

Tea Overboard!

In May of 1773, the British Parliament passed the Tea Act, which gave a monopoly to the British East India Company. The British government was trying to save one of England's oldest and most successful trading companies from economic collapse after the French and Indian War. The act eliminated the normal customs duty on the British East India Company's tea and permitted its direct export to America. Though the company tea was subject to the 1767 Townsend Act tax, dropping the customs duty would allow the tea to be sold for less than smuggled Dutch tea.

Many American colonists, however, did not want to pay the taxes on this tea. In Boston, the colonists took action to stop the tea from entering the city. On the night of December 16, 1773, patriots disguised as Mohawk Indians boarded ships in the Boston harbor and destroyed 342 chests of East India Company Tea. This news was not well received in England. Parliament responded by closing the port of Boston in June of 1774. Throughout the colonies, people were up in arms. The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in September, and decided to stop importing goods from Britain.

In Virginia, the boycott of British goods went into effect on November 1, 1774, one month before the Continental Association boycott went into effect. Most merchants agreed to stop imports, but a few continued to import items from Britain. A ship called *Virginia* arrived in Yorktown from England, carrying two half-chests of tea. The tea had been imported by John Hatley Norton, the Yorktown agent of John Norton and Sons of London, for the merchant John Prentis of Williamsburg. On the morning of November 7, some citizens of Yorktown, learning of its cargo, boarded the ship. The men waited throughout the morning for word from a committee of burgesses (colonial representatives) meeting in Williamsburg who were debating what to do with the tea and the ship. Hearing nothing from the committee by noon, the men hoisted the tea out of its hold and threw it in the river, just as in Boston.

News of the Yorktown tea party spread as several hundred merchants gathered in Williamsburg on November 9. The event convinced most Virginia merchants to sign the Continental Association. The York and Gloucester committees passed resolutions condemning Norton, Prentis, and Captain Howard Esten of the *Virginia* for ignoring the boycott. The committees published their resolutions in the Virginia Gazette on November 24, and John Prentis had an apology printed in the same issue.

It gives me much Concern to find that I have incurred the Displeasure of the York and Gloucester Committees, and thereby of the Publick in general, for my Omission in not countermanding the Order which I sent to Mr. Norton for two Half Chests of Tea; and do with Truth declare, that I had not the least Intention to give Offence, nor did I mean an Opposition to any measure for the publick Good. My Countrymen, therefore, it is earnestly hoped, will readily forgive me for an Act which may be interpreted so much to my Discredit; and I again make this publick Declaration, that I had not the least Design to act contrary to those

*Principles which ought to govern every Individual who has a just Regard
for the Rights and Liberties of America.*

The following May, a letter written by London merchant John Norton was also printed in the Virginia Gazette, in which he apologized for the confusion over the dates of the boycott and explained that Captain Esten had complied with his instructions to report the tea to authorities upon landing at Yorktown.

In Boston, colonists destroyed 342 chests of tea. In Yorktown, the number was much smaller - only two half-chests. Yet, the Yorktown Tea Party was important. It was one of many acts of defiance in Virginia as the Revolution approached, and it convinced many Virginia merchants to stop importing English goods. Even though it was not as large as the Boston Tea Party, it had the effect of moving more people to the verge of Revolution.



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