

# The Townshend Acts and Protest

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Colonists' joy over the repeal of the Stamp Act did not last long. In order to appease those in Parliament who opposed repeal, Lord Rockingham proposed a Declaratory Act, which asserted that Parliament would continue to have authority over all colonial affairs. As Parliament imposed that authority, many colonists reacted as if their rights as Englishmen were under attack. In 1767, Parliament passed the Townshend Acts, which started another round of debate and conflict over the issue of taxation in the colonies.

This tutorial examines the Townshend Acts and the protests against them in four parts:

## 1. The Townshend Acts

Lord Rockingham's tenure as Prime Minister was short and tumultuous, lasting only into the summer of 1766. Rich landowners in Great Britain opposed the repeal of the Stamp Act, fearing that the Prime Minister would raise their taxes instead. Many in Parliament shared these concerns and noted that the Stamp Act's repeal could weaken parliamentary power over the American colonies. To appease them, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act while simultaneously restating its authority with the **Declaratory Act**.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Declaratory Act (1766)**

Enacted following the repeal of the Stamp Act, the Declaratory Act restated parliamentary supremacy in colonial affairs.

The Declaratory Act stated in no uncertain terms that Parliament's power was supreme throughout the Empire. Laws passed by colonies to govern and tax themselves could not be enacted if they ran counter to parliamentary law. The Act also declared Parliament's right to subject the colonies to any laws and statutes whatsoever.

Shortly after the Declaratory Act was passed, King George III dismissed Rockingham in favor of William Pitt, who was Prime Minister during the French and Indian War. Pitt was an old man by this time, afflicted with gout. His Chancellor of the Exchequer, **Charles Townshend**, who managed the Empire's finances, took on many of Pitt's responsibilities. Primary among these was raising the revenue necessary to pay for the protection and administration of Britain's immense Atlantic empire.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### Charles Townshend

Chancellor of the exchequer during William Pitt's ministry; architect of the Townshend Acts, which accelerated hostility between Great Britain and the colonies.

Under Townshend's leadership, Parliament passed a series of measures known collectively as the **Townshend Acts** in 1767. Most notable among them was a revenue act that placed duties on consumer items including paper, paint, lead, tea, and glass. These goods had to be imported to the colonies from England since the colonies did not have the manufacturing base to produce them.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Townshend Acts (1767)

A series of measures that taxed imported items such as paper, paint, and tea, and strengthened customs enforcement in the colonies.

Unlike the Stamp Act, which was an internal tax that affected many American colonists, the duties collected by the Townshend Acts were external taxes that regulated commerce and trade throughout the Empire. Townshend wholeheartedly rejected colonial arguments against the Stamp Act—especially the argument regarding internal taxation and actual representation—and he assumed that a renewed attempt to regulate trade would not anger the colonists. Benjamin Franklin expressed a similar hope, stating before Parliament, “I never heard any objection to the right of laying duties to regulate commerce; but a right to lay internal taxes was never supposed to be in Parliament, as we are not represented there.”

Nevertheless, the sole purpose of the Townshend Acts was to raise revenue from the colonies. Maintaining an army in North America was an expensive endeavor, rising to £700,000 per year by the mid-1760s. Townshend also wanted to use the revenue to tighten imperial administration of the colonies and to limit the influence of the colonial assemblies. The assemblies traditionally paid the salaries of some royally appointed judges, governors, and other officials. Thanks to the Townshend Acts, however, these individuals no longer had to rely on the colonists for payment, which increased their independence from the assemblies. For example, they could implement parliamentary acts, knowing that colonial legislatures could not withhold their pay in retaliation.

The Townshend Acts also attempted to counteract the smuggling of tea and other commodities, which continued to be a problem in the colonies. To ensure compliance, Townshend introduced the Commissioners of Customs Act, which created a Board of Customs to enforce trade laws in the colonies. The board was based in Boston, and it severely curtailed smuggling in the city by granting customs commissioners **writs of assistance**—basically, search warrants—that empowered them to inspect any colonial ship suspected of smuggling.



Charles Townshend, chancellor of the exchequer, shown here in a 1765 painting by Joshua Reynolds, instituted a series of measures known as the **Townshend Acts** to pay for British military and imperial administration in the colonies.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Writs of Assistance

Warrants that enabled English customs officials to board and search colonial vessels suspected of containing smuggled goods.

The Townshend Acts also strengthened the prosecution of suspected smugglers with a Vice-Admiralty Court Act, which established three more vice-admiralty courts in the colonies (Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston) to try customs violators without a jury. Before the Vice-Admiralty Court Act, the only colonial vice-admiralty court had been in far-off Halifax, Nova Scotia. With the addition of these three courts, smugglers could be tried more efficiently. Since the judges of these courts were paid a percentage of the value of the goods they recovered, leniency was rare.

As a result of the Townshend Acts, higher taxes on imported goods, greater regulation, and stronger enforcement powers were imposed on the colonies. Most significantly, due to the revenue raised from taxes and enforcement, royal officials drew closer to the British government, and further away from colonial legislatures.

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## 2. The Colonial Response

Like the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts produced controversy and protest in the American colonies. Many colonists resented what they perceived as another attempt to tax them without representation. Colonists continued to join together and organize the kinds of resistance that had worked during the Stamp Act crisis. This time, however, a growing number of colonists declared their opposition to any form of taxation on the colonies, regardless of whether it was an internal or external tax.

The Townshend Acts generated a number of protest publications based on the argument of actual versus virtual representation in Parliament. Several of these documents also expressed suspicion toward any taxes that raised revenue from the colonies, whether internal or external. In Massachusetts, in 1768, **Samuel Adams** wrote a letter that became known as the **Massachusetts Circular**. Sent by the Massachusetts legislature to other colonial assemblies, the circular restated the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation (a common refrain during the Stamp Act crisis). It also criticized taxes that raised revenue, including the duties enacted by the Townshend Acts.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Samuel Adams

American revolutionary and cousin of John Adams; leading member of the Sons of Liberty and author of the 1768 Massachusetts Circular, which argued the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation and expressed opposition toward any taxes that attempted to raise revenue from the colonies.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Massachusetts Circular

A letter written by Samuel Adams in 1768 in response to the Townshend Acts, restating the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation, and expressing opposition to taxes imposed to raise revenue from the colonies.

**Samuel Adams, The Massachusetts Circular**

Adams included the following passage in the Circular:

“It is, moreover, [the Massachusetts colonial assembly’s] humble opinion, which they express with the greatest deference to the wisdom of the Parliament, that the acts made there, imposing duties on the people of this province, with the sole and express purpose of raising a revenue, are infringements of their natural and constitutional rights; because, as they are not represented in the Parliament, his Majesty’s Commons in Britain, by those acts, grant their property without their consent.”



#### THINK ABOUT IT

What explains Adams’ opposition to the Townshend Acts? How is this statement similar to—and different from—the opposition expressed during the Stamp Act crisis?

Many colonists also supported and promoted the boycott of British goods. The Daughters of Liberty continued to produce homespun cloth and once again found substitutes for British tea and other goods. A number of colonial merchants signed nonimportation agreements, and the Daughters of Liberty urged colonial women to shop only with those merchants.

To enforce the boycott, the Sons of Liberty used newspapers and circulars to identify by name merchants who continued to import goods from Great Britain. A broadside posted in Boston from 1769 to 1770 reads as follows:

#### Newspaper Notice, the Sons and Daughters of Liberty

WILLIAM JACKSON,  
an IMPORTER;  
at the BRAZEN HEAD,  
North Side of the TOWN-HOUSE,  
and Opposite the Town-Pump, [in]  
Corn-hill, BOSTON

It is desired that the SONS  
and DAUGHTERS of LIBERTY,  
would not buy any one thing of  
him, for in so doing they will bring  
disgrace upon themselves, and their  
Posterity, for ever and ever, AMEN.



#### BRAINSTORM

Put yourself in the shoes of a colonial merchant during the protests against the Townshend Acts. How would you have reacted had you seen a broadside such as the one above?

Such broadsides, and the nonimportation effort in general, transformed purchases of ordinary consumer goods into political acts, and enabled colonists to unite against parliamentary taxation and regulation. In this environment, it mattered what one consumed. During protests against the Townshend Acts, even the clothing worn by colonists could be seen as significant: defenders of English liberty might be identified by the homespun cloth they wore, while those dressed in fine English attire might be viewed as supporters of

### 3. The Imperial Reaction

Much of the opposition to the Townshend Acts centered in Boston, where several confrontations between colonists, customs officials, and soldiers occurred during the late 1760s.

Shortly after Samuel Adams penned the Massachusetts Circular, Great Britain sent four thousand troops to Boston to deal with potential unrest. The presence of the troops was a constant reminder of Parliamentary authority over the colonies and illustrated the unequal relationship between members of the Empire. As an added aggravation, many British soldiers moonlighted as dockworkers, which created competition for employment at a time when jobs were scarce. Boston's labor system had traditionally been closed, favoring native-born laborers over outsiders. In response, many Bostonians, led by the Sons of Liberty, mounted a campaign of harassment against the British troops. The Sons of Liberty also helped to protect merchants engaged in smuggling. After all, smuggling helped the colonists to maintain their boycott of British goods.

**John Hancock** was one of Boston's most successful merchants. He was also one of the many prominent merchants who had made their fortunes by smuggling. In 1768, customs officials seized the *Liberty*, one of his ships, and violence erupted. Led by the Sons of Liberty, Bostonians rioted against customs officials, attacking the customs house and chasing out the officers, who fled to Castle William, a British fort on a Boston Harbor island. British soldiers crushed the riot, but over the next few years, conflict and competition between colonial merchants and customs officers and between colonial laborers and British soldiers continued.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### John Hancock

Wealthy Boston merchant (who made his fortune largely through smuggling), statesman, and prominent citizen; supporter of the Sons of Liberty, member of the Continental Congress, and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

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### 4. The Boston Massacre

The conflict turned deadly on March 5, 1770, in a confrontation that came to be known as the **Boston Massacre**. On that night, a crowd of Bostonians from many walks of life started throwing snowballs (some of which may have contained rocks or ice) at British soldiers who were guarding the customs house. Others heckled the soldiers as "lobster backs". Goaded by the mob, the soldiers fired into the crowd, killing five colonists.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Boston Massacre

A confrontation between a crowd of Boston colonists and British soldiers on March 5, 1770, which resulted in the deaths of five colonists.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The reference "lobster backs" equated British soldiers with bottom feeders such as lobsters and similar aquatic animals that fed on the lowest organisms in the food chain.



The bloodshed in Boston illustrated the level of hostility that had developed as a result of the occupation by British troops, the competition for scarce jobs between Bostonians and British soldiers stationed in the city, and the larger issue of Parliament's efforts to tax the colonies.

The Sons of Liberty immediately seized on the event as a "massacre", characterizing the British soldiers as murderers and their victims as martyrs, using public media to sway others to their cause. Shortly after the event, Paul Revere created "The bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th Regt," based on an image by engraver Henry Pelham (see image below).



THINK ABOUT IT



Why was the image produced, and what reaction was it intended to elicit from those who viewed it? Note how the image represents the Sons' point of view by highlighting the ruthlessness of the British soldiers and the helplessness of the crowd of civilians. Notice also the subtle details that Revere used to convince viewers of the civilians' innocence and the soldiers' cruelty. For instance, the British soldiers stand beneath a building labeled "Butcher's Hall." Although eyewitnesses said the crowd started the fight by throwing snowballs and rocks, in the engraving they are innocently standing by. Revere also depicted the crowd as well-dressed, even well-to-do, when in fact they were mostly laborers and probably looked quite a bit rougher.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Crispus Attucks, the first man killed in the Boston Massacre, was of Wampanoag and African descent. Ironically, the Boston Massacre occurred after Parliament had partially repealed the Townshend Acts. Charles Townshend died suddenly in 1767 and was replaced by Lord North, who was inclined to work with the colonists to find a solution. North convinced Parliament to drop all of the duties except the tax on tea. The administrative and enforcement provisions under the Townshend Acts—the American Board of Customs Commissioners and the Vice-Admiralty Courts—remained in place. Most colonists accepted these concessions and abandoned the nonimportation position. Consumption of British goods skyrocketed after the partial repeal, which indicated the colonists' continuing desire for imports from England.



#### SUMMARY

The Townshend Acts demonstrate Great Britain's continuing search for ways to pay for the administration and protection of its empire. They also reflect a growing sense in Parliament that the colonies must be brought under control in the wake of the Stamp Act crisis. However, the enactment and enforcement of the Townshend Acts initiated another series of colonial responses and imperial reactions that soured relations between Great Britain and its American colonies. The Boston Massacre revealed that the unrest could turn violent.

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#### REFERENCES

Figures for cost of British army in North America from Paul A. Gilje, *The Making of the American Republic, 1763–1815* (2006), p. 24



#### ATTRIBUTIONS

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#### TERMS TO KNOW

**Boston Massacre**

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### **Declaratory Act (1766)**

Enacted following the repeal of the Stamp Act; restated parliamentary supremacy in colonial affairs.

### **Massachusetts Circular**

A letter written by Samuel Adams in 1768 in response to the Townshend Acts; restated the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation and expressed opposition toward any taxes that attempted to raise revenue from the colonies.

### **Townshend Acts (1767)**

A series of measures that taxed consumer items such as paper, paint, and tea and strengthened customs enforcement within the colonies.

### **Writs of Assistance**

Warrants that enabled English customs officials to board and search colonial vessels suspected of containing smuggled goods.



## **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

### **Charles Townshend**

Chancellor of the exchequer during William Pitt's ministry; architect of the Townshend Acts, which accelerated hostility between Great Britain and the colonies.

### **John Hancock**

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### **Samuel Adams**

American revolutionary and cousin of John Adams; leading member of the Sons of Liberty and author of the 1768 Massachusetts Circular, which argued the unconstitutionality of taxation without representation and expressed opposition toward any taxes that attempted to raise revenue from the colonies.



## **DATES TO KNOW**

### **1766**

Parliament repeals the Stamp Act, then issues the Declaratory Act; William Pitt becomes Prime Minister.

### **1767**

The Townshend Acts passes; Charles Townshend is succeeded by Lord North, who relaxes taxation on imports.

### **1768**

The colonial boycotts resume; Samuel Adams writes the Massachusetts Circular; the British army occupies Boston.



**1770**

The Boston Massacre results in the death of five colonists.