

The Stamp Act

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines the implementation of the Stamp Act of 1765 and the colonial response to it, paying special attention to the ideas and methods that colonists used to express their frustrations with Parliament.

The Stamp Act will be considered in four parts:

1. The Stamp Act

Prime Minister Grenville, author of the Sugar Act of 1764, introduced the **Stamp Act** in the spring of 1765. According to the Act, colonists who used or purchased anything printed on paper—including legal documents, newspapers, almanacs, and playing cards—had to buy a revenue stamp for it.



TERM TO KNOW

Stamp Act (1765)

A tax on almost every type of printed paper that American colonists used, including newspapers, legal documents, and playing cards.

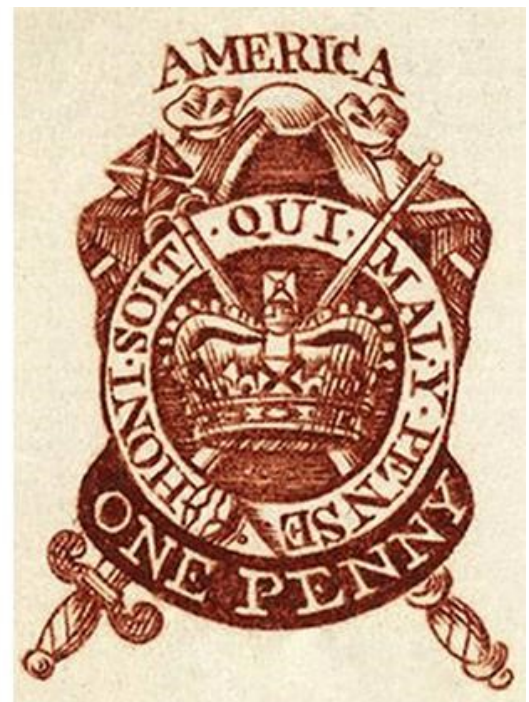
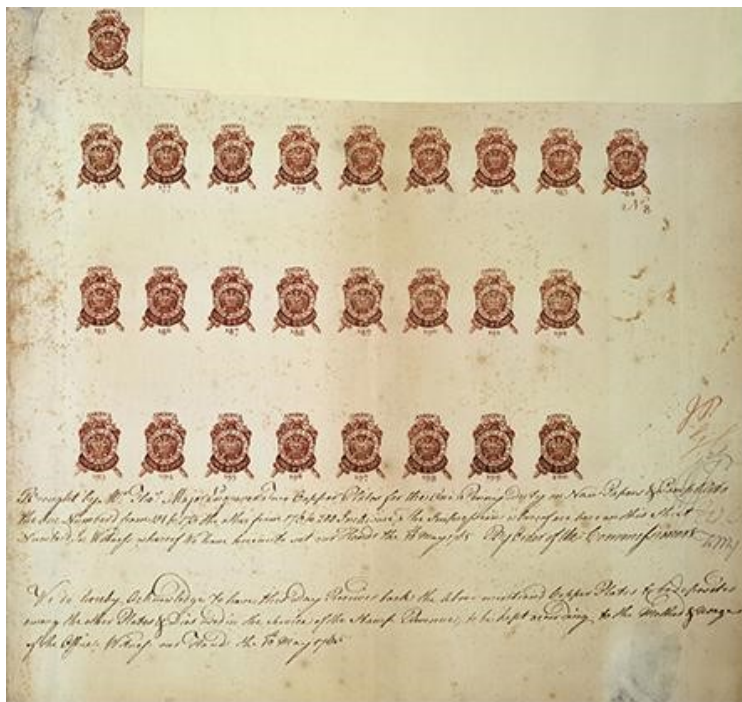


Image (a) shows a partial proof sheet of one-penny stamps. Image (b) provides a close-up of a one-penny stamp.

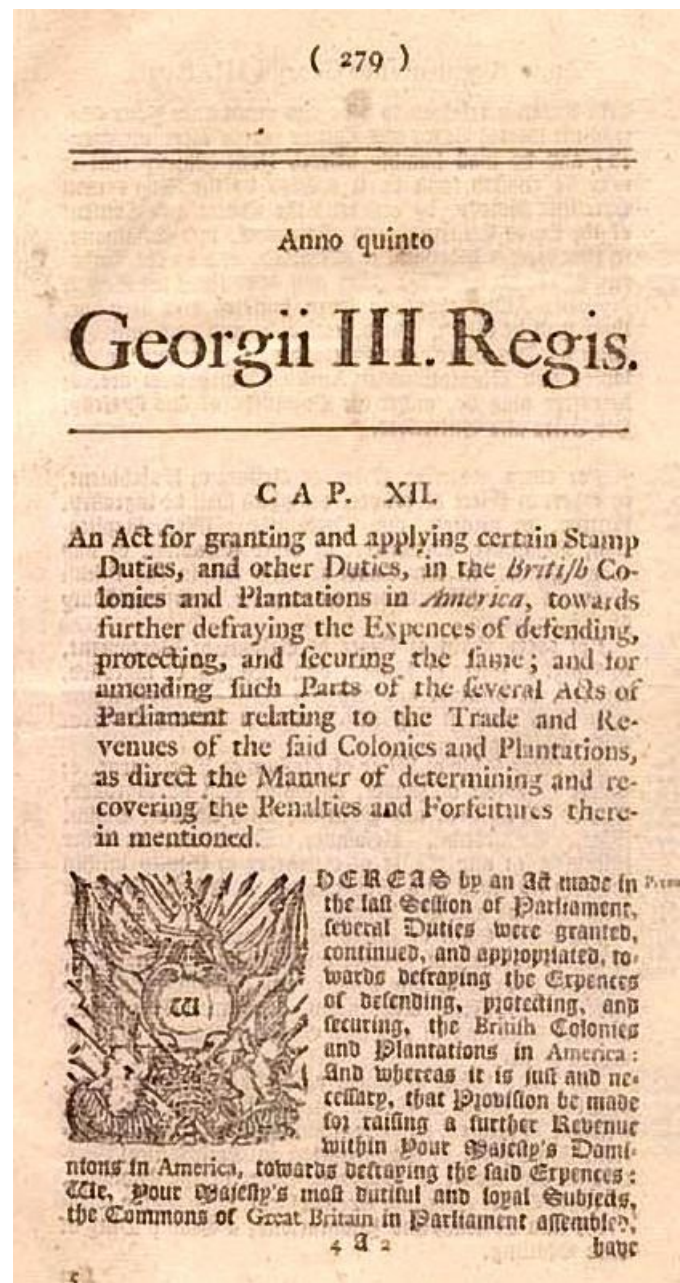
DID YOU KNOW

Stamp acts were common in the British Empire. Prior to 1765, Great Britain had enacted a similar stamp act for the British Isles that raised almost £300,000 per year, five times the amount that the Stamp Act of 1765 was expected to raise from the colonies.

The Stamp Act indicated Grenville's continuing determination that the colonies contribute to the cost of their protection following the British victory in the French and Indian War. Before the Stamp Act was enacted, colonists paid taxes directly to colonial governments, and indirectly through import duties and higher prices for consumer goods. However, the passage of the Stamp Act meant that starting on November 1, 1765, the colonists would contribute an estimated £60,000 per year—17 percent of the total cost—to support the ten thousand British soldiers stationed in North America. Local officials appointed by the Crown, known as stamp agents, would distribute stamps and collect revenue.

DID YOU KNOW

In the same year (1765), Parliament also passed the Quartering Act. It required the colonies to provide housing for British soldiers in barracks or public houses. The colonies also had to raise money to provide food and other necessities for the soldiers.



Announcement of the 1765 Stamp Act in a colonial newspaper.

2. Taxation and Representation

Similar to the Sugar Act of 1764, which lowered import duties on molasses, the Stamp Act of 1765 did not seem burdensome—on the surface. Colonists could purchase stamps for as little as one penny but only with specie, or hard money (typically gold or silver). They could not purchase them with the paper money printed in the colonies. Hard currency was difficult to come at this time because of a recession in the imperial economy (including the colonies) following the French and Indian War. The recession, as well as the manner in which Parliament enacted the measure, influenced the colonial debate on the Stamp Act.

Much of this debate centered on the distinction between **external taxation** and **internal taxation**.



TERM TO KNOW

External Taxation

Taxes enacted by Parliament to regulate commerce in the British Empire.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The Sugar Act of 1764, which taxed the importing of molasses to the colonies, is an example of external taxation.



TERM TO KNOW

Internal Taxation

Taxes enacted by Parliament to raise revenue within the colonies.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The Stamp Act of 1765, which taxed most printed paper used by colonists, is an example of internal taxation. A modern-day equivalent of internal taxation is the sales tax.

Some colonists believed that Parliament had the authority to enact external taxes such as the Sugar Act, which regulated trade within the empire and affected the majority of colonists indirectly through import duties and higher prices for consumer goods. However, they argued that Parliament had no right to enact internal taxes such as the Stamp Act, which directly affected everyone in the colonies without their consent.

From the colonists' perspective, the Stamp Act appeared to be an unconstitutional measure because it deprived freeborn British citizens of their liberty, including the right to representation. As a result, the argument over taxation and representation also centered on a distinction between **actual representation** and **virtual representation**.



TERM TO KNOW

Actual Representation

The principle that the colonists must be represented in Parliament if they were to be taxed.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Colonists were only willing to pay internal taxes that their assemblies or Parliament enacted with their consent. Since the colonies did not have actual representation in the House of Commons, the branch of Parliament in which the bill for the Stamp Act originated, colonists argued that the Stamp Act was passed without their consent.



TERM TO KNOW

Virtual Representation

The principle that the colonists did not have equal standing in Parliament and, therefore, did not require actual representation in matters of taxation.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Parliament believed the relationship between the American colonies and the British Empire was one of dependence rather than equality. As a result, Parliament insisted that it had the right to tax the colonies and that actual representation of the American colonies in the House of Commons was not required.

Despite Parliament's insistence upon its right to tax the colonies, the Stamp Act drew colonists from very different areas and viewpoints together in protest. It is important to remember, however, that in protesting the Stamp Act, colonists were not expressing a desire for independence or advocating a unique American identity. Rather, they were expressing their opposition in terms of the British constitution and governance.

3. The Colonial Response

Historians have examined the colonial response to the Stamp Act by focusing on three areas: the constitutional argument; organizations and boycotts; and mob action (rioting).

In Massachusetts, **James Otis** became the leading voice for the idea that “Taxation without representation is tyranny.” In the Virginia House of Burgesses, **Patrick Henry** introduced the Virginia Stamp Act Resolutions, which denounced the Stamp Act and the British crown in language so strong that some conservative Virginians accused him of treason. Henry replied that Virginians were subject only to taxes that they themselves—or their representatives—imposed. In short, there could be no taxation without representation.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

James Otis

Massachusetts lawyer and member of the General Assembly; became a leading voice in the 1760s in the North for the idea that “Taxation without representation is tyranny.”

Patrick Henry

Virginia lawyer, planter, slave owner, and statesman, member of the House of Burgesses. His fiery opposition to the Stamp Act and impassioned speeches for independence helped fuel revolutionary sentiment in the colonies.

Colonial rhetoric associated with taxation and representation refuted Parliament’s claim that it had the authority to tax the colonies. Otis, Henry, and others insisted upon actual representation, or the right of the colonists to vote for the representatives who had the power to tax them. These ideas influenced many of the organizations that formed in opposition to the Stamp Act.

In the summer of 1765, the Massachusetts Assembly sent letters to other colonies asking them to attend a meeting, or congress, to discuss how to respond to the act. Representatives from nine colonial legislatures met in New York in the fall of 1765 to seek a consensus. Could Parliament impose taxation without representation? The members of this first congress, known as the **Stamp Act Congress**, said no.



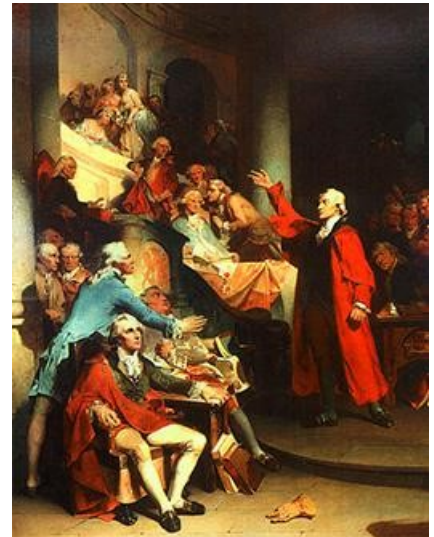
TERM TO KNOW

Stamp Act Congress

A gathering of landowning, educated White men from nine colonies who met in the fall of 1765 to draft a Declaration of Rights and Grievances to express their opposition to the Stamp Act.

The Stamp Act Congress represented the political elite of the colonies and was the colonial equivalent of the British landed aristocracy. The representatives had a vested interest in repealing the tax. Not only did it threaten their liberty as Englishmen, but it might also weaken their businesses and the colonial economy.

The Congress drafted a rebuttal to the Stamp Act, explaining to King **George III** that it desired only to protect colonists' liberty as loyal subjects of the Crown. The document, called the "Declaration of Rights and Grievances", pointed out the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation under the Stamp Act, and trials without juries—a provision of the Sugar Act.



The painting “Patrick Henry Before the Virginia House of Burgesses” (1851), by Peter F. Rothenmel, offers a romanticized depiction of Henry’s speech denouncing the Stamp Act of 1765.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George III

King of England from 1760 to 1820, ruled Great Britain during the American Revolution.

While the gentry drafted their grievances during the Stamp Act Congress, other colonists showed their distaste for the new act by protesting in the streets and boycotting British goods. Two groups, the Sons of Liberty and the Daughters of Liberty, led popular resistance to the Stamp Act.

Formed in Boston in the summer of 1765, the **Sons of Liberty** included artisans, shopkeepers, and small merchants willing to use extralegal means to protest the act. They began to organize protests before the Stamp Act was scheduled to go into effect.



TERM TO KNOW

Sons of Liberty

Artisans, shopkeepers, and small merchants who organized protests against the Stamp Act.

On August 14, the Sons of Liberty targeted Andrew Oliver, who had been named the Massachusetts Distributor of Stamps. After hanging Oliver in effigy—that is, hanging a crudely made figure that represented Oliver—an unruly crowd stoned and ransacked his house, then beheaded and burned the effigy. The brutal event shocked royal government officials, and Oliver resigned from his position the next day.

By that time, the mob had moved on to the home of Lieutenant Governor **Thomas Hutchinson**. Hutchinson supported the Stamp Act, so the Sons of Liberty considered him an enemy of English liberty. A mob barricaded Hutchinson in his home and demanded that he renounce the Stamp Act. When he refused, the protesters looted and burned his house.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Thomas Hutchinson

Hated Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts who became a target of mob violence during the Stamp Act Crisis for his support of Parliament's actions. Royal Governor of Massachusetts during the Boston Tea Party.

Chapters of the Sons of Liberty (also called “True Sons” or “True-born Sons”, to make clear their commitment to liberty and to distinguish them from royal officials) were formed throughout the colonies. They led violent protests intended to force all appointed stamp collectors to resign.

Starting in early 1766, the **Daughters of Liberty** protested the Stamp Act by refusing to buy British goods and encouraging others to do the same. They avoided British tea, opting to make their own teas with local herbs and berries. They built a community—and a movement—around creating homespun cloth instead of buying British linen.



TERM TO KNOW

Daughters of Liberty

Well-born colonial women who led a nonimportation movement against British goods.

The Daughters' **nonimportation movement** broadened the protest against the Stamp Act, giving women a new and active role in the political dissent of the time. Women were responsible for purchasing goods for the home, so by exercising the power of the purse, they wielded more power than they had in the past. Although they could not vote, they mobilized others and changed the political landscape.



TERM TO KNOW

Nonimportation Movement

A widespread colonial boycott of British goods.

A number of wealthy, literate political figures like John Adams also supported the goals of the Sons and Daughters of Liberty, even though they did not engage in violence. These men, who were lawyers, printers, and merchants, ran a propaganda campaign parallel to the Sons' protests. In newspapers and pamphlets throughout the colonies, they published articles outlining the reasons why the Stamp Act was unconstitutional and urging peaceful protest. They condemned violent action but did not call for the arrest of protesters. A degree of cooperation prevailed amidst colonial opposition to the Stamp Act, despite the different backgrounds of participating groups.



REFLECT

Place yourself in the shoes of a member of the colonial gentry. Would you have been more likely to become a member of the Stamp Act Congress or of the Sons of Liberty? Why?



BRAINSTORM

Of the three areas in which colonists responded to the Stamp Act (constitutional argument, organizations/boycotts, and mob action), which do you think was the most effective and why?

4. The Imperial Reaction

Back in England, news of the colonists' reactions worsened an already volatile political situation. Grenville's imperial reforms included increased domestic taxes, and his unpopularity finally led to his dismissal by King George III.

While many in Parliament wanted reforms like those proposed by Grenville, British merchants argued strongly for their repeal. The merchants had no interest in the philosophy behind the colonists' protests. Their motive was that the nonimportation of British goods by North American colonists hurt their business. Some were also appalled by the colonists' violent reaction to the Stamp Act. Other Britons who were frustrated with increased domestic taxes sympathized with the colonists, cheering what they saw as the defense of English liberty by their counterparts in the colonies.

In March 1766, a new prime minister, Lord Rockingham, compelled Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act. Colonists celebrated what they saw as a victory for their liberty. In Boston, merchant John Hancock treated the entire town to drinks.



SUMMARY

Though Parliament designed the 1765 Stamp Act to deal with the financial crisis in the Empire, it had unintended consequences. To a degree, outrage over the act unified otherwise unconnected American colonists, politically and socially. The Stamp Act crisis enabled colonists to assert themselves as defenders of British liberty. With the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, liberty-loving subjects of the king celebrated their victory.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of announcement of the Stamp Act in a colonial newspaper \(1765\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Actual (Direct) Representation

The principle that the colonists needed to be represented in Parliament if they were to be taxed.

Daughters of Liberty

Well-born British colonial women who led a nonimportation movement against British goods.

External Taxation

Taxes enacted by Parliament to regulate commerce throughout the British Empire.

Internal Taxation

Taxes enacted by Parliament to raise revenue within the colonies.

Nonimportation Movement

A colonial boycott of British goods.

Sons of Liberty

Artisans, shopkeepers, and small-time merchants who organized riots to protest the Stamp Act.

Stamp Act (1765)

A direct tax on almost every type of printed paper that American colonists used, including newspapers, legal documents, and playing cards.

Stamp Act Congress

A gathering of landowning, educated white men from nine colonies who met in the fall of 1765 to draft a Declaration of Rights and Grievances to express their opposition to the Stamp Act.

Virtual Representation

The principle that colonists did not have equal standing before Parliament and, therefore, did not require direct representation.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George III

King of England from 1760-1820, ruled Great Britain during the American Revolution.

James Otis

Massachusetts lawyer and member of the General Assembly; became a leading voice in the 1760s in the North for the idea that “Taxation without representation is tyranny.”

Patrick Henry

Virginia lawyer, planter, slave owner, and statesman, member of the House of Burgesses. His fiery opposition to the Stamp Act and impassioned speeches for independence helped fuel revolutionary sentiment in the colonies.

Thomas Hutchinson

Hated Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts who became a target of mob violence during the Stamp Act Crisis for his support of Parliament's actions. Royal Governor of Massachusetts during the Boston Tea Party.



DATES TO KNOW

1763

The Treaty of Paris ends the French and Indian War; the British government establishes the Proclamation Line; George Grenville becomes Prime Minister.

1764

Parliament enacts the Currency Act and the Sugar Act.

1765

Parliament passes the Stamp Act; Stamp Act Congress convenes; the Sons of Liberty form; Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's house is burned.

1766

The Daughters of Liberty organize boycotts; Parliament repeals the Stamp Act.