



All The Tea in Boston

Without Boston's Samuel Adams, there might never have been an American Revolution.

Historian Thomas Fleming

AS A SPIRITED CROWD OF SEVERAL thousand spectators cheered them on, a motley crew of as many as 130 men disguised as Mohawk Indians boarded three British ships docked at Boston's Griffin's Wharf on the evening of December 16, 1773.

Earlier that same day, about 8,000 people—over a third of Boston's population—had met in Old South Church to decide how to respond to the increasingly onerous restrictions the British were placing on their very English custom of taking midday tea.

In May of that year, the British passed the Tea Act, which cracked down on the illegal import of tariff-free tea into the colonies. Merchants like Samuel Adams and John Hancock had gotten rich smuggling in

tea from Holland, and the colonists were now being forced to only accept tea from the British East India Company, which was in dire financial straits—in no small part due to a boycott organized by Hancock.

Not surprisingly, Samuel Adams was the principle instigator of that evening's harbor-front spectacle. A skilled propagandist, Adams had transformed a riot three years earlier in which a violent, drunken mob confronted armed British soldiers into what is now infamously known as the Boston Massacre. (The soldiers blamed for the five resulting deaths were represented in the ensuing trial by Samuel's cousin, John.)

As the leader of the radically pro-independence 'Sons of Liberty', Adams promoted violent confrontation with the British, inciting riots and organizing the burning in effigy of tax collectors and arson of buildings housing British officials.

Through skillful persuasion (and free rum provided at rallies by the wealthy Hancock) Adams greatly expanded membership in the organization, recruiting Patrick Henry, Paul Revere, Benedict Arnold, and many other lesser-known patriots and rabble-rousers.

Since 1764, the colonists had endured the imposition of a series of taxes, first on sugar, coffee, and wine; later on printed matter such as newspapers; and finally on essential items like glass, paints, and paper. Following mass protests and boycotts, these tariffs had mostly been repealed by 1773, but the Tea Act was seen as the final straw.

Although the tariff itself was minimal, the Act reasserted the British Parliament's right to tax the colonists, ostensibly to help defray the costs of maintaining British troops to maintain order and defend against Indians and the ever-threatening French.

The Tea Act actually *reduced* the cost of tea in the colonies, and the only people who stood to suffer financially from the arrangement were smugglers like Adams and Hancock. In fact, the British assumed the cheaper tea would improve relations with the colonists, while simultaneously bailing out the struggling East India Company.

But the Act had the opposite effect, with the populist battle cry 'no taxation without representation' stirring animosity not only against taxation, but against what was seen as British meddling in colonial affairs.

Once on board, the morally outraged (and perhaps caffeine-deprived) patriots spent the next several hours dumping 342 chests of tea into the harbor—the equivalent in today's dollars of almost \$2 million worth of tea. Needless to say, this did not endear them to the Royal Governor, but lacking authority to take action, all he could do the next morning

was write a scathing letter to the Prime Minister explaining the situation, and entrust it to the captain on the next ship bound for London—an action equivalent to posting it on the proverbial 'slow boat to China.'

It wasn't until Spring of the following year that the House of Commons passed the Coercive Acts, closing Boston's port and virtually eliminating self-government in Massachusetts. Known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts, these punitive measures—intended to isolate Massachusetts—once again back-fired spectacularly, raising the spirit of resistance throughout all 13 colonies.

The 'action against tea' (it wasn't dubbed the Boston Tea Party until the 1820s) was downplayed in the colonies, with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and others decrying the destruction of property and arguing that the East India Company should be compensated for its losses. In fact, it's likely that the Boston Tea Party would have been a footnote in history had the British response not been so heavy-handed.

Instead, the galvanized patriots convened the First Continental Congress in September 1774, and hostilities broke out the following April at Lexington and Concord, when British soldiers were dispatched to arrest Adams and Hancock. (Adams went on to serve in the Continental Congress and was among those signing the Declaration of Independence.)

The Crown's harsh measures unwittingly united the colonists and pushed them into a full scale Revolution, in which some 50,000 American and British soldiers would die. In fact, Britain may have been prepared to concede sovereignty to the colonies by 1778, but the emboldened patriots kept the war going for another five years, hoping—with the help of the French—to annex portions of Canada for the new country.