British officials sent troops to Boston to restore order.

Events began to move faster and faster. In March 1770, British soldiers in Boston shot into a crowd of men and boys who were harassing them, killing five and wounding six others. Engraver Paul Revere made an instantly-famous image showing soldiers in red coats smiling as they shot at colonists, including Black man Crispus Attucks. The altercation became known as the Boston Massacre.

Parliament removed all but one of the new taxes—the tax on tea—but trouble continued to simmer. In 1771 and 1772, an official in New Hampshire ordered a search of sawmills for white pine that bore the mark of the King's Broad Arrow, three blazes on a tree—

one straight up and two making an upside-down V— designating trunks thicker than 12 inches as the property of the king. New Englanders had never liked the law that claimed their valuable forests for Royal Navy masts, and had ignored it when they could.

But in April 1772, officials charged six sawmill owners with milling trunks that had been marked with the King's Broad Arrow. One of the owners was arrested and then released with the promise that he would provide bail the next day. Instead, the following morning he and 30 to 40 men, their faces disguised with soot, assaulted the government officials and ran them out of town.

The so-called Pine Tree Riot suggested that British authority could be defied. Just two months later, a Royal Navy customs schooner, the HMS *Gaspee*, ran aground in Rhode Island while chasing a packet boat suspected of smuggling. As the captain waited for high tide to float the schooner free, Rhode Island men rowed to the ship, boarded it, and burned it to the waterline.

Eight of the men who participated in the Pine Tree Riot were later charged with assault, but the local judges who sentenced them let them off so lightly the verdict could easily be seen as support for their actions. The government had even less luck prosecuting the men who burned the *Gaspee*: it could not identify suspects. But its threat to extradite colonists to England for trial seemed to the colonists to prove the British government intended to strip them of their civil rights.

Then, in May 1773, Parliament tried to bail out the failing East India Company by giving it a monopoly on tea sales in the colonies. This would make tea cheaper in the colonies than it had been. It seemed to colonists the plan was to convince people to accept the cheaper tea...and thus establish Parliament's right to govern without colonists' input.

Ships carrying the East India tea sailed for the colonies in fall 1773, but mass protests convinced the captains of the ships headed to every city but Boston to return to England. In Boston the royal governor was determined to land the cargo. On December 16, 1773, after attendees at a meeting at Boston's Old South Meeting House heard that

the governor refused to let ships loaded with tea leave the harbor until the tax was paid, a group of colonists hid their faces, some with soot, other with overt symbols of their new identification with North America rather than England: as Indigenous Americans.

The men boarded three ships moored at a wharf in Boston Harbor, hauled the chests of tea out of the holds with the ships' block and tackle, broke them open with axes and pry bars, and dumped the tea at an exceptionally low tide, turning the harbor into muck. They were careful to make sure that no other cargo was harmed and that none of the tea was stolen. They were making a political statement.

Parliament responded by closing the port of Boston, moving the seat of government to Salem, stripping the colony of its charter, requiring colonists to pay for the quartering of soldiers in the town, and demanding payment for the tea.

By fall 1774, concern about the government's actions had grown deep enough that delegates from the colonies met for six weeks at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia to figure out how to respond, and also how to work together to advance a constitutional opposition to tyranny, as Boston leader Samuel Adams put it.

Over the next two years, American politicians would find an answer to the question of whether the king could be checked by the people. They would get rid of monarchs altogether and declare that the people had the right to govern themselves.

Notes:

Broadside, New-York, December 23, 1773, New York Historical Society.

<https://allthingsliberty.com/2015/03/tides-and-tonnage-a-different-take-on-the-boston-tea-party/>