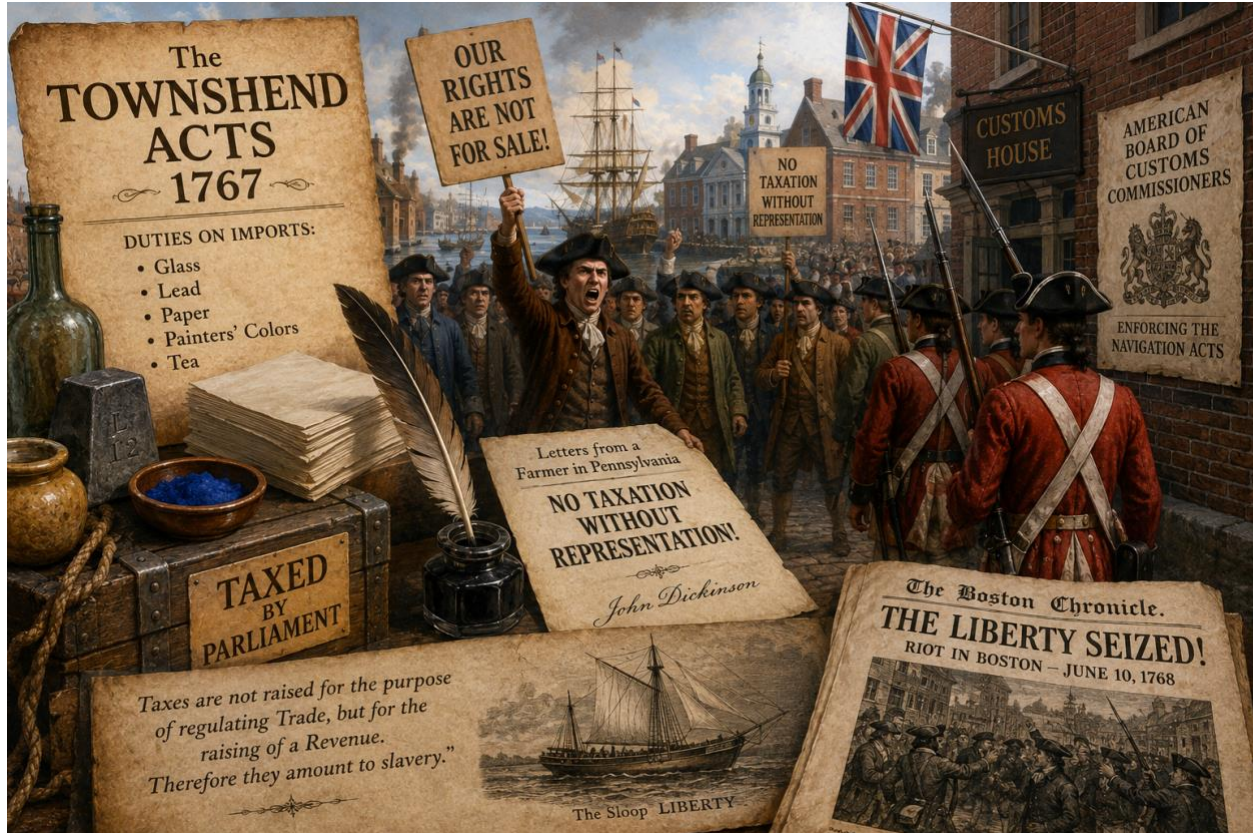




The Townshend Acts of 1767

Parliament Tries Again

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

The repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766 did not resolve Britain's financial problems—or its determination to assert parliamentary authority over the American colonies. Parliament still faced the enormous cost of administering and defending its greatly expanded North American empire following the French and Indian War. British leaders also believed the colonies should contribute to the expense of maintaining approximately 10,000 troops stationed in America.

Just as troubling to British officials was the growing independence of the colonial legislatures. Some assemblies had begun withholding the salaries of royal governors in an effort to influence their policies, while customs officials complained that widespread smuggling and lax enforcement of the Navigation Acts were depriving the Crown of much-needed revenue.

Against this backdrop, Chancellor of the Exchequer **Charles Townshend** persuaded Parliament to adopt a new series of revenue measures in 1767. Unlike the Stamp Act, which imposed a direct internal tax, the new laws attempted to raise money through duties on imported goods. Townshend hoped the colonists would view customs duties differently than internal taxes.

He was mistaken.

Taxes Disguised as Trade Duties

The Townshend Acts imposed import duties on glass, lead, paper, painters' colors, and tea—items that were either unavailable or not produced in significant quantities within the colonies.

Parliament intended the revenue for more than simply raising money. A substantial portion was earmarked to pay the salaries of royal governors and judges, making them financially independent of the colonial legislatures. British officials believed this would strengthen imperial authority. The colonists viewed it as yet another attempt to weaken their elected assemblies.

The acts also created an **American Board of Customs Commissioners**, headquartered in Boston, to tighten enforcement of the Navigation Acts and reduce smuggling. At the same time, Parliament suspended the New York Assembly until it agreed to comply with the Quartering Act by providing supplies and accommodations for British troops stationed there.

To Parliament, these measures represented sensible imperial administration. To many Americans, they appeared to be another assault on colonial self-government.

John Dickinson Challenges Parliament

The constitutional question raised by the Stamp Act had never been settled.

British leaders believed the new import duties were different because Parliament had long regulated trade throughout the empire. Philadelphia lawyer **John Dickinson** disagreed. In his widely read series of essays, **Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania**, Dickinson argued that any tax whose primary purpose was to raise revenue from the colonies—whether collected at a port or within the colonies themselves—violated the rights of Englishmen who lacked representation in Parliament.

His essays spread rapidly throughout the colonies and became one of the most influential political writings of the decade, strengthening the growing belief that Parliament had exceeded its constitutional authority.

Colonial Resistance Grows

Resistance quickly spread throughout the colonies.

Merchants organized another boycott of British imports, while the Sons of Liberty staged demonstrations against customs officials. In Massachusetts, the legislature circulated a letter urging the other colonial assemblies to join together in protesting Parliament's actions. When British authorities ordered the Massachusetts Assembly to withdraw the letter, it refused. Governor Francis Bernard dissolved the legislature, but the attempt to silence Massachusetts only encouraged greater cooperation among the colonies.

For the second time in only a few years, Parliament had united Americans who previously had often acted independently.

The Liberty Affair

Tensions reached a new level in June 1768 when British customs officials seized the merchant sloop **Liberty**, owned by Boston merchant John Hancock. Officials accused Hancock of illegally unloading a cargo of wine without paying the required customs duties.

The seizure infuriated the citizens of Boston. Thousands gathered in protest, customs officials were threatened, and violent riots broke out throughout the city. Fearing for their safety, the commissioners withdrew to the protection of Castle William in Boston Harbor.

Many colonists believed the customs officials routinely abused their authority by conducting unreasonable searches, seizing vessels on questionable grounds, and using the courts to enrich themselves through confiscated property. Whether entirely justified or not, these perceptions fueled popular resentment toward British rule.

British Troops Occupy Boston

Reports of growing unrest convinced British officials that stronger measures were necessary. In the autumn of 1768, four regiments of British soldiers arrived in Boston to restore order and protect customs officials.

Their presence had the opposite effect.

Boston suddenly became an occupied town. Soldiers patrolled the streets, competed with local laborers for part-time work, and frequently quarreled with townspeople. Mutual distrust steadily increased. British soldiers often regarded the colonists as unruly provincials, while Bostonians viewed the troops as symbols of oppression imposed by a distant Parliament.

Each side grew more suspicious of the other.

Parliament Retreats—but Not Completely

As had occurred during the Stamp Act crisis, colonial boycotts began hurting British merchants, who pressured Parliament to reconsider the new duties.

In 1770, Parliament repealed all of the Townshend duties except the tax on tea. The government hoped this compromise would ease tensions while preserving the important constitutional principle that Parliament retained the authority to tax the colonies.

Instead, Britain satisfied neither side.

The colonists celebrated the repeal of most of the duties but remained convinced that Parliament possessed no right to tax them without their consent. Parliament, meanwhile, refused to abandon its claim of supreme authority over the colonies.

Another Step Toward Revolution

The Townshend Acts demonstrated that the constitutional crisis created by the Stamp Act had never truly been resolved. Britain continued to insist upon its authority to govern and tax the colonies. Americans increasingly insisted that only their own elected assemblies possessed that power.

The arrival of British troops transformed a political dispute into a daily confrontation on the streets of Boston. Insults, fistfights, and occasional violence became increasingly common as soldiers and civilians lived uneasily side by side.

On the evening of **March 5, 1770**, those tensions finally erupted outside the Boston Custom House in an event that history remembers as the **Boston Massacre**.

The Townshend Acts had failed to restore imperial authority. Instead, they brought Britain and its American colonies one dangerous step closer to revolution.