

Road to Revolution

1760-1775

In 1607 The Virginia Company of London, an English trading company, planted the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown. The successful establishment of this colony was no small achievement as the English had attempted to plant a colony in North America since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in the 16th century. The Virginia Company operated under a royal charter, granted by King James I, which assured the original settlers they would have all liberties, franchises and immunities as if they had been “abiding and born within England.”

By 1760, England and Scotland had united into the Kingdom of Great Britain and her settlements in North America had grown to thirteen thriving colonies with strong cultural, economic, and political ties to the mother country. Each colony enjoyed a certain amount of self-government. The ties which bound Great Britain and her American colonies were numerous. Wealthy men in the colonies, such as George Washington, used British trading companies as their agents to conduct business. Young men from prominent families, like Arthur Lee, went to Great Britain to finish their schooling. Colonial churches benefited from ministers who were educated in Great Britain. Many of the brightest men in the colonies, such as Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, James Otis of Massachusetts, and Peyton Randolph of Virginia, served the British government as appointed officials.



Map of the British Isles – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

What then caused these strong ties to unravel after 1760? What caused the American colonists to revolt against their mother country in 1775? Though not recognized by most people at the time, economic and political forces beginning in 1760 on both sides of the Atlantic would force Great Britain and her American colonies to reassess their long relationship.



King George III, from the studio of Allan Ramsay – Jamestown -Yorktown Foundation

How did the accession of King George III to the throne of Great Britain affect British policies towards the American colonies?

George III succeeded his grandfather, George II, to the throne of Great Britain on October 25, 1760. When he ascended the throne, Great Britain had been at war with France for a number of years. The new king was the first of the Hanoverian line to be born in England. Though mindful of the restraints on his powers as a constitutional monarch, George III desired to be a strong ruler and wanted to influence government policy. The king used patronage (his personal power to appoint individuals to key positions in the government and the military) and his immense, personal prestige to influence government policy. When George III came to the throne, the Prime Minister of Great Britain was the Duke of Newcastle, and William Pitt served as the Secretary of State in Newcastle's cabinet. Newcastle's government soon began to unravel due to differences within the British cabinet on an expansion of the war with France. When it was learned that the kings of France and Spain had entered into a compact of mutual aid, Pitt proposed declaring war on Spain. George III, on the other hand, wanted to avoid an escalation of the

conflict with France. When Pitt was outvoted in the cabinet on the expansion of the war, he left his position as Secretary of State on October 5, 1761. Within the year, Newcastle's government would fall. By May 1762, Lord Bute, a close personal friend and former tutor of the King, replaced the Duke of Newcastle as Prime Minister.

The king's new advisors re-evaluated Britain's trade policies with the colonies. For over one hundred years, Great Britain had regulated colonial trade with a number of navigation and trade laws. These laws, stemming from the economic theory of mercantilism, generally promoted British shipping and commercial interests. Over the years, these trade laws had been essentially negated by the unofficial British practice of salutary neglect, which was the avoidance of strict enforcement of the laws. Lord Bute, and the Prime Ministers who followed him, ended the practice of salutary neglect and moved to aggressively enforce Britain's trade laws with the American colonies. The substantial increase in the size of the British Navy during the war with France gave the British government the strength to choke colonial smuggling and enforce trade laws more effectively after 1760.

To crack down on smuggling in the American colonies, the British government also increasingly began to use Writs of Assistance. A type of search warrant, the writs authorized government officials to look for contraband, such as smuggled goods, in private homes and businesses. The writs also placed no limits on the time, place or manner of a search. In 1761, sixty-three Boston merchants challenged the legality of the process. James Otis, Jr., an attorney who had formerly represented the royal government, argued the case for the merchants. Though they lost their case, the surrounding publicity fueled anger within the merchant classes of Boston against the British government.



Eighteenth-century tobacco card – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

What was the Seven Years War and how did it contribute to the problems between Great Britain and her colonies?

The Seven Years War was a global conflict which ran from 1756 until 1763 and pitted a coalition of Great Britain and its allies against a coalition of France and its allies. The war escalated from a regional conflict between Great Britain and France in North America, known today as the French and Indian War. George Washington, a wealthy Virginia planter and an officer in the Virginia militia, served under British General Braddock in the early years of this conflict.



British regiment marching

The Seven Years War was the fourth war between Great Britain and France in the hundred-year period after 1689. While there had been some territorial concessions in the earlier wars, most of those earlier struggles returned each nation to their pre-war status. The Seven Years War was different in that it ended in a resounding victory for Great Britain and its allies and a humiliating defeat for France and its allies. France lost to Great Britain most of its North American colonial possessions, known as New France. This included Canada and all of its land east of the Mississippi River, including the Ohio Valley, to Great Britain.

At the war's end, Great Britain faced a number of serious geo-political and financial problems. The first problem faced by the British government rose from the need to govern and protect vast new areas won during the long conflict. In North America, the British now had responsibility for Canada and the areas east of the Mississippi River. These former French colonies included

thousands of Indians and many French-speaking Catholics who had no desire to become subjects of the British crown or to live under English common law. Great Britain also had control over East and West Florida which Spain, an ally

of France, was forced to cede to Great Britain at the end of the war. Financing the administration of these new areas was a critical problem facing the British government at the war's end.

Great Britain also faced a massive war debt at the end of the Seven Years War. As of January 5, 1763, the national debt stood at over £122,603,336. According to historian Charles Middlekauff in his work on the American Revolution, *The Glorious Cause*, the interest on this sum was over £4,409,797 per year. Complicating Britain's financial problems, the government faced growing protests for tax relief after increasing taxes for those living in the British Isles. Protests against the heavy land taxes and the Cider Tax were especially strong there.

The war's end also marked a change of attitudes among people in Great Britain and in its American colonies. During the war, the British government was unable to persuade the colonial legislatures to satisfactorily contribute to the expenses of the war. With the French defeat, the British government did not believe it needed to accommodate the concerns of the colonial legislatures regarding monetary issues. At the same time, the removal of the French threat in North America gave the American colonists a new sense of self-confidence. Many colonists questioned why the British government thought it needed to leave an army in North America to protect its colonies from Indian uprisings.

How did Indians living in the areas formerly controlled by France react to British rule?

One of the critical problems faced by Great Britain at the end of the Seven Years War was its uneasy relations with the Indian tribes living in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes. While these Indian tribes had traded with the French for years, few French settlers, other than trappers and traders, had moved into the areas south of the Great Lakes. After France and her Indian allies were defeated, British settlers began crossing the Appalachian Mountain in large numbers looking for good farm land. The Indians viewed the settlers, who wanted to claim the land, differently than the French fur traders with whom they had lived for many years.

The actions of Major General Jeffrey Amherst, the British Commander of British forces in North America, also contributed to the tense relations between the British and the Indians in the final years of the war. The British, like the French, had enjoyed the support of a number of Indian tribes and, during the war, the chiefs of these tribes had received generous gifts from the British government. Gift giving was considered by the British and the French to be an integral part of maintaining good relations with the tribes. As military operations in North America came to a successful conclusion, General Amherst decided to discontinue the practice of giving gifts to Indian chiefs, as he believed he no longer needed their support. He also made the decision to cut back on trading gunpowder to the Indians. The Indians felt that the British were treating them as a conquered people and not as former allies.

In May 1763, Pontiac, an Ottawa leader, led a number of Indian tribes in the area of the Great Lakes in an uprising against British forces and settlers along the frontier. While a few British forts on the frontier held out, over eight were taken. Hundreds of British soldiers were killed, and the settlers who survived the attacks fled from their farms on the frontier to the safe areas in the east. Commonly known as Pontiac's Rebellion, the conflict lasted until 1764. Though peace treaties ended the fighting, the possibility of further conflicts with the Indians strongly affected Britain's decision to leave a standing army in America after the Seven Years War.

What was the Proclamation of 1763, and how did it impact colonial attitudes towards Great Britain?



Portrait medallion of Benjamin Franklin – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

Great Britain recognized that one of the factors contributing to Pontiac's Rebellion had been the unchecked movement of land-hungry settlers into the area west of the Appalachian Mountains. Britain also realized that a plan was needed to develop the large areas won during the war in an orderly way. Hoping to placate the Indians while buying time to develop a long-range plan, King George III issued the Proclamation of 1763. This royal decree, issued on October 7, 1763, prohibited settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. It also required settlers who had moved west of the Appalachians to return to the eastern side of the mountains.

While the division line established by the proclamation was never meant to be permanent, the decree angered the colonists for a number of reasons. Settlers who had been forced to flee their farms west of the Appalachian Mountains during the war found the proclamation prohibited them from returning to their former homesteads. Many of these settlers had fought for the British government during the French and

Indian War. They believed the western lands were one of the spoils of war earned by their blood and felt betrayed by the British government.

The Proclamation of 1763 also troubled many of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the colonies, because many of these men had invested heavily in speculative land companies such as the Ohio Company (formed in 1747), the Loyal Company (formed in 1749), and the Mississippi Company (formed in 1763). These companies hoped to make money by obtaining title to large tracts of western land from the British government and reselling the land to settlers as they moved across the Appalachian Mountains. Some of the men who invested in these companies were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and Arthur Lee of Virginia and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania. Unable to obtain title for the land from the British government, the land companies could not make sales. Though agents of the companies were sent to London to argue on behalf of the land companies, the British government refused to reverse its position. While new treaties between the Indians and British agents opened up large tracts for development fairly quickly after the war, the land companies did not recover. The wealthy men who had invested in these companies suffered significant financial losses. These losses would be remembered in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

What steps did the British government take to gain control over its finances as the Seven Years War ended?

The British government moved quickly at the end of the long war with France to regain control of its finances. In April 1763, George Grenville replaced Lord Bute as the Prime Minister. Grenville, a former First Lord of the Treasury, wanted the American colonies to contribute to the costs of maintaining a British Army in North America after the war. Grenville saw this as only fair since the taxes on the British people had increased dramatically during the war.

One of the first measures passed to raise revenue from the American colonies was a tax on sugar. Grenville designed the American Revenue Act of 1764, commonly known as the Sugar Act, to replace the Sugar and Molasses Act of 1733 which was to expire. The earlier act had imposed a tax of six pence per gallon on molasses which was imported from the French West Indies or the Dutch West Indies. Molasses was an important ingredient in the manufacture of rum which was one of New England's most important businesses. The Sugar and Molasses Act of 1733 was not planned as a revenue bill but as a means to regulate trade. It was intended to encourage trade with the British West Indies at the expense of the French and Dutch West Indies. Due to wide-spread smuggling and bribery, the tax on molasses from the French and Dutch West Indies was rarely collected. On April 5, 1764, the British Parliament passed the American Revenue Act of 1764. While the new act cut the tax on molasses in half, Grenville anticipated that more aggressive collection of the duties would bring in more money. The act further empowered customs officials to have all violations of the law tried in Vice Admiralty courts rather than general courts. Vice Admiralty courts had jurisdiction over maritime issues, while general courts handled felony cases in the colonies. Vice admiralty courts, unlike general courts, did not use juries, and Grenville recognized that colonial juries were often very sympathetic to popular local merchants involved in smuggling. The Sugar Act would meet with major resistance in New England where the manufacture of rum from molasses had become a major industry.



Seal of the New York Vice Admiralty Court – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

In search of more money to pay the costs of maintaining an army in North America, Grenville proposed a Stamp Act for the colonies. A stamp duty had first been introduced in England in 1694 and proved useful in collecting revenues. The new tax required all legal documents including commercial contracts, newspapers, wills, marriage licenses, diplomas, pamphlets, and playing cards in the American colonies to carry a tax stamp. The Stamp Act was the first direct tax used by the British government to collect revenues from the colonies. Though there were scattered objections in Parliament to using a stamp tax to collect revenue from the colonies, Grenville could not understand how anyone in the colonies could protest a tax which the people in Britain had been paying for over 50 years.

Another economic measure passed by Parliament which affected the colonies was the Currency Act of 1764 which prohibited the American colonies from giving bills of credit the same status as legal tender. Bills of credit was a local solution to the lack of silver and gold coin in the colonies. These instruments were supported by the credit of the government which issued them and not by gold and silver specie. The Currency Act stopped colonial merchants from paying their British creditors in devalued paper money issued by colonial governments. Many in the colonies blamed

the act for causing widespread economic failure after British merchants rejected payment for their goods in devalued bills of credit and demanded to be paid in hard currency.

Besides revenue bills, additional policies caused unrest in the American colonies in the years after the war. In May 1765, Parliament passed a Quartering Act that required colonial authorities to find or pay the lodging expense for British soldiers stationed in the colonies. The act did not require the quartering of soldiers in occupied homes but did permit the quartering of soldiers in inns, livery stables, ale houses, barns, and other buildings. When the colony of New York failed to obey the Quartering Act in 1766, Parliament suspended the New York legislature in 1767 and 1769.

How did the colonists in America react to the Currency Act and Sugar Act enacted by Parliament after the Seven Years War?

While many colonists blamed the Currency Act for causing the recession at the war's end, there were few wide-spread protests over this measure in the colonies. Great Britain had forbidden the printing of colonial currency in certain colonies in earlier years and many viewed the act as an extension of those earlier currency laws.

“And now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished by our indulgence...will they grudge to Contribute... to relieve us... the burden under which we live?”

– Charles Townshend, Member of Parliament speaking in favor of the Stamp Act, 1765

Complaints against the Sugar Act were also fairly low-key though there was a great deal of grumbling among merchants in New England. Samuel Adams, a popular leader in Boston's rowdy political clubs, organized some of the earliest resistance to the tax and urged the Massachusetts General Assembly to go on record

opposing the tax. Some Boston merchants agreed to boycott the purchase of British luxury goods in retaliation. This step began non-importation, or the boycott of British goods, as a tool of colonial protest. A five member Committee of Correspondence was appointed in June 1764 in Massachusetts to coordinate action and exchange information with other colonies. These groups, organized for the purpose of coordinating written communication with other colonies, proved important in disseminating information about British activities and coordinating common protests. Possibly, the protests over the Sugar Tax were low-key as many in the colonies saw the new Sugar Act as simply an extension of the earlier Molasses Act of 1733 and not as a means to raise revenue. More probably, many merchants thought they would be able to circumvent the payment of this tax as they

had avoided the earlier Molasses Act by bribery, intimidation, and stealth. They did not appreciate Grenville's plans to stop smuggling and enforce trade laws.

“Taxes are not to be laid on the people but by their consent.”

– James Otis, Jr., Boston lawyer, from *The Rights of the British Colonies*, 1764

What was the colonial reaction to the Stamp Act?

The American reaction to the Stamp Act, however, was swift and intense. The first official opposition to the stamps came from the Virginia House of Burgesses. On May 29, 1765, the House of Burgesses passed five resolves proposed by Patrick Henry, a young, newly-elected member from Hanover County. Though a well known attorney, Henry was considered an upstart firebrand when he won a special election and traveled to Williamsburg to take his seat. Henry's measures, known as the Virginia Resolves, took the House of Burgesses by storm. The Virginia Resolves tied the liberties and immunities enjoyed by Virginians in 1765 to the first two royal charters granted by King James I in the early 17th century. The third resolve boldly stated,

“That the Taxation of the People by themselves, or by Persons chosen by themselves to represent them, who can only know what taxes the people are able to bear, or the easiest Method of raising them, and must themselves be affected by every Tax laid on the people, is the only Security against a burdensome Taxation, and the distinguishing characteristick of British freedom, without which the ancient constitution cannot exist.”

The fifth resolve, the most radical of the five resolutions passed by the House, stated that only the General Assembly of Virginia had the power to lay taxes on its inhabitants. This declaration reflected the growing principle in the colonies that there could be no taxation without representation. The day after the five resolves passed the House of Burgesses, conservative and moderate members regrouped to strike the more radical fifth resolve from the official records.

The news of Virginia's courageous stand spread quickly throughout the colonies, and several newspapers in other colonies published all five resolves. Other colonial assemblies followed Virginia's daring lead. Shortly after Virginia's action, the Massachusetts lower house proposed a meeting of representatives from all of the colonies. This meeting, known as the Stamp Act Congress, met in New York in October 1765 and produced a document called "The Declaration of Rights and Grievances". This document raised fourteen points of protest that went well beyond the protests over the Stamp Act and was sent as three petitions to the King, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons.

In addition to protests by colonial legislatures, mobs in numerous cities violently demonstrated against the Stamp Act. Many of these crowds often went by such patriotic names as the Sons of Liberty and the Liberty Boys. These secretive and volatile groups, often composed of printers and artisans, were led by some of the most powerful men in the colonies. Samuel Adams led the Sons of Liberty in Boston. These groups protested by hanging effigies of people associated with the tax and ransacking their homes. Occasionally, these groups would "tar and feather" people who represented the royal government. Individuals appointed to be stamp collectors feared for their personal safety. Most tax collectors never claimed their lucrative offices and resigned their positions before ever issuing any stamps. In addition to mob violence, other groups organized efforts to stop the importation of British goods. Many of these groups also punished merchants who violated the boycott of British goods.

How did the British Parliament respond to the colonial protest against the Stamp Act?

News of the violence against the tax collectors and government officials quickly reached London. The British Parliament was strongly divided as to how to proceed, and two major factions swiftly developed within the government. While Lord Rockingham had replaced George Grenville as Prime Minister, Grenville remained a Member of Parliament. He and his faction rejected repealing the Stamp Act, feeling this was a question of Parliamentary supremacy and that there could be no retreat on the issue. Other influential members of

"I desire to know when they were made slaves?"

– William Pitt, Member of Parliament and proponent of colonial rights, Responding to Grenville's question, 1766

Parliament, such as William Pitt and Edmund Burke, urged that the Stamp Act be repealed. This bloc had the critical

support of the powerful merchant class in Great Britain which was suffering due to the non-importation of British goods. The testimony of Benjamin Franklin also influenced the issue. Franklin, who had been living in England for a number of years as an agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly, testified before Parliament that the colonists had no objection to external taxes but only

objected to internal taxes. Internal taxes were vaguely defined as taxes rising from activities within the colonies, such as the Stamp Act, while external taxes were essentially duties on trade. George Grenville rejected any distinction between external and internal taxes as contrived and artificial. After convincing a reluctant George III that repeal was in the nation's best interests, Parliament passed a measure to repeal the Stamp Act in March 1766. On the same day, Parliament also passed the Declaratory Act which affirmed the right of Parliament to pass laws over the colonies, "in all cases whatsoever."

The residents of all the colonies celebrated the repeal of the Stamp Act with joy. The news of its repeal gave the American colonists confidence that the British government understood and respected their position regarding taxes. Few recognized or appreciated that Parliament clearly claimed the right to pass laws "in all cases whatsoever" with the Declaratory Act. For some in the British government, they would simply find another way to raise revenue from the colonies.

"Great Britain protects America; America is bound to yield obedience. If not, tell me when the Americans were emancipated?"

– George Grenville, member of Parliament, in debates over the repeal Stamp Act, 1766; as prime minister, he had secured passage of the act the year before

What were the Townshend Duties, and how did the colonies respond to them?

In July 1766, the government of Lord Rockingham failed and William Pitt became Prime Minister. Pitt brought Charles Townshend into the government as the head of the Treasury. Pitt, a vocal critic of Grenville's policies towards the American colonies, became ill shortly after his return to power.

During Pitt's illness, Townshend assumed the duties of pushing the government's economic measures through Parliament. Townshend did not share Pitt's concerns over colonial taxation and pushed through a number of measures in 1767 related to the American colonies. Townshend proposed three measures that became known as the Townshend Acts consisting of the Revenue Act of 1767, the Suspension of the New York Assembly Act, and the Board of Customs Act. The Revenue Act raised revenue from the colonies by putting new import duties on lead, glass, paints, and tea. The New York Assembly Act suspended the New York Assembly until it agreed to obey the Quartering Act. The American Board of Customs Act established a Board of Customs Commission in Boston to enforce the duties imposed by the Revenue Act and created new Vice Admiralty courts in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Townshend did not believe the colonists would reject the import duties as they had rejected the Stamp Act since the new duties were considered external taxes.



William Pitt, British Prime Minister 1766 to 1768 – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

However, the colonies immediately protested the Townshend duties. Better organized after the Stamp Act crisis, the colonies quickly moved to again use non-importation of British goods as an effective tool of protest. Though the dissent against the Townshend duties was not as violent as the mob protests over the Stamp Act, the colonists again succeeded in their petitions. In 1770, the Parliament rescinded all of the Townshend duties except the tea tax which was maintained to demonstrate Parliament's supremacy over the colonies.

How did relations between Britain and the colonies fare after repeal of the Townshend Act?

Though Parliament rescinded most of the Townshend duties and the American merchants began trading again with British merchants, there continued to be confrontations between British soldiers and colonists. Continued enforcement of British trade laws and the presence of British soldiers in several major port cities caused many of these conflicts. On March 5, 1770, one such incident occurred when British soldiers in Boston fired into a mob, killing five people. The incident became known as the Boston Massacre and received wide-spread publicity throughout the colonies. Though there was a general outcry throughout the colonies to the Boston Massacre, the British government allowed the soldiers to be tried in Massachusetts. The British soldiers were represented by John Adams, second cousin of the outspoken Samuel Adams. John Adams, a well-respected attorney, was considered more moderate in his political views than Samuel Adams. John Adams argued that the British soldiers were not guilty of a criminal offense as they were only protecting themselves from an angry mob. Six of the eight British soldiers on trial were acquitted while the remaining two were convicted of manslaughter. Many on both sides of the Atlantic felt the soldiers received a fair trial.

Another conflict between the Royal Navy and the colonists rekindled the activities of the Committees of Correspondence. On June 9, 1772, the HMS Gaspee, a British war ship tasked with intercepting smugglers, ran aground off the coast of Rhode Island. After it ran aground, patriots from Providence rowed out to the ship and confronted her crew. The colonists removed the ship's crew and burned the vessel to the waterline. The British government launched a formal inquiry to find the guilty parties. Many colonists feared that suspects would be sent to Great Britain for trial. Virginia's leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry, urged the colonies to reactivate the Committees of Correspondence to communicate about the crisis. Though no one was held guilty for the burning of the HMS Gaspee, the rekindling of communications between the colonies prepared the colonists for the next step on the road to revolution.

How did the Tea Act of 1773 and the Boston Tea Party contribute to the final breakdown of relations between Great Britain and England?

By 1773, a relative calm existed between the British government and her colonial subjects. While British soldiers remained in America and the Townshend duty on tea remained the law, moderates on both sides appeared to be gaining control. A new act of Parliament, designed to help a struggling trading company, would next fuel the growing conflict between the American colonies and the British government.



Tea pot – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

The East India Company, once one of England's oldest and most successful trading companies, faced economic collapse in the years following the Seven Years War. The high annual payment the company was required to pay the British government was a factor in the company's financial problems.



Taking tea – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

The company enjoyed many friends in the government, and responding to pleas for governmental assistance, the British Parliament passed the Tea Act in May 1773 to help the company. This act eliminated the customs duty on the company's tea and permitted its direct export to America. Though the company's tea was still subject to the Townshend tax, dropping the customs duty would allow the East India Company to sell its tea for less than smuggled Dutch tea.

Though Parliament did not pass the Tea Act as a revenue measure, patriot leaders saw the act as a cunning way to get the Americans to pay the hated Townshend duty on tea by undercutting the price of smuggled Dutch tea. Many colonial leaders feared that the colonists would buy the company's tea if it made it to shore and submit to the payment of the tea tax. This would undercut their claim that only colonial legislatures could tax the colonies. Angry

mobs, like the Sons of Liberty, in Philadelphia and New York forced ships carrying the company's tea to return to England without unloading. In Massachusetts, however, the Royal Governor refused to allow the ships carrying the company's tea to leave the harbor without first paying the duty on the tea. On the evening of December 16, 1773, patriots disguised as Indians boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and threw over three hundred crates of tea into the water to make sure the tea did not get unloaded.

The British government swiftly reacted to the Boston Tea Party. In the 18th century, the British proudly based their national identity on the twin pillars of international trade and the rule of law. The senseless destruction of private property by a group of hooligans shocked the English merchant class. Moderates within Great Britain who had long supported the colonists turned decisively against them. Instead of placating the colonies by repealing the Tea Act, the British government decided to punish Boston and the people of Massachusetts with a series of acts which became known as the Intolerable Acts or the Coercive Acts.

“The Ministry could not have devised a more effectual Measure to unite the Colonies... Old Jealousies are removed, and perfect Harmony subsists between them.”

– Samuel Adams, Massachusetts patriot commenting on the Tea Act, December 1773

What were the Intolerable Acts?

The Intolerable Acts consisted of a number of measures meant to punish the port of Boston and the people of Massachusetts for the Boston Tea party. Parliament, now under the leadership of Lord North, passed the first of these measures, the Boston Port Act, in March 1774. This act provided that the port of Boston would be closed until the East India Company received compensation for the loss of the tea and the Royal Government received payment for the lost income it would have received on the customs duty. The second of these laws was known as the Administration of Justice Act of 1774. This act allowed a change of venue to another British colony or to Great Britain for trials of officials charged with a crime growing out of their enforcement of the law or suppression of riots. The



Lord North, British Prime Minister 1770 to 1782 – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

third of the Intolerable Acts, the Massachusetts Government Act, abolished the popularly elected upper council of the colony and replaced them with a 12 to 36 member council appointed by the King. The act also gave the Massachusetts royal governor broad powers to remove various judges, marshals, and justices of the peace. The fourth of the Intolerable Acts was the Quartering Act. This law was passed on June 2, 1774. Like the previous Quartering Act, the new law allowed a colonial governor to house British soldiers in unoccupied houses and barns.

Another measure, the Quebec Act, passed by Parliament during this period, also troubled the American colonies. Though it was not intended by the British government to punish the people of Massachusetts for the Boston Tea party, many colonists consider the act as one of the Intolerable Acts. Passed in June 1774, the act extended the jurisdiction of Quebec into the area north of the Ohio River. The act also restored some of the rights previously enjoyed by the French-speaking residents of Quebec and provided that the area would be governed by a royal governor and an appointed council. The act wiped out the claims of Virginia and several other colonies to the areas west of the Appalachian Mountains. The act appeared to favor the French-speaking residents of Quebec over the colonialists of the older British colonies.

How did the Intolerable Acts contribute to the final break between the colonies and Great Britain?

Mass protests in the colonies greeted the news of the Intolerable Acts. In May 1774, the Virginia House of Burgesses set aside June 1, 1774, as a day of “Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer for Boston.” Though the Royal Governor of Virginia dissolved the House of Burgesses upon learning of this act of solidarity with the people of Massachusetts, the members reconvened at Raleigh Tavern. In July 1774, George Washington, now a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and his neighbor, George Mason, drafted the Fairfax Resolves. These resolves detailed many of the complaints against British rule, called for non-importation of British goods, demanded an end to the slave trade, and urged the calling of a general congress to draft a petition to the King. George Washington carried the Fairfax Resolves to the Virginia Houses of Burgesses which took up the matter on August 1, 1774, as the First Virginia Convention, the revolutionary body which governed Virginia until 1776. Across the thirteen colonies, local groups were adopting similar resolutions to protest the Intolerable Acts. In Massachusetts, the Suffolk Resolves would mirror the spirit of the Fairfax Resolves while the Orangetown Resolutions captured the anger of the colonists in the colony of New York.

“The dye is now cast, the Colonies must either submit or triumph.”

– King George III to Lord North, September 1774

“The die is cast...it seems to me the Sword is now our only, yet dreadful, alternative....”

– Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, in a letter to a friend in February 1775

The British goal of isolating and making an example of the people of Boston and the Massachusetts colony using the Intolerable Acts completely failed. Instead of isolating Massachusetts from the other colonies, it united the colonies against a common enemy. The closing of the port of Boston indiscriminately punished the innocent, as well as the guilty and drove many unaligned neutrals into the ranks of the patriots. The number of loyalists, people who supported the British government, declined dramatically. People residing

outside Massachusetts realized that they could be punished as harshly as the people of Massachusetts if they offended Parliament. In addition to formal protests, a number of colonies sent aid to the isolated people of Boston.

The Intolerable Acts compelled a number of patriot leaders, committees of correspondence, and colonial legislatures to endorse the call for a general congress of the thirteen colonies to discuss how to resolve the newest crisis. This congress, known as the first Continental Congress, met briefly in Philadelphia from September 5 to October 26, 1774,

to consider ways of redressing colonial grievances. Peyton Randolph, the former Speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses, chaired the first Continental Congress. Delegates to this convention included George Washington and Patrick Henry of Virginia and John Adams and Samuel Adam of Massachusetts. The Congress created The Continental Association, a system for implementing a trade boycott of British goods. The delegates agreed the colonies would cease importation of British goods on December 1, 1774, but delayed the ban on exporting goods to Britain until September 1775. The Congress also agreed to a broad Declaration of Rights which strongly stated that only the American colonies had the right to tax themselves. Before adjourning, the Congress also agreed to reconvene in May 1775 to decide if further action was necessary.

What event triggered general war between Great Britain and its American colonies?

By late 1774, provisional governments, some known as Committees of Safety, assumed control over governmental duties in a number of colonies. These provisional governments called for local militias to arm and train. In September 1774, British General Thomas Gage, the new military governor of Massachusetts, seized the munitions stored at Charles Town and Cambridge and also began to fortify his position in the city of Boston. Patriot spies, like Paul Revere in Boston, began to report on British troop movements to keep colonial munitions safe from seizure and keep rebel leaders from being arrested. The British seizure of gunpowder and munitions was countered by patriots who seized gunpowder from Fort William and Mary at New Castle, New Hampshire, in December 1774.



British General Thomas Gage – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation



Battle of Lexington – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

Parliament declared Massachusetts in a state of rebellion in February 1775 and authorized General Gage to use force to put down the rebellion. On April 14, 1775, General Gage received orders from the British government to disarm and arrest rebel leaders. British troops left Boston on the night of April 18, 1775, to seize the munitions stored by the patriots in Concord. Patriot spies gave warning of the movement of British troops, and minutemen assembled along the road from Boston to Lexington. The conflict the next day between the British soldiers and the New England minutemen in Lexington

was the spark which led to general war. Coincidentally, the day after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Royal Governor of Virginia seized the gunpowder stored in the magazine in Williamsburg. An angry mob descended on the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg, demanding the return of the gunpowder. Calmer heads prevailed and violence was averted. The British government had decided it was time to take decisive action to end the growing rebellion.

Shortly after the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the gunpowder incident in Williamsburg, the second Continental Congress reconvened in Philadelphia and learned British forces in Boston were under siege by thousands of New England minutemen. This Congress authorized the creation of the Continental Army and, on June 15, 1775, appointed George Washington commander of the American forces. Washington's selection reflected his reputation as a veteran of the French and Indian War, as well as his position as one of Virginia's most powerful men.

What did George Washington think about as he traveled north to Boston to face General Gage, the commander of British forces?

Ironically, Washington and Gage both served under General Braddock during the French and Indian War as fellow officers and both miraculously survived the disaster which befell Braddock's expedition. Did Washington mull over the years after 1763 and shake his head in disbelief that Great Britain and its American colonies had come to blows? Or did Washington, the quintessential pragmatist, worry more about devising a strategy to battle one of the world's best armies with a motley assortment of militias? Though Washington may not have dreamed it as he traveled north that fateful summer to take command, America was now on the road to independence.



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P.O. Box 1607, Williamsburg, VA 23187

