

The Elizabeth Murray Project

Boycotting British Goods

Women's participation in trade had a larger significance in the decade preceding the Revolution than most realize. Women shopkeepers had to take a stand in order to survive financially. Patriot leaders in Boston had promoted a boycott of British goods in response to the Townshend duties. Agreeing not to import taxed items after January 1, 1769, merchants in Boston had gradually gained the backing of others in such major ports as New York and Philadelphia. Although support for the boycott became more widespread, some larger merchants and smaller shopkeepers continued to sell imported goods. Some Boston patriots even took it upon themselves to go door-to-door enlisting support for nonimportation and threatening those who violated the policy.

Bostonian shopkeeper Elizabeth Murray had returned to London during this time of unrest. However, her female friends, who were still keeping shop in Boston, became involved in the growing boycott controversy. Shopkeeper Jane Eustis, who had signed a 1768 agreement but not the one adopted in 1769, found her name published in the *Boston Gazette*. Being harassed by local patriots, she decided to close her shop and return to England. The *Boston Chronicle* printed the names of those who ordered and imported British goods. Anne and Elizabeth Cuming, the sisters whom Elizabeth Murray had helped establish a business earlier, became a target for public pressure and censure. The Cuming sisters, however, said that their business was both very small and very necessary to their survival.

A merchants' committee attempted to patrol shops; however, they found that it was difficult to control access to imported merchandise. Violations occurred in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Planned boycotts would collapse without coordinated efforts to oppose the Townshend Acts.

Besides women shopkeepers becoming part of the growing boycott controversy, women consumers began playing a major role in the political unrest. Boycotts of British goods involved women and girls who previously considered politics as outside their involvement. A woman buying goods for her family faced important choices about what to give up, such as tea or imported fabrics. While many expressed their opposition to Britain's taxation through spinning bees to make their own cloth or the use of other herbs to make drinks, still others made it possible for shopkeepers such as the Cumings to sell their goods. This time was a very confusing one for many people in the colonies.