

The French and Indian War and Its Aftermath

In the mid-1750s, longstanding tensions between the English and French erupted into war. Over the course of the previous 150 years, the English had settled along the eastern coast of North America and the French in the Mississippi River valley and Canada. Competition for a North American empire and the construction of new forts in the interior of the continent in the 1740s and early 1750s led to the outbreak of hostilities known in America as the French and Indian war. The French had close Indian allies, as did the British.

At the conclusion of the war in 1763, the British army, with help from colonial militia, had prevailed. Britain gained vast French territory from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. In the years after the war, British leaders were faced with a crushing debt. The war in America, as well as fighting in Europe, had depleted the treasury, and the government needed a way to generate revenue. The way King George III and Parliament saw the situation, the colonists deserved to pay their fair share of the war costs. Paying very small taxes, in their view, was the least colonists could do to show their appreciation for the help of the mother country in ridding the continent of the French presence. The colonists, however, felt much differently about the taxes that Parliament passed without their consent. Previously, colonists had passed their own taxes through their own representative bodies; the British government had not directly taxed them. Further, colonists had enjoyed vast freedoms in purchasing desirable goods and had, in some cases, gone into considerable debt. New taxes alarmed colonists concerned about government control and personal debt.

When the first of these taxes, the Stamp Act (so called because of a stamp that was to be affixed to all sorts of paper goods, such as newspapers, playing cards, and legal documents) was passed in 1765, there was an uproar throughout Boston and the rest of the colonies. The slogan of "No Taxation without Representation" was born and widely repeated. Ordinary citizens, who had never voiced political concerns in the past, began to rally. Some formed groups like the Sons of Liberty, others harassed stamp collectors, and still others signed agreements to boycott British goods. In these protest movements, the first seeds of serious unrest were planted; further taxes fueled the rebellious mood.