

**ELIZABETH MURRAY AND REVOLUTIONARY BOSTON, PART I:
BOYCOTTS**

Parliament's Decision to Tax the Colonies

Until the 1760s, American colonists thought of themselves as loyal English subjects. They believed the British government was the best ever devised by “by the wit of man” because it was structured to limit the power of leaders and to preserve freedom.¹ But a few short years later, Americans were calling their king a tyrant and declaring their intention to be free from the control of England. This dramatic change in attitude was caused in large part by Parliament’s decision to tax the colonies to help pay for a costly war against France, known in America as the French and Indian War, and to defray some of the costs of stationing troops in America after the war’s end. Members of Parliament thought it was reasonable to make the colonists bear some of the burden for their own protection.

Many Americans throughout the colonies reacted with anger. They argued that they *had* carried some of the burden of the war already by supplying troops as well as horses and carts to carry supplies. They had also housed and fed British soldiers. As Benjamin Franklin pointed out to Parliament, “The colonies raised, clothed and paid, during the last war, near 25,000 men and spent many millions,” most of which had not been paid back.² Second, Americans believed that Parliament’s decision to tax them violated a long-standing tradition of self-taxation. For example, Pennsylvania’s assembly asserted that it was “the inherent birthright, and indubitable privilege of every British subject to be taxed only by his own consent, or that of his legal representatives.”³ Otherwise, the government was guilty of exercising arbitrary power and thereby limiting the freedom of its citizens. Finally, with many colonists coming to enjoy luxury

consumer goods more and more during this time, taxes on these goods reminded them of their dependence on Britain.⁴

Stamp Act

Parliament's first major attempt to pay off their war debt was the Stamp Act of 1765. It placed a tax on many paper items that people used everyday, including newspapers, pamphlets, playing cards, and marriage licenses. To show their displeasure with Parliament, some American leaders centered in Boston organized a boycott. Suddenly, buying products—or refusing to buy them—became a political act. People could show their loyalty to the American cause (or to Parliament) based on what they did with their money. Since women, in their roles as household managers, bought many of the consumer products used in the colonies, the boycott would fail without their support. By deciding how to spend money, women, who were not usually thought of as “citizens,” could make a political statement.⁵ Patriotic women refused to buy imported English cloth, and some helped produce rougher “homespun” cloth. They refused to drink tea, a practice that had become quite common among the middle class as a social activity and a means of displaying the luxury goods—like ceramic tea ware—that were a part of the consumer revolution.⁶ One patriotic nine-year-old girl who was offered tea by the Tory governor of New Jersey “curtsied, raised it to her lips, and tossed the contents out the window.”⁷ A Philadelphia woman wrote the following poem:

...for the sake of Freedom's name,
 (Since British Wisdom scorns repealing,)
Come, sacrifice to Patriot fame,
 And give up Tea, by way of healing,
This done, within ourselves retreat,
 The Industrious arts of life to follow,
Let the Proud Nabobs storm & fret,
 They Cannot force our lips to swallow.⁸

Townshend Acts and the Boston Massacre

Protests against the Stamp Act prompted British manufacturers, who feared the loss of trade with the colonies, to pressure Parliament to repeal the tax. Colonists celebrated when the act was repealed in 1766. But in 1767, the Townshend Acts, a series of taxes on a variety of imported goods, prompted colonists to protest again through riots and a new boycott. By the summer of 1768, tension in Boston over the Townshend Acts had grown so strong that the governor of Massachusetts decided to request troops from Britain to suppress rebellious behavior. The arrival of troops led to increased tension and minor clashes between residents of Boston and the troops.

On the evening of March 5, a group of Bostonians strolling down Cornhill were insulted by several soldiers walking through the streets with their weapons drawn. In the ensuing commotion, reports quickly circulated through town that soldiers were fighting townspeople. Quickly, a crowd gathered and, with snowballs and clubs, pressed the soldiers toward the barracks. Two officers locked their men in and tried to calm the crowd outside. Meanwhile, a couple of blocks away, a soldier on duty alone in front of the Customs House yelled at some boys who were insulting a passing officer. The soldier was pelted by snowballs. One boy ran into the church and began ringing the bells, the signal for fire. This sound immediately drew the crowd away from the barracks and toward the Customs House. There, the lone soldier still confronting the boys called for help. When reinforcements arrived, they found an angry mob of two hundred. As people yelled “Fire” and the crowd closed in on the soldiers, the soldiers fired. They killed or fatally wounded five men and injured six more. Moments later, the Governor appeared on the scene and took the officer in charge away for questioning.⁹ [Examine Boston Massacre engraving.]

HIGH SCHOOL LESSON PLAN: SHOPKEEPERS IN REVOLUTIONARY BOSTON

In conclusion, it is clear that the years after the French and Indian War witnessed political turmoil and protests in Boston and elsewhere in the colonies. In protesting what they perceived to be the oppressive behavior of the British government, colonists enacted boycotts that would only work if everyone agreed to them. In the course of a few years, boycotts mobilized many individuals. American leaders of the protest pressured shopkeepers not to sell imported goods to those American colonists who chose to ignore the boycott. But for shopkeepers whose livelihood depended on selling goods that came from Britain, the decision was not an easy one. If they supported boycotts, they could go bankrupt since they would not be able to sell all the goods they had already bought for their stores. If they ignored the boycotts, they might be labeled traitors and be attacked—or have their shops vandalized—by angry mobs.

HIGH SCHOOL LESSON PLAN: SHOPKEEPERS IN REVOLUTIONARY BOSTON

¹ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 29-30.

² Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 229.

³ Pennsylvania Resolves, 21 September 1765, *A Collection of Interesting, Authentic Papers, Relative to the Dispute Between Great Britain; Shewing the Causes and Progress of that Misunderstanding, From 1764 to 1775* (London, 1777), 21, quoted in John Phillip Reid, *Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, (abridged edition, Madison, 1995), 41.

⁴ T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* [Great Britain] 1998 (119), 89.

⁵ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 36-39.

⁶ Breen, 83-84.

⁷ Milton Halsey Thomas, ed., *Elias Boudinot's Journey to Boston* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), preface, cited in Kerber, 39.

⁸ Hannah Griffiths, “Beware the Ides of March,” Feb. 28, 1775, Hannah Griffiths Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia, cited in Kerber, 39.

⁹ This paragraph adapted with the permission of the publisher from Patricia Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray: A Woman's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 101, 138-139.