

Lesson Fourteen

The Birth Of Independence

LESSON IDEA

To make early American history more vivid by recalling how the Revolutionary War began, and explaining why the Declaration of Independence was written.

PREPARATION

Prepare, for each member of the family, a card with the Patrick Henry's famous "give me liberty or give me death" quotation (see page three). For grade schoolers, shorten the quote to include only the last two sentences (beginning "Is life so dear..."). Small children could be given, as an alternative, the four-line ditty, also on page three, that describes the Boston Tea Party ("We made a plaguey mess of tea...").

TONIGHT WE TRAVEL BACK to a time when Great Britain was a giant and America was a dwarf. On one side of the Atlantic Ocean sat prosperous, powerful England. On the other were the struggling American colonists who had carved a thin strip of civilization (stretching north to New Hampshire and south to Georgia) out of a huge expanse of wilderness.

The colonists had close ties to the British in 1765, and were loyal subjects of King George III. They had brought fame and wealth to Britain by establishing towns and businesses under the British flag and fighting England's enemies on the American continent. In return, the colonists enjoyed more freedom than any other people in the civilized world. They were able, for example, to elect their own assemblies, which levied taxes to support the colonial governments.

There were, however, some vexing problems. The extent to the colonies engaged in trade with each other - as well as Spain, Africa, the West Indies, and other areas of the world - irritated England. The commerce included tobacco, salt, molasses, cotton, shoes, and furniture, among other things. According to Britain, Americans were supposed to work for the benefit of England, not themselves or others. It was for that reason that Parliament passed the Navigation Acts beginning in 1651 (a series of laws extending over

a century), which included the Molasses Act of 1733, which taxed molasses and sugar coming into the North American colonies from the West Indies. The purpose was to take such trade from the Indies and give it to other British colonies. Americans colonists largely ignored the Act, however, and it was eventually repealed in 1764.

RESISTANCE to being treated like dependent children in a nursery continued to grow among within the American colonies. Tempers flared in 1765, when the mother country passed a Stamp Act that ignored the long-standing colonial system of representative taxation and placed the parental hand directly into the colonists' pockets.

Suppose something equivalent were to happen today. Suppose, for instance, that the head of the United Nations suddenly decree a new law compelling Americans to pay a new tax on every newspaper and magazine they buy. How would we feel about it? Encourage family members to state their reaction.] Suppose, when you graduate from college, you are forced to purchase a \$10 UN stamp before you receive your diploma. Again, how would you feel? [Ask for reactions, and point out how offensive and unfair it would be.]

The Stamp Act was not merely a dictatorial intrusion, but a financial hardship for many colonists as well. Some newspapers were forced to close their doors. In the last issue of the Pennsylvania Journal, publisher William Bradford printed a skull and crossbones in the spot reserved for the British stamp. In a front-page statement, he asserted:

I am sorry to be obliged to acquaint my readers that as the Stamp Act is feared to be obligatory upon us after the first of November ensuing (the fatal tomorrow), the publisher of this paper, unable to bear the burden, has thought it expedient to stop awhile, in order to deliberate, whether any methods can be found to elude the chains forged for us and escape the insupportable slavery, which it is hoped, from the last representation

now made against the act, may be effected.

Mr. Bradford urged his subscribers to pay what they owed the paper, so that he could both survive during the interim, and be better prepared to resume publishing when the opportunity arose.

Fortunately, that opportunity was not long in coming (about four-and-one-half months). Colonial anger at the tax had reached the British Parliament, which changed its mind about the stamps. But it did not change its mind about taxes in general.

The English Lords declared that the could tax the colonial subjects directly, even though the Americans would have no say about the types of taxes or their amounts. The colonists vigorously disagreed with the policy, even though they were willing to pay taxes. After all, colonial assemblies and town meetings had been levying taxes for years - but it was colonial money, voted by colonial representatives. In most colonies, the tax revenue paid the governor's salary, and if the King's executive opposed the will of the colonists on important matters, it was a simple matter to refuse to raise money for his salary, thereby pressuring him into line.

FOR ENGLAND suddenly to transfer taxing power from the colonies to itself was deemed an outrage, as was Britain's self-serving concept of representation. The royal argument claimed that the colonists were as well-represented in Parliament as were citizens of England, since Parliament was comprised of farmers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and tradesmen. British logic held that this gave representation to all farmers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and tradesmen who lived in England or the colonies.

Applying such flawed logic today, the UN General Assembly, to which the United States belongs, could tax Americans directly simply because members of the United Nations hold the same types of jobs and professions as Americans. Would you like to have a sizable percentage of your allowance forcibly taken by the UN, on

grounds that some delegates to the General Assembly are students, so you are "represented"? Regardless of the amount taken, would it be fair? [Have youngsters state the amount of their allowances, and ask each what she or she would think if the UN took, say, half of the amount. Stress that there would be no opportunity to say "yes" or "no" to the UN tax collector, nor to the amount that he could take.]

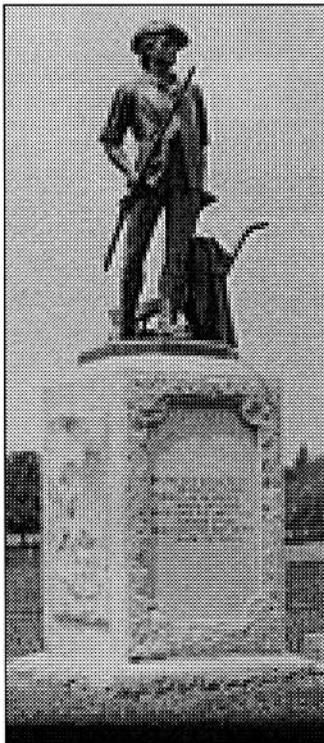
So it was not so much the amount of money that upset the colonists, but the fact that it was taken without their consent. The Townshend Acts, a new British taxing scheme, were adopted in 1767. They imposed another tax on the purchase of glass, paper, paints, and tea. In protest, colonists began refusing to buy anything British-made. Patriots wore homespun clothes and scorned those who dressed in linens and woolens imported from England.

Despite the boycott, the taxes stayed in place, and colonial discontent grew more and more explosive with each passing year. Town meetings were called, patriotic groups were organized, and news about the situation was carried by riders from colony to colony over country roads and woodland trails.

In December 1773, three British ships moored in Boston harbor with a cargo that included 342 chests of tea that could not be unloaded until the royal tax was paid. But tea mer-

chants, fearing public outrage, dared not accept the tea with the tax, regardless of its low price. The standoff was resolved on December 16th when, under cover of night, about 50 young men dressed as "wild Indians" (John Hancock was one) boarded the ships and dumped the untaxed tea into the harbor. This was the famous Boston Tea Party. Samuel Adams, originator of the patriotic Committees of Correspondence, sent messengers dashing in all directions with news of the "party." A popular ditty celebrating the event concluded with these lines:

We made a plaguey mess of tea
In one of the biggest dishes



**Minuteman Statue
Lexington, Massachusetts**

