Tea Troubles: The Boston Tea Party

It was a cold December night in Boston in 1773. The three British ships, the Dartmouth, the Eleanor, and the Beaver, were sitting in Boston Harbor, their holds full of tea that wasn't being unloaded because the angry residents of Boston were threatening not to buy or use the tea.

Tea, Anyone?

The anger was directed at the government of Great Britain, which in May 1773 had passed the Tea Act, a law that almost guaranteed that the American colonists would buy tea from the East India Company. Why? The Tea Act imposed no new taxes on the colonies, but the law lowered the price on tea sold by the East India Company so much that it was way below the price charged by other tea companies. The Tea Act granted the British East India Company Tea an unfair monopoly on tea sales in the American colonies. Most American tea sellers would be put out of business.

Why did this law come about? The East India Company wasn't doing well financially and the British government wanted to help the company get back on its feet. The Tea Act was not intended to anger American colonists; instead, it was meant to help the British East India Company get out of massive amounts of debt.

Other tea companies weren't happy about the Tea Act, of course, but the American colonists viewed it as another example of "taxation without representation." In effect, the Tea Act was putting a tax on tea sold by companies other than the East India Company. As with the Stamp Act and other unpopular taxes, they were all voted in by Parliament, which was thousands of miles away, and the American colonists had no way to influence the law or speak out against it while it was being debated in government.

From Anger to Action

So the colonists were angry. They wanted to do something else to let the British know about the unhappiness that the Tea Act was causing. Some people wanted to keep things nonviolent; others wanted bloodshed. The result was somewhere in the middle.

A group of colonists determined to make things change was the Sons of Liberty. Led by such impassioned patriots as Samuel Adams and John Hancock, the Sons of Liberty had secret meetings at which they discussed how best to get their message across to Great Britain, that the American people wanted more of a role in governing themselves. Christmas was approaching in the year 1773, and the colonists faced another year of unopposed and unrepresentative taxes. The Sons of Liberty decided to take action.

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Tea Overboard

On a chilly night of December 16, 1773, over 8,000 people gathered at the Old South Church in Boston. They came to hear fiery Sam Adams speak. He dared the crowd to take action. Later that evening, a large group of the Sons of Liberty disguised as Mohawk Indians stormed aboard those three unsuspecting British ships and dumped 342 crates full of tea overboard. These crates happened to be jammed full of tea, and so the companies that made that tea lost a lot of money that night.

Because the Sons of Liberty were disguised as Native Americans, they could claim that they were not guilty of dumping the tea. The British government knew better, of course, and grew angrier than ever at what it saw as Americans' ingratitude. The very next year saw the passage of what came to be called the Intolerable Acts, one of which closed the port of Boston entirely.

The Boston Tea Party was a symbolic act, an example of how far Americans were willing to go to speak out for their freedom. Two short years later, Americans were willing to give their lives for their freedom, as shots rang out on Lexington Green, signaling the start of the American Revolution.

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