

Becoming a People: The Stamp Act and America's Road to Independence

Long before the United States emerged as an independent nation, the seeds of freedom were planted in the soil of the colonies. A colony is an area of land controlled by another country. You can think of the British government as the parents and the colonies as kids who had left home and gone to college. Let's say the kids went to different schools in different places, took different classes, and developed new interests. They may grow apart for a while, but their shared history may bring them back together when problems, issues, or disagreements arise.

In the colonies, this coming together around a common cause to oppose Great Britain began before the Declaration of Independence was issued!

The British colonies, such as Virginia and New York, were controlled across the Atlantic Ocean by Great Britain. But the land in America was also claimed by other countries, like France.

Both Great Britain and France wanted more land and power, so they started fighting over it.

This big fight was called the French and Indian War. It wasn't just the French and British soldiers fighting, though. Many Native American tribes who were already living in America got involved, too. Some tribes helped the French, and some helped the British. The colonists living in the British colonies in America had done their best to help, and these colonial soldiers, whom the British mockingly called "Yankee Doodles," had shown great courage.

Great Britain, with help from the colonies, won the French and Indian War. The war cost a lot of money, which had to be paid. Furthermore, Great Britain needed to build a government in the colonies to control and defend the land and govern its people living there.

The British government needed money to pay for the big war they just fought. So, they decided to make the colonies pay for it by adding a special payment on things made from paper, like newspapers, playing cards, and other documents. This special payment is called a tax.

What are taxes you ask? If a bottle of soda costs \$2 in the store and the government puts a \$1 tax on it, that means you must pay \$3 for the soda instead of \$2.



The government keeps the extra dollar. In the case of the colonists, paper goods became more expensive because of the tax. If the colonists needed or wanted these paper goods, they had no choice but to pay the tax to the government!

The colonists didn't have a say in what they thought about the tax. They had no one speaking up on their behalf in the British government – and not to mention, the government was all the way across the Atlantic Ocean! The colonists thought that it was unfair to be forced to pay extra money without having a voice in Great Britain's government.

In Virginia, Patrick Henry, one of America's Founding Fathers, stood in the House of Burgesses, Virginia's elected representative government, and made a strong speech telling the people of Virginia that the Stamp Act (the name of the law that created the tax) was wrong. "Treason, treason!" he yelled.¹ Treason is another way of saying someone betrayed or turned their back on you. Patrick Henry also said that tyranny must be resisted. Tyranny is a type of government that acts like a bully and doesn't listen to the will, wants, and needs of the people.

Other colonies were also upset with Great Britain's Stamp Act. In North Carolina, John Ashe, another Founding Father, said: "This law will be resisted in blood and death."²

Massachusetts suggested that a general "Stamp Act Congress" should be held in New York, in 1765. The Stamp Act Congress would represent and speak for the angry colonists. Nine of the 13 colonies showed up, and six of them wrote a paper stating that, as British citizens, they could be taxed only with their own permission. Since they had no members in Parliament, Great Britain's representative government, they said they would not obey Great Britain's Stamp Act.

Men everywhere began thinking how they could stand up to Great Britain and formed groups called "Sons of Liberty." The Sons of Liberty visited the men chosen to sell the stamped paper and warned them not to try to do so unless they wished to be treated like traitors, or people who did not support their fellow colonists.

As a result, not a single sheet of stamped paper was ever sold in the colonies.³ Indeed, when they were to have been first used, a Pennsylvania newspaper appeared with the title, "No stamped paper to be had."⁴ Everyone, adult and child, marched up and down crying, "Liberty, Property, and No Stamps!" or even such hard words as "Taxation without representation is tyranny," a phrase created by a Massachusetts lawyer, James Otis.⁵

In 1774, tensions between the colonies and Britain got worse and worse. The British Parliament had passed a series of laws, such as the Coercive Acts (also known as the Intolerable Acts), which punished Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party and attacked colonial freedoms. In response, the colonies had a meeting in Philadelphia for their First Continental Congress.

Unlike the Stamp Act Congress, which only had nine colonies show up, delegates (people sent by each colony to represent them) from 12 colonies attended the First Continental Congress.

During the First Continental Congress, delegates discussed their complaints against British policies and debated possible solutions. They agreed to send a petition, a written request, known as the "Olive Branch Petition," to King George III, begging him to stop the oppressive laws and give the colonists the rights they deserved as British citizens. Additionally, they issued a "Declaration of Rights and Grievances" defending the colonies' rights to self-government and protesting taxation without representation.

Although the Congress tried to stay friends with Great Britain, it also took steps to prepare for potential war. Each colony was told to form local militias, an army of normal citizens, to plan resistance efforts. As they prepared for battle, Patrick Henry delivered a powerful speech to the people of Virginia, saying these powerful words: "Give me liberty, or give me death."⁶

On April 19, 1775, British soldiers marched from Boston to the town of Lexington. Their goal was to capture some colonial leaders and take weapons stored by the colonists. Early in the morning, a group of colonial militia, called Minutemen for their fast response, gathered on the Lexington Green to stop the British. No one knows who fired the first shot, but this moment became known as "the shot heard 'round the world" because it marked the start of the Revolutionary War. The British soldiers quickly defeated the Minutemen and continued their march to Concord, where they would eventually retreat to Boston.⁷

The Second Continental Congress met in May 1775, just weeks after the outbreak of armed conflict between British troops and colonial militia at Lexington and Concord. Delegates from all 13 colonies gathered once again in Philadelphia to address the growing crisis and determine what the colonies should do.

During the Second Continental Congress, delegates faced the large task of managing a full-scale war while shaping the future of the colonies. They created the Continental Army and made George Washington its commander-in-chief, or the leader of the army, giving him the responsibility of leading the military against British forces, the most powerful military in the world at that time.

Furthermore, the Congress took big steps towards declaring independence, or freedom, from Britain. A few of our Founding Fathers (Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston) were tasked with writing a declaration explaining the colonies' reasons for wanting to break away from their mother country. This document, known as the Declaration of Independence, was adopted on July 4, 1776, declaring the colonies' separation from Great Britain and defending their natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.⁸

The British government was not holding up their end of the bargain. Initially, the colonists came together to tell their home country that their rights as British citizens were being cast aside. When that didn't work, the colonists came together and broke away from Britain because their rights as human beings were being violated. When this happens, the people have the right to create a new government – that's exactly what the Declaration of Independence said and it's exactly what the colonists did.

In the face of tyranny, three million brave Americans, who used to act as separate colonies scattered over three thousand miles, now had one soul, igniting the flames of a young nation's revolution.

Footnotes

1. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/1658hpr-9260362296ba000/>
2. https://northcarolinagenealogy.org/statewide/stamp_act.htm
3. https://www.si.edu/object/1p-stamp-act-1765-proof%3Anpm_0.022044.1
4. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.34604500/>
5. <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/no-taxation-without-representation>
6. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp
7. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/lexington-and-concord>
8. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>