

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 Americans colonists largely ignored the Act, however, and it was eventually repealed in 1764.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.]

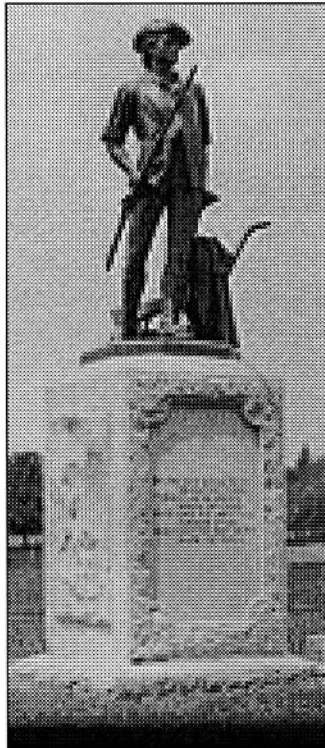
So it was not so much the amount of money that upset the colonists, but the fact that it was taken without their consent. The Townshend Acts, a new British taxing scheme, were adopted in 1767. They imposed another tax on the purchase of glass, paper, paints, and tea. In protest, colonists began refusing 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**

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Edmund Burke was one of several English statesmen who sympathized with the American cause in 1775. However, in 1789, Burke opposed the French Revolution as fervently as he supported the American fight for independence. Why? The reasons for his opposition are detailed in his essay, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which is available in most public libraries. Encourage older students to read it. Claims by today's left wing revolutionists that they are "modern George Washingtons" can be countered by many of Burke's observations.

I mean we steeped it in the sea
And treated all the fishes!

Five months later (May 1774), England retaliated by approving the Port Bill. The Boston harbor was to be closed to all shipping on June 1st unless the colonists paid for the tea destroyed by the "wild Indians." For the colonists to do so, however, would be an admission that Parliament had the right to tax them — an admission that the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence would never make. Samuel Adams circulated a letter notifying the other colonies of the "we-do-not-intend-to-pay" decision. All rallied behind Massachusetts, realizing that if Massachusetts lost its freedom, so would they. Colonies as far away as Georgia sent rice, money, and supplies; church bells tolled; and flags flew at half-mast. [Ask family members to ponder what would happen if the UN were to close harbors or highways in your area because its tax on (say) coffee had not been paid. How would it affect the daily routine? Explain that tea was as popular with the colonists as coffee is with Americans today.]

The closing of Boston harbor was lit the fuse of a powder keg of protest, and led to the convening of the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia in September 1774. Every colony except Georgia (which was sparsely populated and more dependent on England than the others) sent delegates; statesmen such as Samuel Adams, George Washington, Patrick Henry, and John Adams.

FOLLOWING DAYS of debate, these patriotic leaders issued a statement of their rights as British subjects, and a demand to be taxed by their own elected assemblies. There

was no mention of separation from the mother country, but the last few lines of the petition to the King carried a veiled threat: A resolve not to buy or use goods made in England until the unjust laws were repealed.

The American petitions, declarations, and resolutions calling for justice were flicked aside by the King and Parliament like so much waste paper. By February, the English government had declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion, and had made an unsuccessful attempt to seize colonial military supplies at Salem.

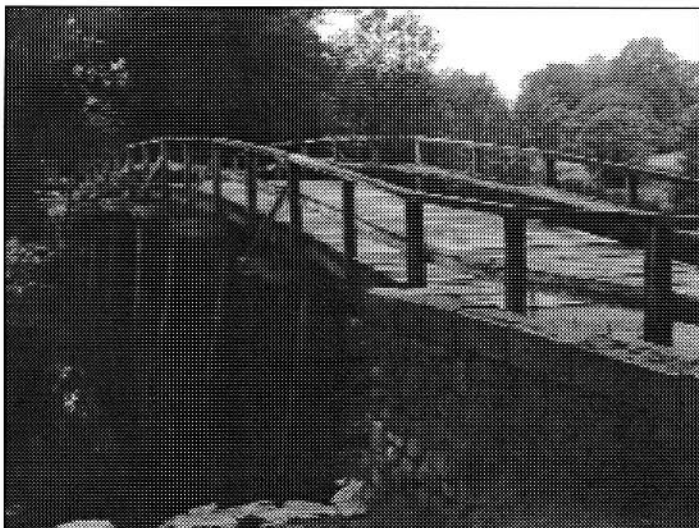
On March 22, 1775, Edmund Burke made his famous appeal to the King for reconciliation. The following day in America, Patrick Henry strode to the pulpit of St. John's Church in Richmond to deliver his spirited "We Must Fight" speech to Virginia's second revolutionary convention.

Beginning with a recap of the wrongs that had been suffered by the colonists, the fiery Virginian concluded his stirring speech by demolishing the arguments for peace with these famous words:

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,



Minutemen meet Redcoats in the Battle of Lexington



Thomas R. Eddleman

Concord Bridge

Almighty God! — I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!

BRITISH TROOPS were quartered in the city of Boston (the trouble center), and British warships were anchored in the bay. Samuel Adams and John Hancock, sought by England as traitors, were in Lexington preparing to leave for the Second Continental Congress that would convene in Philadelphia on May 10th. On April 14th General Thomas Gage, the British commander, was ordered to squelch the colonial rebellion. Four days later British troops were on their way to capture guns and powder which the colonists had stored at Concord. The Boston patriots anticipated that move. The only question was which route the British would take: by land or by sea.

From the tower of Boston's North Church, a watchman eyed the British movements and flashed the lantern signal which sent William Dawes and Paul Revere riding to Lexington and Concord to arouse the people, warn Adams and Hancock, and call out the militia. As April 19th drew to a close, most of the colonists' guns and powder were secure, Adams and Hancock were safely on their way to Philadelphia, the "shot heard round the world" was fired (it is not known which side was responsible), and the War for Independence had begun.

The Philadelphia Congress authorized the

Continental Army and appointed George Washington as commander-in-chief. Three months later (July 3, 1775), Washington rode into Cambridge Common in Boston to take command of an army of untrained men from every colony and all walks of life. At about that time, Congress sent the Olive Branch Petition (a final appeal for peace and justice) to King George.

In August, England smashed American hopes for peace by decreeing that the colonies were in open rebellion. British troops still controlled Boston (Washington's volunteer army was camped on the outskirts) and Benedict Arnold was preparing an expedition to Canada to capture the British fort at Quebec. In October, Congress authorized a navy and, in November, began a search for allies among England's enemies in Europe. King George ignored the Olive Branch Petition and issued a proclamation closing the colonies to all trade effective March 1, 1776.

Still, resolve to make a total break with England was slow in developing. It was a difficult decision, since declaring independence would mean becoming traitors, hence criminals, under British law.

Concluding Thought

Clearly, the colonists did not act in hot-headed haste. A decade elapsed between the Stamp Act in 1765 and the first battle of the Revolutionary War in 1775. In the meantime, all lawful means were employed to correct British injustices, but without success. Even as the colonial army trained for battle, Congress petitioned for reforms, and another year lapsed before the final break.

Looking Ahead

In our next lesson we will take a closer look at the dramatic events of July 1776 that marked our independence; our birth as a nation.

DURING THE WEEK

Ask each family member to memorize all or part of either Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" quotation or the Boston Tea Party ditty. Test their progress during breakfast or dinner during the week. Also, discuss some of the events described in this lesson.