
History

The Real Boston Tea Party, Dec. 16, 1773

by Colin Lowry

Friends! Brethren! Countrymen!

That worst of plagues, the detested tea, shipped for this port by the East India Company, is now arrived in this harbor. The hour of destruction or manly opposition to the machinations of tyranny stares you in the face. Every friend to his country, to himself, and posterity, is now called upon to meet at Faneuil Hall, at nine o'clock this day, at which time the bells will ring, to make a united and successful resistance to this last, worst and most destructive measure of administration.

—From a handbill, Boston, Nov. 29, 1773

The town meeting called by the patriot leaders of Boston that day, occurred just after the first of three ships carrying East India Company tea had anchored off Long Wharf in Boston Harbor. More than 5,000 people crowded in and around Faneuil Hall to hear what could be done to stop the tea from being landed, and prevent the hated tax paid to support the East India Company's monopoly, and the coffers of the British Treasury.

This was much more than a resistance to an unjust tax. It was a battle against an oligarchical system, which was now increasingly dominated by private financiers, such as the East India Company, who used the power of the English Crown to enforce its policies. In 1772, the India Act in Parliament had brought the East India Company officially into the British government for the first time, granting the Company the right to appoint four members to the British Board of Trade, in exchange for the government's right to appoint four members of the company's board of directors. The act also extended the Company's monopoly on the India trade for another 50 years, and brought more taxes on the trade into the British Treasury. Prior to this act,

American colonial leaders and English Whigs had often attacked the brutal policies of the Company, in the hope that the Crown would rein them in. That hope was now gone, and a bolder course of action would need to be taken, if America was to retain any hope of economic development.

Since 1763, at the end of the Seven Years War, the British had continually restricted the economic development of America, using the Stamp Act, the Iron Act, the Townshend Acts, and now, in 1773, a new act granting a tea tax and total monopoly on the tea trade in America. Of course, no American had a seat in the British Parliament, but the opposition to the act was swift, with Benjamin Franklin warning the Parliament that the new tax would end in disaster for the Company.

Since the Stamp Act in 1765, the colonial leadership had established Committees of Correspondence among the various patriot groups in America, and these had been used to organize the non-importation movement, whereby no English-made goods would be bought in trade, and the Americans would make what they needed, including clothing, tools, iron, paper, and an almost universal refusal to drink English tea would

be observed. George Washington had introduced into the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1765 an agreement supporting non-importation, which every member signed.

‘The King Means To Try the Question’

The non-importation movement was so successful, that in 1770, the hated Townshend Acts were repealed, but the Ministry kept the tax on tea. Franklin remarked that “the ministry believe that threepence tax on a pound of tea, of which one does not perhaps drink ten pounds a year, is sufficient to overcome all the patriotism of an American.” The colonial legislatures sent resolutions in protest to Lord North, who arrogantly answered them, writing, “It is to no purpose making objections, the King will have it so. The King means to try the question with America.”

In October 1773, East India Company ships first tried to land the tea, at Philadelphia. This was met by local companies of militia, drilling every day in sight of the tea agents, who would have to successfully land the tea to collect the tax. Large town meetings in Philadelphia demanded that the tea be returned to England, and refused the ships’ unloading.

The East India Agents then tried to bring the tea to New York, but were met by an even fiercer opposition from the Sons of Liberty there. Patriot leaders declared at the New York town meeting that “America is faced with worse than Egyptian slavery! The language of the revenue act is, that you have no property you can call your own, that you are vassals, the live stock, of Great Britain.”

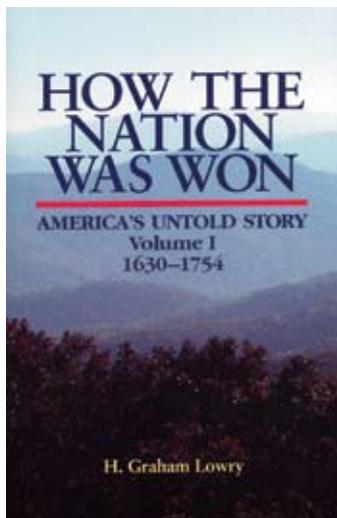
The resistance in New York was so strong, that even the British Governor asked that the ships remove themselves from the harbor, to avoid a riot. The Committees of Correspondence quickly reported to the patriot leaders in Boston, that the ships were now headed their way. Boston would now become the site of the final test of the resolve of the patriot leaders to defy the British Crown and the East India Company.

At the Nov. 29 town meeting at Faneuil Hall, Sam Adams offered a resolution that the tea should be refused, and the ships returned to England, with no tax paid. This was unanimously agreed to, and John Hancock offered to guard the tea ships along the wharves, with militia composed of members of the Sons of Liberty, to ensure that no secret unloading would occur. He also posted six horsemen, ready to ride and sound the alarm if necessary to the surrounding towns, and

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chose Paul Revere to lead this group. The guard, consisting of 34 men, rotated on shifts for 24 hours a day, for 19 days, until the evening of Dec. 16.

Dec. 16 began with a call for the largest town meeting ever seen, and over 7,000 people came to Old South Meeting House, most not being able to squeeze inside. The main speakers were Sam Adams, Dr. Thomas Young, and Josiah Quincy, Jr. All knew the action to be taken next could draw severe punishment, and likely death.



“The Destruction of Tea at Boston Harbor,” lithograph by Nathaniel Currier (1846).

‘No Looking Back’

Josiah Quincy rose to speak last, saying: “It is not, Mr. Moderator, the spirit that vapors within these walls that must stand us in stead. The exertions of this day will call forth the events which will make a very different spirit necessary for our salvation. Whoever supposes that shouts and hosannas will terminate the trials of the day, entertains a childish fancy. We must be grossly ignorant of the importance and value of the prize for which we contend; we must be equally ignorant of the power of those who have combined against us; we must be blind to that malice, inveteracy and insatiable revenge which actuates our enemies, public and private, abroad and in our bosom, to hope that we shall end this controversy without the sharpest, the sharpest conflicts. To flatter ourselves with that popular resolves, popular harangues, popular acclamations, and popular vapor will vanquish our foes. Let us consider the issue. Let us look to the end. Let us weigh and consider before we advance to those measures which must bring on the most trying and terrific struggle this country ever saw. Now that the hand is at the plough, there must be no looking back.”

Soon after he had finished, an Indian war cry was heard outside, and someone exclaimed that “the Mohawks have come!” A shout from the gallery was heard, calling for “every man to his tent.” Outside, a crowd of young men, dressed in partial Indian costumes, marched by the meeting house. The Sons of Liberty had divided up into three groups of about 25 men, with one group crudely disguised as Indians.

As the night went on, the three groups marched in silence toward the wharves where the East India Com-

pany ships lay at anchor, with several other ships of the Royal Navy not far off in the harbor. One of the groups came upon a British officer, who drew his sword, as the men were armed with axes and a few muskets. One of the “Indians” drew a pistol, and said to the officer, “The path is wide enough for us all; we have nothing to do with you, and intend you no harm; if you keep your own way peaceably, we shall keep ours,” and with that, the officer hurried away.

Now the men boarded the three ships in silence, and found the captains and the night guards, and told them they would not harm anything but the tea, and had no quarrel with them. The crews opened up the hatches, and the men worked quickly, breaking open tea chests, and tossing them into the water. Another group in small boats quickly drowned the chests that floated away, and on the shores, even small children helped stamp the tea into the mud.

The operation was highly organized, not that of a mob. The whole job was done in less than three hours, and the men even swept the decks of the ships to get rid of the loose tea, and replaced a lock they had broken on one of the ships. While the ships did contain other cargo, none of it was damaged. Once the work was finished, the men marched away in silence. Only one was arrested as a result of the tea party, but he was never tried. The message to the Crown and the East India Company could not have been clearer: The Americans had organized a united resistance in all of the colonies, and the Boston Tea Party marked the point of no return on the road to independence.