

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 Americans colonists largely ignored the Act, however, and it was eventually repealed in 1764.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

