

II. The Stamp Act (1765)

A. A New Kind of Tax

1. In 1765, the British government created a new law that placed taxes on the use of paper in the American colonies. It required that stamps be placed on a legal documents, such as diplomas, newspapers, and licenses.
2. The stamps could only be obtained at government offices, and a payment was required.
3. Previously, the British government had only placed taxes on goods that moved between the colonies and the mother country (Britain). This was believed proper because the colony had been created to help the mother country avoid trade with other countries. This was considered an “indirect tax” because it did not directly affect life in the colonies.
4. The Stamp Act, however, was a tax on a product being used only within the colonies. It had nothing to do with trade with the home country. In this way it was a new kind of tax—a “direct” tax.

B. Patrick Henry and the Virginia Resolves

1. In the Virginia House of Burgesses, a new representative named Patrick Henry stood forward to argue that the Stamp Act was an unjust tax.
2. Henry explained that according to British traditions, going back to the Magna Carta that only a parliament where the people were represented could tax them.
3. Since the only parliaments where American colonists were represented were in their own colonies, these were the only parliaments that could tax them.
4. In his famous speech, Patrick Henry warned the King of Britain, George III to be careful about imposing new kinds of taxes on the people, and thereby attempt to gain too much power. Henry proposed to offer the king a history lesson. In the climax of his speech he said, “Caesar had his Brutus, Charles I his Cromwell, and George III...may profit by their example.”
5. Many burgesses were upset with this warning, which seemed like a threat to the king, but the House of Burgesses still passes the “Virginia Resolves.” These resolves stated:
 - a) The American Colonists were English citizens.
 - b) Colonial charters established that colonists had all the same rights as Englishmen.
 - c) American Colonists had a history of self-government recognized by the British government.
 - d) Only the colonial governments, where the people were represented, could rightly tax them.
 - e) Anyone who maintained that any government other than the colonial assemblies could tax the colonists was an *enemy* of the colonies. (This last “resolve” did not actually pass, but it was published in colonial newspapers nonetheless, and widely affected how people thought about the Stamp Act.)

C. Other Reactions

1. Throughout the colonies, many were upset by the Stamp Act. The Parliament of Massachusetts called for a “Stamp Act Congress,” where all the colonies could discuss this new law.
2. This congress met in New York and those who attend agreed to form “Committees of Correspondence” to keep in touch over this problem, and to plan a protest by not importing English goods. (This they hoped would lead English merchants to complain

that they were not able to sell their products to the colonies, and cause the British Parliament to repeal the law.)

3. In all the colonies, groups of angry citizens formed clubs known as the “Sons of Liberty”. They threatened government officials not to try to collect the stamp taxes.

D. The Declaratory Act (1766) and Townshend Acts (1767)

1. When it came time for the stamps to first be collected according to the new law, nobody was willing to buy them. After a while, people resumed their normal lives as if the law did not exist.
2. This rejection of the law was so widespread, that the British parliament did not know how to react. They decided to repeal the law, and try something else.
3. On the same day that the Parliament repealed the law, it passed another law, the Declaratory Act, which asserted that the Parliament had the right to impose any tax it chose on the colonies.
4. The next year it created a new set of duties on various products being imported into the colonies, including paper, paint, glass, and tea. This was done through the Townshend Acts of 1767.

III. Trouble in Boston

A. The Boston Massacre (1770)

1. The Sons of Liberty continued to be upset by the new taxes and in 1768, they grabbed a cargo of imported wine and marched past the customs offices of the government without paying the duties on it.
2. To stop the colonists from breaking the laws in this way, the British government sent 1000 troops to Boston.
3. The people of Boston were disturbed at having the army patrolling their city. To make matters worse, some Bostonians had to provide quarters for the troops due to the Quartering Act of 1765.
4. One night in 1770, a groups of protesters marched on the Customs House.
5. The troops who were on guard were pushed around and had snowballs thrown at them. As the crowd became more violent one soldier fired in a panic. Very quickly the situation was out of control and three colonists had been killed.
6. Throughout the colonies this moment became known as the “Boston Massacre.” People believed that it showed that the British government intended to treat the colonists like slaves.

B. The Boston Tea Party (1773)

1. On the very day of the Boston Massacre, the British Parliament had decided to repeal most of the Townshend Act taxes, and to lower the tax on tea.
2. The government allowed the shipment of tea directly from the East Indies to the colonies, and charged a low tax, resulting in the overall price of tea being lower in the colonies than in England.
3. The colonists perceived this ploy to be a trick, to get them to accept new taxes in principle, which could be raised later, when people were used to paying them.
4. In Charleston, South Carolina, a shipment of tea was offloaded but the colonists refused to buy it. In New York and Philadelphia, the merchant vessels were not allowed to offload their tea, and were forced to take their shipments to England.
5. When a cargo of tea arrived in Boston in 1773, the Sons of Liberty dressed up as Indians, jumped on board the ship, and dumped the tea into the harbor. This is known as the “Boston Tea Party.”

6. Of course, the British government could not allow property to be destroyed in this way, without punishing those responsible...

IV. The Escalating Conflict

A. The Coercive Acts (1774)

1. In answer to the violent resistance to its taxation measures, the British government passed laws to punish Massachusetts and all the American colonies.
2. The Port of Boston was closed, and Massachusetts was placed under the control of a military governor, General Gage.
3. With the Quebec Act of 1774, the Province of Quebec was enlarged all the way down to the Ohio river, making it illegal for the American colonists to take over the land they had fought for in the French and Indian War.

B. The First Continental Congress

1. In answer to Britain's latest acts, the thirteen colonies again held a congress to discuss their common problems.
2. They agreed to a “non-importation, non-exportation, non-consumption” association to try to starve Britain of its colonial trade and thus convince British merchants to put pressure on the British Parliament to repeal its taxes.
3. They also agreed to form colonial militia to prepare a resistance to Britain's next move.

C. Give Me Liberty, Or Give Me Death!

1. In March of 1775, Patrick Henry once more stood before the representatives of the House of Burgesses – this time with a definite call to rebellion.
2. He explained that he was guided by the “lamp” of experience, and that judging according to the past, one could only predict even worse treatment of the colonies by Britain. His final lines were:
“Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace, but there is no peace.
The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, *give me liberty, or give me death!*”