

The Boston Tea Party

Imagine that when you went to the snack bar at recess, your favorite bag of chips, which always cost \$1.00, suddenly costs \$2.00! In this pretend scenario, the price of chips at the snack bar has gone up because the school principal has decided to put a tax on chips. What this means is that the extra dollar that you are paying for your snack goes to the principal, not to the snack bar or to the company that made the chips. And, in our story, the principal can decide if he wants to take away the tax or raise it even higher!

Does this seem fair to you? Will you no longer be able to buy chips from the snack bar? Or, will you have to ask your mom or dad for more allowance money?

As it turns out, something very similar happened to the American colonists while they were still under British rule.

Before America became the country that we know today, there were many people from different countries, such as France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Russia, who had come to the New World.¹ But as we know, Great Britain had a strong presence in America. Do you remember the story of the English pilgrims who traveled across the Atlantic and celebrated the first Thanksgiving?

English territory in America was divided into 13 colonies: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.²

You may recognize the names of these original 13 colonies as the names of some of our states! But these colonies weren't independent—or united—just yet. The colonies had their own government structure, but the King of England still ruled over them with an iron fist.³

Over time, the colonists became angry with King George III for the high taxes he and his government charged. Britain owed a lot of money, specifically from a war they just fought against the French, so the King and the British government looked to the colonies to pay these high costs.

Among the taxes imposed by Britain that angered the colonists was the Stamp Act of 1765, which taxed printed paper.⁴ This included taxes on playing cards, newspapers, and documents. These taxes on printed materials greatly affected students, journalists, and lawyers, who used a lot of paper!



The colonies had no one representing them in the British government and couldn't get the king to listen to their frustrations, which made them angry. In response to the Stamp Act, the slogan "No taxation without representation!" came about because the colonists did not think it was right that they had no say over Britain's forcing of these taxes upon the colonies.⁵

Although the British government removed the tax in 1766 after it faced uproar from the colonists, this experience unified the colonists around a similar cause—that Britain did not have the right to impose oppressive taxes on the colonies without their say.

One year later, the British government imposed the Townshend Acts of 1767, which taxed even more items, including paint, paper, glass, lead, and tea.⁶ The colonists were so angry that they organized boycotts of British goods as well as protests and demonstrations.

But what is a protest, you ask? A protest is a demonstration that is done by one or many people and can take many forms. One example of a protest is a march with people carrying signs and wearing t-shirts and stickers.

Protests give people the opportunity to tell a government, a company, or a group, "Hey! We don't like what you're doing. You need to change these things if you want our support back."

It's important to remember that protests should always be respectful of other people and property.

While the colonists continued rallying support, British soldiers were deployed to enforce these laws and keep the unruly colonists in line. The presence of British troops, also called "Redcoats" because of the color of their uniform, increased tensions between the colonists and the British crown.⁷

In Boston on March 5, 1770, as British military occupation and control over the colonists continued to rise, a deadly fight took place between the colonists and British soldiers. This event, known as the Boston Massacre, killed five colonists and injured six.⁸ One of the killed colonists was Crispus Attucks. History now remembers Attucks, a Native American and African sailor, as the first victim of the American Revolutionary War.⁹

In April, the British repealed the Townshend Acts—except for the tax on tea.¹⁰ And you should know, the colonists loved to drink tea—just like grown-ups today love to drink coffee. In fact, the colonists drank 1.2 million pounds of tea every year.¹¹ That's a lot of tea!

In the winter of 1773, the American colonists staged another protest at Griffin's Wharf in Boston, Massachusetts.

A group called the "Sons of Liberty," led by Samuel Adams, was a group of merchants and traders who were deeply against British taxation. When three ships, the Dartmouth, Beaver, and Eleanor, arrived, filled with tea to be sold, the colonists refused to pay the taxes and unload the tea. In response, Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who was loyal to the king, demanded that the tea be unloaded and the taxes be paid.

This did not go over well with the colonists.

On the night of December 16, 1773, led by revolutionaries Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and the Sons of Liberty, a large group of men disguised themselves in Native American dress and boarded the ships.¹² The colonists dumped 342 chests of tea into the Boston Harbor—in an event that has since become known as the "Boston Tea Party."

It took almost three hours to dump more than 90,000 pounds of the tea into the harbor (enough for 18.5 million teabags). Today, the value of the tea that the colonists destroyed is estimated at \$1-1.7 million!^{13 14}

The events surrounding the Boston Tea Party were the first major demonstrations of activism in America. Although standing up for what you believe in is an important part of being an American—and has been since before our nation's founding—protests should not be violent or destroy property, because that is against the law.

Even George Washington, who later became America's first president, disagreed with the colonists' destruction of private property. Benjamin Franklin, too, disapproved and offered to pay for the destroyed tea.¹⁵

King George III and the British government were furious with the colonists' display of activism, so their response to the Boston Tea Party was harsh and severe. In 1774, the British government imposed the Coercive Acts, also known as the Intolerable Acts.

Included in these laws were mandates for repayment for the tea the colonists destroyed, the closure of Boston harbor, and requirements for sheltering British troops.¹⁶

The Intolerable Acts made clear to the American colonists that they were being punished by Britain and that the freedom they cherished was being taken away.

In the fall of 1774, the First Continental Congress, a gathering of delegates (or representatives) from every colony except Georgia, got together in Philadelphia to discuss American resistance to the British.¹⁷ The colonists had high hopes that forming a united front would put an end to British oppression.

The colonists first issued a strong declaration listing the things that the British government had done that were wrong and infringed on their freedom, liberty, and right to representation in government.¹⁸ They also wrote a respectful petition, or letter, to King George III, saying that if he addressed their issues, they would remain loyal to the king.¹⁹

The goal of the colonists was not to start a war. They wanted the complete opposite: peace. Yet, the British were not willing to find a compromise with the American colonists that preserved their liberty and treated them fairly. These events set the stage for the American Revolutionary War.²⁰

The Boston Tea Party was a critical step in America earning its freedom from Britain. As the first American colonists showed us in the 1770s, all people have the right to freely speak their minds, assemble, and peacefully express their opinions and grievances. But these rights were not always respected. Unlike today, when Americans vote in elections, the colonists did not have the opportunity to be heard.

Just as the colonists believed, these fundamental rights come from God, not from a king. It was this firmly held belief that led to the birth of America.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/thirteen-colonies>
2. <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/thirteen-colonies>
3. https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/lesson-plans/Intermediate_establishing_independence_handouts.pdf
4. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-tea-party>
5. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/uproar-over-the-stamp-act>
6. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-tea-party>
7. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-townshend-acts>
8. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-massacre>
9. <https://www.biography.com/military-figure/crispus-attucks>
10. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/townshend-acts>
11. <https://www.bostontepartyship.com/boston-tea-party-cause#:~:text=In%20simplest%20terms%2C%20the%20Boston,the%20French%20and%20Indian%20War>
12. <https://www.bostontepartyship.com/disguise-of-sons-of-liberty#:~:text=In%20an%20effort%20to%20hide,as%20Mohawks%20or%20Narragansett%20Indians>
13. <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-boston-tea-party>
14. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-boston-tea-party>
15. <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-tea-party>
16. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-intolerable-acts-and-the-first-continental-congress>
17. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-boston-tea-party>
18. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-intolerable-acts-and-the-first-continental-congress>
19. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/congress-petitions-english-king-to-address-grievances#:~:text=On%20October%2025%2C%201774%2C%20the,be%20standing%20behind%20British%20rule>
20. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-intolerable-acts-and-the-first-continental-congress>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/thirteen-colonies>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-tea-party>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-townshend-acts>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-massacre>
- <https://www.biography.com/military-figure/crispus-attucks>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/townshend-acts>
- <https://www.bostonteapartyship.com/boston-tea-party-cause#:~:text=In%20simplest%20terms%2C%20the%20Boston,the%20French%20and%20Indian%20War>
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- <https://www.history.com/news/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-boston-tea-party>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/road-to-revolution/the-american-revolution/a/the-boston-tea-party>
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- <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/congress-petitions-english-king-to-address-grievances#:~:text=On%20October%2025%2C%201774%2C%20the,be%20standing%20behind%20British%20rule>