Definition: **Boston Tea Party** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(1773) Protest by a group of Massachusetts colonists, disguised as Mohawks and led by Samuel Adams, against the Tea Act and, more generally, against "taxation without representation". The Tea Act (1773), passed by the British Parliament, withdrew duty on tea exported to the colonies. It enabled the East India Company to sell tea directly to the colonies without first going to Britain and resulted in colonial merchants being undersold. The protesters boarded three British ships and threw their cargo of tea into Boston harbour. The British retaliated by closing the harbour.

Summary Article: **BOSTON TEA PARTY**
From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

On the evening of December 16, 1773, American colonists disguised as Indians boarded three ships containing East India Company tea and pitched that cargo into Boston's harbor. What came to be known as the Boston Tea Party prompted a harsh British response that led, in turn, to the summoning of the First Continental Congress.

The Tea Act and Colonial Opposition to Great Britain

America's anti-British resistance had stalled by late 1770. The Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, had threatened to escalate the conflict between the colonists and England, but the deft response by Thomas Hutchinson, the native-born acting governor, and other colonial officials in Massachusetts defused the situation. When Parliament subsequently eliminated all the Townshend duties except the duty on tea, the nonimportation effort sparked by the Townshend duties quickly fell apart. By mid-1773, many colonies again were enjoying prosperous times—it seemed that only a serious blunder by the British could reinvigorate a movement toward American independence. That blunder occurred when Lord North, the British prime minister, fashioned a plan to rescue the cash-starved East India Company, which was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Because the company played a pivotal role in governing Britain's holdings in India, it had to be saved. Lord North decided to help the company, and simultaneously reaffirm Parliament's right to tax the colonists, by getting Parliament to pass the Tea Act of May 1773. This act allowed the East India Company, which had massive inventories of tea, to consign its retail sales to selected colonial merchants. The only customs duty that would have to be paid would be the Townshend duty on tea. In reality, the colonists would have the price of their tea cut about in half. Indeed, the East India Company could sell its tea at a price not even smugglers could match.

British politicians realized that the Tea Act would anger those American tea merchants not selected as consignees. Tea smugglers would also be infuriated because they faced being driven out of business. But most British politicians believed that angering smugglers and some tea merchants would not create major problems between the colonists and England. Americans would, they assumed, find the lure of amazingly inexpensive tea irresistible. The supporters of the Tea Act were wrong. As Samuel Adams
remarked in late 1773, the British "could not have devised a more effectual Measure to unite the Colonies." (Alexander 126)

The Initial Colonial Response

Resistance to the Tea Act began in New York and Philadelphia, which by 1773 had become the leading smuggling ports in the colonies. In New York, threatening handbills, inflammatory diatribes in newspapers, and public demonstrations savaged the Tea Act and brought pressure on the merchants designated as consignees to resign. Philadelphia responded even more boldly. A mass meeting held on October 16 condemned the Tea Act on political and economic grounds. It was denounced as an underhanded effort to get Americans to pay the Townshend tea duty and thus to concede that Parliament had the right to tax the colonists. Opponents further alleged that the East India Company's consignees would monopolize the tea business. If that were allowed to happen, a precedent would be set for British monopolization of many other colonial businesses. So, the livelihood of ordinary workers, not just some tea merchants, might vanish. The meeting issued eight resolves depicting the Tea Act as part of "a violent attack upon the liberties of America" that was designed "to introduce arbitrary government and slavery." (Drake 297) In addition, the meeting created a committee to inform the consignees that they must resign immediately. Other cities and towns also moved against the Tea Act. It was, in fact, being effectively subverted without large-scale violence. Boston's resistance, however, traveled a path that produced more dramatic, more consequential results.

Toward the Tea Party

Most colonial officials appointed by the king or in other ways beholden to the British government looked the other way as Americans effectively nullified the Tea Act. Thomas Hutchinson, who became governor of Massachusetts in 1771, was not among them. With sons as consignees and standing to profit handsomely, Hutchinson was determined to see the Tea Act implemented. Hutchinson also championed the Tea Act because he wanted to uphold the power of Parliament. The governor, who was scheduled to retire soon, also longed to score a victory over the people he believed were undermining British authority.

Elements of the Boston Caucus, a political organization dedicated to defending colonial rights, began the Massachusetts assault on the Tea Act. Boston's North End Caucus, one of the units of the Boston Caucus, vowed to make sure the East India Company's tea would never be brought ashore and created a committee to arrange for the consignees to resign at a public gathering. The consignees ignored the caucus's demands; but ignoring the Boston Town Meeting, the city's governing body, was not so easy. On November 5, the Town Meeting unanimously endorsed the wording of the resolves adopted at Philadelphia's anti-Tea Act gathering. Following the pattern of Philadelphia, the Town Meeting established committees to inform the consignees that they must resign. The consignees responded with a statement saying they could not take any action, because they did not know exactly what the East India Company planned to do; the Town Meeting denounced that evasive reply.

Believing that ships carrying the East India Company's tea would soon arrive, on November 18 the Town Meeting appointed a new committee to demand the consignees' immediate resignation. The committee made the consignees promise to respond that very afternoon; they did respond—but again offered excuses, not resignations. After branding their response unacceptable, the meeting suddenly dissolved itself. According to Governor Hutchinson, that unexpected action terrified the consignees because the dissolution of the Town Meeting indicated that the efforts to resist the Tea Act would

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shift to extralegal entities—individuals and groups that would probably be more strident and more violent than the city's government. Once the Town Meeting stepped aside, Boston's Committee of Correspondence coordinated the resistance efforts.

The *Dartmouth*, the first ship carrying the East India Company's tea to Boston, arrived on November 28, 1773. The correspondence committee immediately visited the ship's owner, Francis Rotch, and made arrangements to ensure that the tea would not be off-loaded. The committee then scheduled a meeting of the residents of greater Boston for November 29. Contemporary observers noted that "a great Number of Persons" attended and that they called themselves a meeting of "the People" or "the body," thus distinguishing themselves from the formal meetings of the city's government. (Upton 289-290) This gathering adopted a resolution demanding that the tea aboard the *Dartmouth* be returned to England. Rotch argued that he could not legally do so without the governor's permission and, furthermore, that authorization would not be given unless customs officials cleared the ship to sail. Samuel Adams, who played a central role in Boston's efforts against the Tea Act, told Rotch how the governor might be persuaded to let the ship return without any duty being paid, saying that Rotch "might safely and honestly protest that he was compelled by a Mob of several Thousands to send the Tea back without the Duty's being paid and that it was necessary for the Safety of his Person and Property so to do." Adams added that "the People" now had "the Power in their Hands" and would "carry their Resolutions into Execution at all Events." (Upton 291) Rotch replied that he would seek permission to reship the tea without any duty being paid. To ensure that the tea was not unloaded, "the body" created a 25-member watch to guard the *Dartmouth*. Concurrently, a representative of the consignees informed the meeting that a message had just been received from the East India Company. He requested that they be given until the next morning to respond—and the meeting agreed.

When the meeting resumed on November 30, the sheriff read a proclamation issued by Governor Hutchinson that ordered "the People" to disperse. The meeting refused and turned its attention to the latest missive from the consignees. Maintaining that they faced financial disaster if they merely reshipped the tea to England, the merchants urged the meeting to let them land the tea and store it wherever the meeting designated. The meeting rejected that request and reiterated its demand that the tea be returned to England. After "the body" adjourned on November 30, the correspondence committee ordered Rotch to have the *Dartmouth*, then anchored beside a British warship, moved to a town wharf. Rotch did so, but the matter remained unsettled. Unless the Townshend duty was paid by midnight on December 16, customs officials could seize the *Dartmouth* and its cargo. Given Hutchinson's intransigence, the Whigs—as the champions of American rights were called—decided they must take action.

**The Tea Party**

Two more ships carrying East India Company tea, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver*, reached Boston before December 16. Acceding to the directives of the local Committees of Correspondence, which were working in unison, the vessels' owners had them tie up near the *Dartmouth*. "The body" assembled on December 14 and again on December 16 to give the consignees and shipowners every opportunity to find a way to return the tea without paying the Townshend duty. Hutchinson lamented that "the town is as furious as in the time of the stamp act." (Drake M)
Bostonians dressed as Indians pour chests of East India Company tea into Boston Harbor. The British response to the Boston Tea Party included the Boston Port Bill, which closed down Boston Harbor until restitution was paid for the destroyed tea, and the Massachusetts Government Act, which unilaterally altered the Massachusetts Charter and installed a military government. This reaction led directly to the convening of the First Continental Congress and the movement toward war with Britain. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

The December 16 gathering truly was a meeting of "the People" of greater Boston. At a time when Boston had about sixteen thousand inhabitants, an estimated five thousand or more people, with approximately two thousand of them coming from neighboring towns, attended. It was shortly before 6 p.m. and nearly dark when Rotch arrived at the meeting; the owner of the Dartmouth reported that Governor Hutchinson had rejected his request to return the tea without the duty being paid. Samuel Adams then declared that the people had done everything they could to defend their country and he could think of nothing more to be done. No proof exists that such statement was a prearranged signal, but Adams's declaration reportedly prompted shouts of: "Boston harbor a tea-pot tonight!" "Hurrah for Griffin's Wharf!" "The Mohawks are come!" (Labaree 141) At the same time, men disguised as Indians—this disguise made identification harder and linked the men to the symbol then used to signify America—advanced on Griffin's wharf, where the Dartmouth was moored. Those who had organized the meeting of "the body" tarried in the Old South Church, but many of the approximately five thousand at the mass meeting rushed to the harbor. They witnessed 90 to 150 men, many of whose identities remain clouded, board the three ships. After telling the crews and customs officials not to interfere, the men, while trying not to damage other property, axed open 342 chests of East India Company tea. The tea and chests were then heaved into the harbor. The "Mohawks" were determined to avoid any hint of thievery. Thus, when one of their number was found to have stuffed his coat with tea, his
clothes were confiscated and he was sent ashore, where members of the crowd beat him.

About three hours were needed to destroy ninety thousand pounds of tea worth about £9,000. Although elements of the British navy were nearby, none of the representatives of British authority attempted to stop the destruction.

The Impact of the Boston Tea Party

The Boston Tea Party presented British politicians with a situation reminiscent of what they had faced in the wake of the Stamp Act riots. In 1766, the British government had temporized by repealing the Stamp Act and, at the same time, issuing the Declaratory Act, which stated that Parliament had and always did have the right to make laws "to bind" the American colonists "in all cases whatsoever." But the Tea Party convinced most British politicians, including some who had championed the Americans, that temporizing in response to colonial provocations, as the British had done time and again for almost a decade, would no longer do. The dominant view in the England of 1774 was: Boston—the city that the Massachusetts Loyalist Peter Oliver later labeled "the Metropolis of Sedition"—must be severely punished. (Oliver 56) Accordingly, the British government lashed out at Boston, at Massachusetts, and, in some ways, at all the colonies by passing the Coercive (or "Intolerable") Acts. Britain's harsh response to the Tea Party helped reinvigorate the Revolutionary movement and was the principal reason for the convening of the First Continental Congress in 1774. Thus, the Boston Tea Party was a major factor in the movement that eventually produced the American Revolution.

Bibliography and Further Reading


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