

Chapter 7 -- Relations With Britain Become Strained



Dates:
1763-1775

Sections:

- Britain Boosts Taxes On The Colonists To Pay For The French & Indian Wars
- The “Intolerable Acts” Of 1773 Convert Rhetoric Into Action
- A First Continental Congress Is Convened To Unify The Colonists
- Antagonism Builds On Both Sides

Time: 1763-66

Britain Boosts Taxes On The Colonists To Pay For The French & Indian Wars



Money

Within this same timeframe, America’s British masters are also pondering the status of their national wealth.

While victorious in the field during the French & Indian Wars (1754-63), the battle for North America has been financially costly for England.

To help pay off the associated debts, various Chancellors of the Exchequer encourage George III, who has become King at 22 years old in 1760, to extract more revenue from the colonists.

This results in a series of heavy-handed Acts that, cumulatively, ends the harmony that has existed between the King and the colonies and leaves the Americans feeling bullied and angered, and then outright rebellious.

The Proclamation of 1763 demands that any families who have settled west of the Appalachians abandon their homes and return east. Presumably so the crown can sell back this land, won in the war, for a profit.

The Sugar Act of 1764 adds taxes on sugar, coffee and wine, while prohibiting imports of rum and French spirits.

Another 1764 command, the Currency Act, prohibits the colonies from issuing its own paper money, a move that tightens British control over all economic transactions in the colonies.

In March 1765, the crown further ups the drive for revenue with the Stamp Act, which requires that a paid-for seal be affixed to all printed material – from legal documents and licenses to everyday items like newspapers, pamphlets, almanacs, even playing cards. Attempts to justify this move center on the “*need to defend the colonies from future invaders.*”

Colonial resistance to the Stamp Act is immediate and widespread, especially among the more influential segments of the population, land owners, merchants, ship-builders, lawyers and printers. Here is another imposed tax from Britain absent any input or debate from the elected Burgesses with their local Councils and Governors. Where will this end? And, besides, which enemies are left, and hasn't the performance of the local troops during the recent war demonstrated that the colonists are now capable of defending themselves.

The English are shocked by the resistance from abroad. For show, Parliament passes the Declaratory Act, stating that the crown has the absolute right to impose whatever demands it deems appropriate on its colonies. But then it repeals the Stamp Act in 1766, a first "flinch" that signals at least a token American victory.

For the moment, both sides back off from the building tension.

Time: 1770-1776

The "Intolerable Acts" Of 1773 Convert Rhetoric Into Action



Commercial Ships in Port

The period of calm, however, is brief.

In 1767 a new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Townshend, imposes a series of taxes on staples such as lead, paint, glass, paper and tea.

Organized resistance materializes around Boston. Members of a "revolutionary body" known as the "Sons of Liberty" vow to oppose collection of the new duties by boycotting the imports. Shortages are offset by increases in local production and smuggling.

Britain responds with a show of force -- sending troops into Boston in 1768 to insure tax collection, and handing the bill for housing them to the colonists through a Quartering Act.

The result is a growing sense of betrayal among the colonists. Only five years ago they fought and died on behalf of the King in the war against France. In return comes the imposition of onerous taxes and armed enforcers.



A British Soldier

Almost inevitably anger turns into violence. On March 5, 1770, a mob of protesters at the customhouse begin pelting British guards with stones. The redcoats fire into the crowd, killing five civilians and wounding seven. One victim, some say the first, is Crispus Attucks, a “mixed race mulatto,” who is either a freedman or a run-away slave at the time of his death.

This March 5 event is christened “the Boston massacre” and word of it spreads rapidly across the colonies.

Again the British back off with PM Lord Frederick North rescinding the Townshend taxes on everything but tea.

This stand-off lasts until 1773 when a new Tea Act imposes restrictions on free trade -- demanding that all sales of the commodity be funneled through British agents of the East India Company rather than local merchants.

Reaction comes quickly. On December 16, 1773, a “Sons of Liberty” band, poorly disguised as Mohawk Indians, climbs aboard British ships in Boston harbor and dumps 342 crates of tea into the water.

Britain reacts quickly to this “Boston Tea Party.”

A series of punitive measures known as the “Coercive or Intolerable Acts” are mandated. The most severe measure closes the port of Boston, which effectively shuts down the economy in the city and threatens to starve the population. The order is to remain in place until the locals pay 15,000 pounds to cover the cost of the lost tea.

Time: September 5 to October 26, 1774

A First Continental Congress Is Convened To Unify The Colonists



Carpenters Hall in Philadelphia,
Scene of the First Continental Congress

These “Intolerable Acts” further inflame colonial passions.

“Sons of Liberty” chapters begin to spread beyond New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, eventually reaching into all thirteen colonies. Meetings are held at “Liberty Trees” in town centers or local taverns, often led by local merchants like Sam Adams and John Hancock, those hit hardest by new taxes.

Newspapers and broadsides capture the growing antagonism toward Britain.

In July 1774, Thomas Jefferson, a 34 year old Virginia planter and Burgess, publishes a pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, laying our grievances against the Crown and asserting that men have the right to govern themselves.

This is quickly followed by a First Continental Congress -- a watershed moment for the colonists, and a precursor to the formation of a future independent and national government.

It is held at the two story Carpenter's Hall guild house in Philadelphia over a seven week period beginning on September 5, 1774. Twelve of the thirteen colonies are present, with only Georgia missing.

The Congress is presided over by Peyton Randolph, speaker of the House of Burgesses in Virginia, and comprises a total of 56 delegates, all elected by their local legislatures to speak for their colony's interest. Among those present are many of the men who will shape America's future.

Some Delegates At The First Continental Congress

Representing	Total #	Some Members
New York	9	John Jay Robert Livingston
Pennsylvania	8	Thomas Mifflin Joseph Galloway Thomas McKean Robert Morris
Virginia	7	George Washington Peyton Randolph Richard Henry Lee Patrick Henry
South Carolina	5	John Rutledge Christopher Gadsden
Maryland	5	Matthew Tilghman
New Jersey	5	William Livingston
Massachusetts	4	John Adams Samuel Adams
Connecticut	3	Roger Sherman
Delaware	3	George Read
North Carolina	3	Richard Caswell
Rhode Island	2	Stephen Hopkins
New Hampshire	2	John Sullivan

The central debate occurs between those like the Virginian, Patrick Henry, who favor a clean break with England, and opponents, such Joseph Galloway, a Loyalist from Pennsylvania, who will ultimately join the British army.

In the end, the majority agree to send a sharp message to the crown by imposing a boycott on all British imports to begin on December 1, 1774. This will not only reduce revenue flowing to Britain, but also signal the growing capacity of the colonies to manufacture the finished goods on their own.

On the question of actual independence, the decision is to take a wait and see stance for the moment, and then reconvene a second Congress on May 10, 1775 to revisit conditions at that time.

The Americans now look to Boston to see what happens next.

Time: May 1774 to April 1775

Antagonism Builds On Both Sides



Statue of Paul Revere's Ride

A new figure is now on the scene in Boston, Major General Thomas Gage, named on May 13, 1774, as Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and ready to impose martial law if need be.

Gage has been in America for almost 20 years, arriving to fight in the French & Indian Wars, rising to become Commander in Chief of all British forces, settling down with his family in New York City. He has been on leave in England for the Boston Tea Party, but returns with orders to quell the rebellion.

Over the next year, Gage tries to harness what he regards as the potentially dangerous impulse toward “democracy” that is building. Rather than resorting directly to force, he makes several attempts to stabilize the situation by forming local council to resolve conflicts. But these fail, and he becomes increasingly concerned about rumors that the Sons of Liberty are threatening violence against the crown.

Indeed talk of open rebellion is now sweeping across the colonies.

Four weeks later the inflammatory rhetoric turns into bloodshed.

On April 14, 1775, Gage orders his troops to march 16 miles west to the town of Concord, arrest two rabble-rousers, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, and seize all weapons that might be used against the crown. Around 10PM on the night of April 18, some 700 Infantry Regulars under Lt. Colonel Francis Smith depart Boston to carry out Gage’s directive.

Their plan to take the Americans by surprise is, however, foiled by one Paul Revere, a Boston silversmith, who doubles as an intelligence agent for the “Committee On Public Safety.” Revere learns of the planned British route – by boat across to the Charleston peninsula -- and signals advance warning by having two lanterns (“*one if by land and two if by sea*”) hung in the bell tower of the Old North Episcopal Church. He then completes a “midnight ride” across the countryside to Lexington, awakening the “minuteman militias” along the way, before meeting up with Adams and Hancock to plan a defense.

Upon hearing Revere’s news, they decide to make a stand against the British troops when they arrive.