



BOSTON TEA PARTY

BY AELRED CONNELLY, LBMA PR EXECUTIVE

The Boston Tea Party, 16 December 1773. Wood engraving, c1850.

Throughout history, from the earliest rebellions against the agricultural tax levied in Ancient Egypt, societies have revolted against the imposition of taxes.

Indeed, opposition to taxation has led to the collapse of whole empires (Egyptian, Aztec and Roman) and spurred the overthrow of monarchies (French Revolution). But with the 2018 LBMA/LPPM annual precious metals conference rolling into Boston, it would be amiss not to mention what is arguably the most famous tax rebellion in world history – the Boston Tea Party. It may not have strictly been a party nor was it all about tea, but it certainly did take place in Boston.

The introduction in 1773 of the Tea Act by the British Government into its American colonies was designed to give the East India company (EIC) a monopoly over the tea market. The tea tax imposed by Britain on the American colonists was not in itself that punitive, but it followed a succession of other taxes and, as such, was probably the straw that broke the camel's back.

On 16 December 1773, at Griffin's Wharf in Boston, American colonists, angry at Britain for imposing "taxation without representation", dumped 45 tonnes of tea (equivalent to the weight of 3,600 gold bars) into the harbour. The incident became known as the Boston Tea Party.

The event was significant in that it was the first major act of defiance by the colonists to British rule. It also demonstrated to Britain that the Americans wouldn't take taxation lightly and prompted the colonists across the 13 colonies to begin their fight for independence. It was the catalyst for the American Revolution, which ultimately give rise to the great American dream.

ORIGINS

In the 1760s, Britain was deep in debt (some things never change) and in an effort to balance the books, the British Parliament imposed a series of taxes on American colonists. The first of many taxes was the Stamp Act of 1765, which taxed colonists on virtually every piece of printed paper they used, swiftly followed by the Townshend Acts of 1767, which imposed taxes on a range of staple items including paint, paper and glass.

Britain felt justified in levying the taxes because of growing debts as a result of fighting wars on behalf of the colonists. This, unsurprisingly, was not well received by the colonists, who objected largely on the grounds that they did not have a voice in the British Parliament nor indeed any representation.

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BOSTON MASSACRE

On 5 March 1770, annoyed and frustrated with the presence of British soldiers in their streets, a group of American colonists began throwing snowballs at the British soldiers guarding the

Boston Customs House and a street brawl broke out. Reinforcements were called and opened fire, killing five. The incident became known as the Boston Massacre.

IMPOSITION OF THE TEA ACT

To appease the colonists, Britain repealed many of the taxes that it had imposed, with the exception the tea tax. In protest, the colonists boycotted tea sold by the EIC and smuggled in Dutch tea, leaving the EIC with millions of pounds of surplus stock and facing the prospect of bankruptcy.

In May 1773, the British Parliament passed the Tea Act, which allowed the EIC to sell tea to the colonies duty-free and much cheaper than other tea companies, but still tax the tea when it reached colonial ports. Tea smuggling in the colonies increased, although the cost of the smuggled tea soon surpassed that of tea from the EIC.

SONS OF LIBERTY

A group of colonial rebels, known as the Sons of Liberty, held a series of meetings protesting against the tax. The EIC tried to bring three ships (Dartmouth, Beaver and Eleanor) loaded with tea into the Boston harbour, but the colonists voted not to pay taxes and refused to allow the tea to be unloaded. In return, Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused to allow the ships to return to Britain and ordered the tea tariff be paid and the tea unloaded.

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Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

DISGUISED AS NATIVE AMERICANS, A LARGE GROUP OF MEN BOARDED THE DOCKED SHIPS, BROKE OPEN 342 CHESTS OF TEA AND DUMPED 45 TONNES OF TEA INTO THE HARBOUR.



THE FIRST BOSTON TEA PARTY

On the evening of 16 December 1773, a large group of men – many reportedly members of the Sons of Liberty – disguised themselves as native Americans, boarded the docked ships, broke open 342 chests of tea and dumped 45 tonnes of tea into the harbour. All the time, the British ships looked on but made no attempt to intervene.

BOSTON TEA PARTY AFTERMATH

As things go, it was a relatively peaceful incident, no one was hurt and no property was damaged. The participants even allegedly swept the ships' decks clean before they left. Largely as a result of the disguises that they had used, only one of the colonists, Francis Akeley, was actually arrested and imprisoned.

COERCIVE ACTS

But despite the lack of violence, the Boston Tea Party was met with fierce retribution by the British government, with Parliament passing the Coercive Acts (later known as the Intolerable Acts), which served to:

- close Boston Harbor, until the value of the tea lost in the Boston Tea Party was repaid
- end the Massachusetts Constitution and free elections of town officials
- move judicial authority to Britain and British judges, basically creating martial law in Massachusetts
- require colonists to house British troops on demand
- extend freedom of worship to French-Canadian Catholics under British rule (which naturally upset the mainly Protestant colonists).

Britain hoped the Coercive Acts would help to suppress resistance from the colonists and prevent them from uniting against British rule. However, it only served to increase resistance. The other states stood shoulder to shoulder with Boston and sent messages of support as well as supplies.

TEA FOR TWO

A second Boston Tea Party took place in March 1774, when around 60 Bostonians boarded the ship *Fortune* and dumped nearly 30 chests of tea into the harbour. This event did not gain as much notoriety as the first one the previous year, but it did encourage other tea-dumping demonstrations in other parts of the colonies.

FIRST CONTINENTAL CONGRESS IS CONVENED

Many colonists felt Britain's Coercive Acts were a step too far. On 5 September 1774, elected delegates from 12 of the 13 colonies (except Georgia) met in Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress to consider how they should resist the British acts of oppression.

Opinion was divided on how best to achieve their aims, but the events of the Boston Tea Party had certainly united them in their determination for independence. Within a matter of weeks, they'd written The Declaration which set out a series of demands:

- repeal of the Coercive Acts
- boycott of British goods
- right to govern independently
- formation of a colonial militia.

Britain retaliated by refusing to pander to their demands and, within months, the American Revolutionary War had begun.

LEGACY

The Boston Tea Party laid the foundations for the colonists to issue the Declaration of Independence, adopted by the Continental Congress on 4 July 1776, when the 13 American colonies severed their political connections to Britain. The American War of Independence which ensued finally ended in 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on 3 September 1783, in which Britain acknowledged the American colonies as independent. King George III became known as the King who lost America.



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Aelred joined the LBMA in September 2011. He provides support to the Chief Executive in the administration and organisation of the Association's Public Affairs. He is responsible for Press enquiries, is the editor of the *Alchemist* as well as contributing to other LBMA publications, provision of the website and support for LBMA events.

Prior to joining the LBMA, he worked at the Bank of England for more than twenty-five years, the last five as an analyst in the Bank's gold bullion department.