



The Boston Tea Party

Britain's Failed Rescue of the East India Company

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

The Boston Tea Party is usually remembered as a dramatic protest against a tax on tea. In reality, it was much more than that. It was a popular uprising against Britain's attempt to rescue the financially troubled British East India Company by granting it special commercial advantages in the American colonies. Parliament believed the Tea Act of 1773 would solve several problems at once. Instead, it ignited one of the most famous acts of civil disobedience in American history and pushed Britain and her colonies one giant step closer to revolution.

Britain's Rescue Plan

By 1773, the British East India Company was facing serious financial difficulties. The company possessed enormous quantities of tea that it could not profitably sell while burdened with taxes and fierce competition from smugglers. Prime Minister Lord North and Parliament believed they had found an elegant solution.

The Tea Act allowed the East India Company to ship tea directly to the American colonies without first passing through British wholesalers. The company also received important tax advantages that enabled it to sell tea more cheaply than many colonial merchants. Ironically, the Tea Act did **not** increase the price of tea for the colonists. In fact, legally imported tea would actually become less expensive. Parliament assumed Americans would welcome lower prices. They could not have been more mistaken.

The Real Issue Was Principle

By 1773, the controversy had little to do with the cost of tea. For nearly a decade, Britain's American colonies had protested what they regarded as unconstitutional taxation imposed without their consent. The Proclamation of 1763, the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, and the continuing presence of British troops had convinced many Americans that Parliament was steadily eroding their traditional rights.

The Tea Act seemed to confirm their fears. Parliament had chosen to rescue a politically connected monopoly while threatening the livelihoods of colonial merchants and middlemen. Many Americans saw the measure not as an act of economic wisdom but as another example of a distant government favoring powerful interests at the expense of its own colonial subjects.

Colonial Resistance

Resistance spread rapidly throughout the colonies. Merchants organized boycotts, citizens refused to purchase East India Company tea, and in several ports company agents resigned under public pressure. Ships carrying tea were turned away, forced back to England, or left unloaded in colonial harbors.

Boston proved to be the exception. Governor **Thomas Hutchinson** refused to allow the tea ships to depart without first unloading their cargo and paying the required duty. Determined to uphold British authority, he left the protesters with few peaceful alternatives.

December 16, 1773

On the evening of **December 16, 1773**, approximately 150 men—many loosely disguised as Mohawk Indians—marched to Boston Harbor after a mass meeting led by Samuel Adams and other Patriot leaders. Whether Adams personally organized the operation remains uncertain, but he unquestionably inspired the resistance.

The protesters boarded the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, and *Beaver*, broke open **342 chests of tea**, and dumped their contents into Boston Harbor. Remarkably, they damaged nothing except the tea itself. The ships, their crews, and all other cargoes were left untouched. The demonstrators intended to destroy a symbol of British policy—not engage in indiscriminate vandalism.

Parliament Strikes Back

The destruction of the tea shocked officials in London. Rather than compromise, Parliament chose punishment by enacting the **Coercive Acts**, known in America as the **Intolerable Acts**.

These measures closed the Port of Boston until the destroyed tea had been paid for, strengthened royal control over the Massachusetts government, allowed certain British officials accused of crimes to be tried outside Massachusetts, and expanded the Quartering Act, requiring colonists to provide accommodations for British troops when necessary. Instead of isolating Massachusetts, however, the laws united the colonies in sympathy with Boston.

The Road to Revolution

The Boston Tea Party accomplished far more than the destruction of several hundred chests of tea. It demonstrated that colonial resistance had progressed beyond petitions and economic boycotts to carefully planned direct action. More importantly, Britain's harsh response convinced many Americans that Parliament intended to govern the colonies through coercion rather than cooperation.

The following year, delegates from twelve colonies assembled in Philadelphia as the **First Continental Congress**, determined to coordinate a united response to Britain's increasingly heavy-handed policies. The possibility of reconciliation was rapidly slipping away.

In April 1775, British troops marched from Boston toward Lexington and Concord to seize colonial military supplies and arrest Patriot leaders. Instead, they encountered armed Massachusetts militiamen. The exchange of gunfire that followed transformed a decade of political and economic conflict into open warfare.

The road from the Proclamation of 1763 to the Boston Tea Party had been marked by growing resentment, protests, boycotts, and occasional violence. After Lexington and Concord, the argument would no longer be settled with speeches, pamphlets, or petitions.

It would be settled on the battlefield.

The story of that struggle—the campaigns, battles, victories, defeats, and ultimate triumph that secured American independence—is the subject of the **final article in this series**.