The Boston Tea Party

In 1773, Britain's East India Company was sitting on large stocks of tea that it could not sell in England and was on the verge of bankruptcy. In an effort to save it, the government passed the Tea Act of 1773, which gave the company the right to export its merchandise directly to the colonies without paying any of the regular taxes that were imposed on the colonial merchants, who had traditionally served as the middlemen in such transactions. With these privileges, the company could undersell American merchants and monopolize the colonial tea trade. The act proved inflammatory for several reasons.

First, it angered influential colonial merchants, who feared being replaced and bankrupted by a powerful monopoly. The East India Company's decision to grant franchises to certain American merchants for the sale of their tea created further resentments among those excluded from this lucrative trade. More important, however, the Tea Act revived American passions about the issue of taxation without representation. The law provided no new tax on tea. Lord North assumed that most colonists would welcome the new law because it would reduce the price of tea to consumers by removing the middlemen. However, the colonists responded by boycotting tea. Unlike earlier protests, this boycott mobilized large segments of the population. It also helped link the colonies together in a common experience of mass popular protest. Particularly important to the movement were the activities of colonial women, who were one of the principal consumers of tea and now became the leaders of the effort to boycott.

Various colonies made plans to prevent the East India Company from landing its cargoes in colonial ports. In ports other than Boston, agents of the company were "persuaded" to resign, and new shipments of tea were either returned to England or warehoused. In Boston, the agents refused to resign and, with the support of the royal governor, preparations were made to land incoming cargoes regardless of opposition. After failing to turn back the three ships in the harbor and fearful that the tea would be seized for failure to pay custom duties and eventually become available for sale, local patriots led by Samuel Adams organized a spectacular protest. On the evening of December 16, 1773, three companies of fifty men each, masquerading as Mohawk Indians, passed through a tremendous crowd of spectators, went aboard the three ships, broke open the 342 tea chests, and heaved them into the harbor. As the electrifying news of the Boston "tea party" spread, other seaports followed the example and staged similar acts of resistance of their own.

When the Bostonians refused to pay for the property they had destroyed, King George and Lord North decided on a policy of coercion, to be applied only against Massachusetts, in the form of the Coercive Acts (known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts). In these four acts of 1774, Parliament closed the port of Boston, drastically reduced the powers of self-government in the colony, permitted royal officers to stand trial in other colonies or in England when accused of crimes, and expanded the Quartering Act which allowed British troops to be quartered in colonists' homes. The acts sparked new resistance throughout the colonies and precipitated the forming of the First Continental Congress to consider a united response.
A Tea Party

Resistance to the Stamp Act brought about its repeal. But other unpopular measures remained, and new ones were added. The British found how hard it is to impose authority on an unwilling people. The colonists were moving down the road from resistance to revolution. In Boston, on March 5, 1770, a crowd gathered to confront British troops guarding the courthouse. Snowballs flew in the air and the soldiers panicked. An order to fire was shouted, no one knows by whom, and five Bostonians fell dead, with many more wounded. This was the Boston Massacre. Radicals used the incident as a dramatic example of British threat to liberty and the danger of a standing army in peacetime. The soldiers involved were acquitted by a jury -- packed by the Crown-appointed sheriff, it was said.

Petitions from the colonies to settle their grievances poured into London but were rejected. The colonials became convinced the entire British government – George III as well as parliament – was ready to deny the colonists their liberties. What other measures could the colonists take?

Cool Samuel Adams was always ready with another idea. Now in his late forties, he was a great power in Massachusetts politics. He had no wealth or position, nor did he look impressive. A stout man with nervous palsy, he lacked skill as an orator or writer. But with the Stamp Act crisis he showed his great talent as one of America’s first politicians. He understood the ebb and flow of public opinion and knew how to plot and promote actions that might bring about a break with Britain and lead to independence.

It was Sam Adams’ idea to get the Boston town meeting to set up a Committee of Correspondence. Many other towns and colonies quickly did the same. It became a network for exchanging information and developing common action.

The network came in handy when the colonists took to boycotting British tea in protest against the duty they had to pay on it. Philadelphia and New York refused the East India Company’s tea, and the ships sailed back to London with their cargos. In Boston three tea ships docked at Griffin’s Wharf in December 1773. When the ships refused to depart with their tea, Sam Adams stood up at the town meeting and said, in a resigned voice, “This meeting can do nothing more to save the country.” It was a signal. War whoops sounded from the balcony. What happened next was recalled long after by an eyewitness, Robert Sessions:

I was living in Boston at the time, in the family of a Mr. Davis, a lumber merchant, as a common laborer. On that eventful evening, when Mr. Davis came in from the meeting, I asked him what was to be done with the tea.

“They are throwing it overboard,” he replied.

Receiving permission, I went immediately to the spot. Everything was as light as day, by the means of lamps and torches – a pin might be seen lying on the wharf. I went on board where they were at work, and took hold with my own hands.

I was not one of those appointed to destroy the tea, and who disguised themselves as Indians, but was a volunteer, the disguised men being largely men of family and position in Boston, while I was a young man whose home and relations were in Connecticut. The appointed and disguised party proving too small for the quick work
necessary, other young men, similarly circumstanced with myself, joined with them in their labors.

The chests were drawn up by a tackle – one man bringing them forward in the hold, another putting a rope around them, and others hoisting them to the deck and carrying them to the vessel's side. The chests were then opened, the tea thrown over the side and the chests thrown overboard.

Perfect regularity prevailed during the whole transaction. Although there were many people on the wharf, entire silence prevailed – no clamor, no talking. Nothing was meddled with but the teas on board.

After having emptied the hold, the deck was swept clean, and everything put in its proper place. An officer on board was requested to come up from the cabin and see that no damage was done except to the tea.