



Led by the Sons of Liberty, Bostonians ransack, then burn, the elegant home of British Lt. Governor Thomas Hutchinson on Aug. 26, 1765

Burning Down the House

Strapped for funds to defend the colonies' expanded borders, Britain imposes a new tax, but the **Stamp Act** ignites protests—and domiciles

BY THE 1760S, BRITAIN AND HER AMERICAN COLONIES were like an aging husband and wife who had drifted apart. No longer fully able to remember what had brought them together in the first place, each one sure that anything said will be misunderstood, they strove mightily to ignore each other. But each partner in this marriage grown stale still needed something from the other.

Britain's cupboard was bare, depleted by the French and Indian War, in which England wrested from France control of Canada and vast new lands west of the present colonies, extending to the Mississippi. Frequent skirmishes with Native Americans along these new frontiers, home to the prosperous fur trade newly inherited from the French, led London to de-

cide that more than 10,000 British troops would be permanently garrisoned in America, along with several British warships. And surely the colonists, who would most immediately benefit from the troops' presence, ought to help defray the expense of transporting, housing and feeding them?

The colonials begged to differ. Stung by a growing if not yet fully articulated sense that they did not enjoy the same rights as other British subjects (for example, to elect members of Parliament), they saw no need for a standing British army in their midst. Many suspected the troops were being sent to intimidate them; these redcoats were little more than foreign occupiers. Moreover, colonists suspected Britain's real aim was to reduce the debt it incurred fighting a European war; Amer-

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"No law can be made or abrogated without the consent of the people their repr

People by their representatives"—Connecticut anti-Stamp Act pamphlet, 1765

ernor Thomas Hutchinson was burned to the ground. A few days later in New York, arsonists burned the home of a British officer who had vowed that he would "crawl the stamps down American throats at the point of his sword." When the Governor of New York threatened to order his troops to fire into a rioting crowd, he received a written message predicting that he would be hanged from the nearest lamp post within a few minutes of doing so. Throughout the colonies, stamp-tax collectors resigned their posts and, in more than a few cases, ran for their lives.

The Stamp and Quartering acts led to calls for an assembly in which representatives of each colony would meet, independent of British oversight, to discuss common goals. When the Stamp Act Congress convened in New York on Oct. 7, 1765, nine of the 13 colonies were represented; Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia abstained, while New Hampshire declared it would sign any agreement the others ratified. Ten days later, the Congress issued a resolution declaring in part that it "is inseparably essential to the freedom of a people, and the undoubted right of Englishmen, that no taxes be imposed on them, but with their own consent, given personally, or by their representatives."

On Nov. 1, when the Stamp Act officially went into effect, many colonies observed a symbolic (and slightly histrionic) day of mourning: businesses closed their doors, while long-faced men solemnly paraded through the streets, dressed in funeral garb. The English were already looking for a way out. Of the 13 colonies, only Georgia even attempted to enforce the measure. All the other colonies either quietly ignored it or, in the case of rambunctious Rhode Island, openly declared the law invalid. In London, British merchants smarting from the colonial boycott were also calling for the law's repeal.

In February 1766, the perplexed British government invited that most reasonable of Americans, Benjamin Franklin, to articulate the colonists' position. Members of Parliament were stunned to hear the first citizen of the colonies, who was not given to exaggeration, warn of a possible revolution if the British used their army to enforce the Stamp Act. By the following month, His Majesty's government had had enough: on March 17, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act. It was a victory for the colonies in the increasingly fractious relationship between two peoples that, by then, had little love remaining for each other but were still locked in the cold embrace of custom and language, law and property.

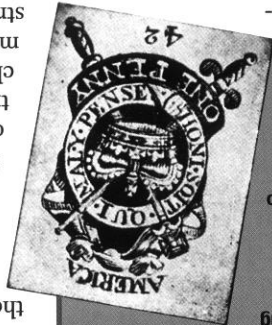
icans viewed the French and Indian War as merely the North American theater of the larger global conflict history calls the Seven Years' War.

The English thought the Americans ungrateful: at a time when the average annual tax paid by a British subject was 26 shillings, the typical resident of Massachusetts contributed only one shilling to the royal treasury. Unfortunately for the British, the means they settled on to support the new troops—a levy on printed documents called the Stamp Tax—betrayed a startling lack of insight into the mindset of their overseas brethren. Indeed, London could not have devised a strategy more guaranteed to outrage the colonists and unite them in opposition.

Passed unanimously by Parliament on March 22, 1765, and scheduled to go into effect in November of the same year, the Stamp Tax required that an official wax seal be affixed to documents ranging from newspapers and legal briefs to deeds and bills of sale—54 categories of everyday printed material in all. Depending on the kind of document, colonial bureaucrats would charge anywhere from a few pence to several pounds for this seal. The bitter opposition of lawyers and newspaper editors, property owners and merchants—in short, nearly every citizen of some influence in the colonies—was guaranteed.

The Stamp Act came on the heels of a series of hated tax measures. The previous year, the Sugar Act had increased levies on sugar, coffee, wine, textiles and dyes shipped to the colonies from England, while the Currency Act had banned colonial governments from issuing their own paper money, making American merchants dependent on British banks.

The new act crossed an entirely new threshold: it was the first measure that required colonists to pay money directly from their own pockets into the British treasury. To make matters worse, Parliament also enacted the Quartering Act in the same month as the Stamp Act, requiring colonists to house and feed the British troops they despised.



was born." Independence there the child write, "Then and would later John Adams, who student named was a young law gallery that day Otis from the throne." Watching of England his head and another his exercises of power had "cost one King Superior Court that previous arbitrary omunsly declared before the colony's without representation is tyranny" — would later coin the phrase "Taxation Burgesses. In Massachusetts, a brilliant against the levy in the House of foe. In Virginia, Patrick Henry rallied different colonies against a common to the revenue act united very (below) as a death's-head. Opposition newspaper (above) portrayed the



Artifacts

FACING PAGE: THE GRANGER COLLECTION; NEW YORK: THIS PAGE, TOP: TIME LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION; BOTTOM: BROWN BROTHERS

