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On the winter night of Thursday, December 16, 1773 the “tea crisis” in Boston came to a head. Members of the **Sons of Liberty** disguised as **Mohawk Indians** were armed with an assortment of axes. They quietly boarded **three ships** carrying cargoes of British East India Company tea moored at Griffin’s Wharf. In a span of three hours, 340 chests of **British East India Company Tea** were smashed and dumped into Boston Harbor. Over 92,000 pounds of tea were destroyed and thrown into the harbor. The implication and impact of the Boston Tea Party were enormous; the event directly led to the sparking of the **American Revolution** on April 19, 1775.

December 15, 1773

On December 15, 1773, the *Beaver*, the last of the three ships sailing from London, England arrived at Griffin’s Wharf in Boston. The **Beaver** was delayed due to a case of smallpox which broke out onboard, and she was held in quarantine for two weeks in Boston’s outer harbor. Previously, the **Dartmouth** had arrived at Griffin’s Wharf on November 28 and the *Eleanor* on December 2. The *Beaver* was commanded by Captain Coffin, the *Dartmouth* by Captain Hall, and the **Eleanor** by Captain Bruce. There were to be four ships, but the *William* ran aground off Cape Cod on December 10, 1773, in a violent storm. The *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, and *Eleanor* each carried more than one hundred chests of British East India Company Tea. The tea came from China and was described as the “Bohea” type. In the 18th century tea trade, black tea was referred to as “Bohea” which traditionally came from the Wuyi Mountain region of China, but the term “Bohea” was hijacked by the tea trade to refer to all black tea varieties. Additionally, the shipment of British East India Company tea also contained green tea from the Chinese province of Anhui..

Tax Deadline

With the arrival of the three shipments of British East India Company tea to Boston, the tax on tea, which had been implemented with the passing of the 1767 Townshend Revenue Act, had to be paid the moment the tea was unloaded from the *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, and *Eleanor*. The absolute deadline for payment of the tax was twenty days after the arrival of the tea. If the tax was not paid within the twenty days following the ships’ arrival, the ships and their cargoes of **British East India Company Tea** would be seized by authorities. The deadline to pay the tax on the tea the *Dartmouth* delivered to Boston was December 17. Immediately following the arrival of the *Dartmouth* at the end of November 1773, pamphlets distributed by the **Sons of Liberty** appeared throughout the streets of Boston proclaiming, “*Friends! Brethren! Countrymen! That worst of Plagues, the detested tea shipped for this port by the East India Company, is now arrived in the Harbor; the hour of destruction, or manly opposition to the machinations of Tyranny stares you in the Face...*” For the twenty days following the arrival of the *Dartmouth*, meetings occurred on a daily basis throughout Boston at locations such as the Green Dragon Tavern, **Faneuil Hall**, and **Old South Meeting House** to discuss what was to be done about the shipments of “detested tea”. The Sons of Liberty, led by Samuel Adams, was responsible for organizing the **Boston Tea Party**.

November 29, 1773: “The Body of the People”

Following the arrival of the *Dartmouth*, the first large-scale organized meeting to discuss the “tea crisis” occurred on Monday, November 29, 1773 at Faneuil Hall. By this time, Boston had become a hotbed of dissent and radicalism, and thousands of men, women, and children gathered from Boston and surrounding towns to meet at Faneuil Hall. The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Sons of Liberty organized the meeting, both of whom were under the leadership of Samuel Adams. The gathering attracted so many of the concerned citizenry that the meeting had to be quickly relocated to the Old South Meeting House because Faneuil Hall could not accommodate the masses of people. Old South Meeting House was the largest public building in Boston at the time and thus became the central meeting place of the Patriot movement.

Meeting Attendance

Samuel Adams recorded the number of people present at the meeting, *“The people met in Faneuil Hall, without observing the rules prescribed by law for calling them together...they were soon obliged for the want of room to adjourn to the Old South Meeting House; where were assembled upon this important occasion 5000, some say 6000 men, consisting of the respectable inhabitants of this and the adjacent towns. The business of the meeting was conducted with decency, unanimity, and spirit.”* The resolves from the meeting were signed “*The People*”, and the meeting became known as “*The Body of the People*”. Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson described the people gathered at the meeting as, *“principally of the lower ranks of the people and even journeymen tradesmen were brought in to increase the number, and the rabble were not excluded.”*

The Decision

The meeting came to a conclusion when Samuel Adams resolved, *“Whether it is the firm resolution of this body that the tea shall not only be sent back but that no duty shall be paid thereon!”* He was met with affirming nods, pounding fists, tapping canes, and cheers to support his motion not to pay the tax on the shipment of British East India Company tea. The decision was made to have twenty-five Sons of Liberty stand guard at Griffin’s Wharf to barricade and prevent the British East India Company tea from being unloaded from the *Dartmouth*.

John Singleton Copley’s Involvement

The meeting regathered at the Old South Meeting House on Tuesday, November 30 to give the tea consignees the opportunity to respond. The husband of one of the tea consignees’ daughters, the portrait artist John Singleton Copley, read the proposal the tea consignees put together in response to the previous night’s meeting. The tea consignees proposed to store the British East India Company Tea tea, and that it could be inspected by the Sons of Liberty until they received further instructions from London. The proposal was booed and rejected by the thousands gathered at the meeting because agreeing to the tea consignees’ proposal meant paying the tax because the tea would have to be unloaded from the *Dartmouth*. Before a compromise could be made between the Patriots and the tea consignees, the meeting was interrupted when it received a proclamation from Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson. The proclamation stated, *“To disperse and to surcease all further unlawful proceedings at your utmost*

peril.” Hutchinson’s order and warning was not headed, and the meeting responded with the following signed “The People”, “It was solemnly voted by the body of the people of this and the neighboring towns assembled at the Old South meeting-house on Tuesday, the 30th day of November that the said tea never should be landed in this province.”

“The Tea that bainfull weed is arrived. Great and effectual opposition has been made to the landing of it. To the publick papers I must refer you for perticulars. You will there find that the proceedings of our citizens have been united, spirited and firm. The flame is kindled and like lightening it catches from soul to soul. Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more lenient measures.”

~ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, December 5, 1773

December 14 to 16, 1773: “The Final Straw”

In December, tensions grew to an all-time high with the arrival of the *Eleanor* and *Beaver*. Under the order of Thomas Hutchinson, Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts, no vessel could leave Boston Harbor without a pass. As the deadline to pay the tax on the *Dartmouth’s* tea fast approached, another large-scale meeting to discuss the “tea crisis” was planned for Tuesday, December 14 at the **Old South Meeting House**. Prior to this, smaller meetings had been held by the **Sons of Liberty** at the Old South Meeting House almost daily since November 30 to discuss the “tea crisis”. The Sons of Liberty planned a course of action of the utmost secrecy to deal with the “tea crisis” if the issue could not be resolved diplomatically through negotiations. A pamphlet was distributed throughout Boston to announce and call forth the concerned citizenry to meet at 10:00 in the morning on December 14 at the Old South Meeting House, *“Friends! Brethren! Countrymen! The perfidious act of your reckless enemies to render ineffectual the late resolves of the body of the people, demands your assembling at the Old South Meeting House, precisely at ten o’clock this day, at which time the bells will ring.”* Additionally, news of the meeting was spread to towns in close vicinity to Boston, and towns throughout Massachusetts sent proclamations of support. **Samuel Adams** called upon the **Committees of Correspondence** from Massachusetts for support, calling them to be in *“readiness in the most resolute manner to assist this Town in their efforts for saving this oppressed country.”*

Tuesday, December 14, 1773

Thousands of people from Boston and towns across Massachusetts gathered at the Old South Meeting on December 14, 1773. Samuel Phillips Savage of Weston, Massachusetts, was chosen as the moderator of the meeting. As with the November 29 to 30 meeting, the consensus was to find a way to prevent the British East India Company Tea from being unloaded. Samuel Adams recorded the following about the meeting: *“The people met again at the Old South church, and having ascertained the owner, they compelled him to apply at the custom house for a clearance for his ship to London with the tea on board, and appointed ten gentlemen to see it performed; after which they adjourned till Thursday the 16th.”*

Ship owners await their fate

The owners of the *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, and *Eleanor* found themselves caught in the middle of the “tea crisis”. The *Beaver* and *Dartmouth* were both owned by the Rotch family of Nantucket, and the *Eleanor* was owned by Boston merchant John Rowe. Rowe was present at the meeting at the Old South Meeting House and Francis Rotch represented the Rotch family. Additionally, the captains of both the *Beaver* and *Dartmouth* were present at the meeting. The Patriots did not want the tea unloaded, and they wanted the ships to leave Boston and to return the tea back to England without payment of tax. On the other end of the spectrum, Thomas Hutchinson wanted the tea immediately

unloaded; the tea tax paid, and would not allow the ships to leave until the tea was unloaded. None of the owners or captains of the *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, and *Eleanor* wanted to risk damaging their ships by attempting to leave Boston without governmental permission. If they attempted to leave, the ships risked being taken by British warships or fired upon by the fort that guarded the entrance to Boston Harbor, Castle William. The *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor* and their captains and crew awaited their fates while moored at Griffin's Wharf.

Thursday, December 16, 1773

On the morning of Thursday, December 16, the day before the deadline for payment of the tax on the *Dartmouth's* tea was due, thousands from all over Massachusetts gathered in Boston. They gathered in the streets, at Griffin's Wharf, the Green Dragon Tavern, and at the Old South Meeting House. The atmosphere was tense, and the Sons of Liberty did its part to rouse the masses. It is estimated that 5,000 to 7,000 people gathered at the Old South Meeting House at 10:00 in the morning for resumption of the meeting, which had been adjourned two days earlier. The crowd gathered was more than a third of Boston's entire population. The deadline for the payment of the tea tax was midnight, and the decision of what was going to be done needed to be made.

It was decided by the meeting that Francis Rotch and a committee would go to the Customs House to demand a pass for the *Dartmouth* to leave Boston Harbor. The officials at the Custom House could not grant their demand for it was not in their authority to do so. The meeting then decided Rotch would make a personal plea to Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson for permission for the *Dartmouth* to leave Boston without unloading the cargo of British East India Company tea. The Patriots wanted to make their refusal of the **British East India Company Tea** as legitimate and legal as possible. On December 16, Hutchinson was conveniently in Milton, Massachusetts. The meeting forced Rotch to immediately travel the ten or more miles to Milton to get in contact with Hutchinson. Upon meeting with Hutchinson, Rotch was denied a pass to allow the *Dartmouth* to sail unmolested out of Boston Harbor and to return the cargo of British East India Company tea back to England.

Pending the Response

The meeting was tense and spirited language filled the air as thousands waited hours for Rotch to return with the response from the Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts. John Rowe, the owner of the *Eleanor*, was reputed to have been at the meeting. Rowe was known for his smuggling and staunch anti-British policy leanings and was so angered with the situation that he is recorded to have said, "*Perhaps salt water and tea will mix tonight!*" Rowe is remembered as one of the inciters of the **Boston Tea Party**, yet he attempted to cover up his participation in the planning by recording false entries in his diary as to his whereabouts on December 16. After several hours and at approximately 6:00 in the evening, Francis Rotch finally returned to the Old South Meeting House with the response from Hutchinson.

December 16, 1773: "The Secret Plan"

With the *Dartmouth* refused a pass to safely sail out of Boston Harbor and to return her cargo of **British East India Company Tea**, time was running out and the Patriots exhausted all legal means to keep the ship from being unloaded. Since the arrival of the *Dartmouth* on November 28,

the **Sons of Liberty** had been secretly planning a last resort alternative measure to prevent the unloading of the British East India Company tea if all diplomatic negotiations with government officials failed.

Taking Action

Lieutenant Governor and Chief Justice of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson was the final word in regards to colonial policy in Massachusetts and with his refusal to cooperate with the people's demands, **Samuel Adams** declared, *"This meeting can do nothing more to save the country!"*.

With those words Adams addressed the thousands gathered at the **Old South Meeting House**, the meeting came to a close, and it was the signal for the Sons of Liberty to take action and carry out their plan. Cries of *"huzza!"* and *"make Boston Harbor a teapot tonight!"* resonated throughout the Old South Meeting House. With war whoops, members of the Sons of Liberty dressed in their best interpretations of **"Indian Dress"** emerged from the **Old South Meeting House**, mustered at Fort Hill, and marched to Griffin's Wharf.

An Eyewitness Account

An eyewitness to the **Boston Tea Party**, John Andrews, a merchant, described the events to Philadelphia merchant William Barrell in a December 18, 1773 letter:

"They mustered, I'm told, upon Fort Hill, to the number of about two hundred, and proceeded, two by two, to Griffin's wharf, where Hall, Bruce, and Coffin lay, each with 114 chests of the ill-fated article on board... and before nine o'clock in the evening, every chest from on board the three vessels was knocked to pieces and flung over the sides. They say the actors were Indians from Narragansett. Whether they were or not, to a transient observer they appeared as such, being clothed in blankets with the heads muffled, and copper-colored countenances, being each armed with a hatchet or axe, and pair pistols, nor was their dialect different from what I conceive these geniuses to speak, as their jargon was unintelligible to all but themselves..."

~ John Andrews

The Symbolism of the "Indian Dress"

Reports from the time describe the participants as dressed as **Mohawks** or Narragansett Indians. The disguise was more symbolic in nature; they knew they would be recognized as non-Indians. The act of wearing **"Indian Dress"** was to express through symbolism to the world that the American colonists identified themselves as "Americans" and no longer considered themselves British subjects. They were not dressed as Indians in the classic sense with headdresses and full authentic regalia; rather they wore wool blankets matchcoat style, painted their faces with soot, and employed other modes of dress commonly known at the time as "Indian dress" which had been adopted by soldiers during the French and Indian War. Boston Tea Party participant **George Hewes** dictated his account of the Boston Tea Party many years after the event and described his "Indian dress" as the following: *"It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hatchet, which I and my associates denominated the tomahawk, with which, and a club, after having painted my face and hands with coal dust in the shop of a blacksmith, I repaired to Griffin's wharf, where the ships lay that contained the tea. When I first appeared in the street after being thus disguised, I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me and marched in order to the place of our destination."*

The Amount of Participants

It is estimated hundreds took part in the Boston Tea Party, and the event was witnessed by thousands. For fear of punishment, many **participants of the Boston Tea Party** remained anonymous for many years after the event. **John Adams** would later recount he did not know the identity of a single participant. To date it is known 116 people are documented to have participated. Not all of the participants of the Boston Tea Party are known; many carried the secret of their participation to their graves. The participants were made up of males from all walks of colonial society. Many were from Boston or the surrounding area, but some participants are documented to have come from as far away as Worcester in central Massachusetts, and Maine. The vast majority were of English descent, but men of Irish, Scottish, French, Portuguese, and African ancestry are documented to have participated. The participants were of all ages, but the majority of the documented participants were under the age of forty. Sixteen participants were teenagers, and only nine men were above the age of forty.

December 16, 1773: “The Destruction of the Tea” The Boston Tea Party

340 chests of **British East India Company Tea**, weighing over 92,000 pounds (roughly 46 tons), onboard the **Beaver**, **Dartmouth**, and **Eleanor** were smashed open by the **Sons of Liberty** armed with an assortment of axes and dumped into Boston Harbor the night of December 16, 1773. The cargo was worth more than \$1,700,000 dollars in today’s money. Merchant John Andrews wrote in his December 18, 1773 letter, *“ten thousand pounds sterling of the East India Company’s tea was destroyed the night, or rather the evening before last...”* The British East India Company reported £9,659 worth of damage caused by the **Boston Tea Party**.

No Damage and No Theft

Besides the destruction of the tea, historical accounts record no damage was done to any of the **three ships**, the crew or any other items onboard the ships except for one broken padlock. The padlock was the personal property of one of the ships’ captains, and was promptly replaced the next day by the Patriots. Great care was taken by the Sons of Liberty to avoid **the destruction of the tea** personal property – save for the cargo of British East India Company Tea. John Andrews recorded, *“...to Griffin’s wharf, where Hall, Bruce, and Coffin lay, each with 114 chest of the ill-fated article on board; the two former with only that article, but the latter, arrived at the wharf only the day before, was freighted with a large quantity of other goods, which they took the greatest care not to injure in the least...”*

Nothing was stolen or looted from the ships, not even the tea. One participant tried to steal some tea but was reprimanded and stopped. The Sons of Liberty were very careful about how the action was carried out and made sure nothing besides the **tea was damaged**. After the destruction of the tea, the participants swept the decks of the ships clean and anything that was moved was put back in its proper place. The crews of the ships attested to the fact there had been no damage to any of the ships except for the **destruction of their cargoes of tea**. Boston Tea Party participant **George Hewes** remembered the following:

“The commander of the division to which I belonged... ordered me to go to the captain and demand of him the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles. I made the demand accordingly, and the captain promptly replied, and delivered the articles; but requested me at the same time to do no damage to the ship or rigging. We then were ordered by our commanders to open the hatches and take out all

the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately proceeded to execute his orders, first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as thoroughly to expose them to the effects of the water. In about three hours from the time we went on board, we had thus broken and thrown overboard every **tea chest** to be found in the ship, while those in the other ships were disposing of the tea in the same way, at the same time. We were surrounded by British armed ships, but no attempt was made to resist us... During the time we were throwing the tea overboard, there were several attempts made by some of the citizens of Boston and its vicinity to carry off small quantities of it for their family use. To effect that object, they would watch their opportunity to snatch up a handful from the deck, where it became plentifully scattered, and put it into their pockets. One Captain O'Connor, whom I well knew, came on board for that purpose, and when he supposed he was not noticed, filled his pockets, and also the lining of his coat. But I had detected him and gave information to the captain of what he was doing. We were ordered to take him into custody, and just as he was stepping from the vessel, I seized him by the skirt of his coat, and in attempting to pull him back, I tore it off; but, springing forward, by a rapid effort he made his escape. He had, however, to run a gauntlet through the crowd upon the wharf, each one, as he passed, giving him a kick or a stroke. Another attempt was made to save a little tea from the ruins of the cargo by a tall, aged man who wore a large cocked hat and white wig, which was fashionable at that time. He had slightly slipped a little into his pockets, but being detected, they seized him and, taking his hat and wig from his head, threw them, together with the tea, of which they had emptied his pockets into the water. In consideration of his advanced age, he was permitted to escape, with now and then a slight kick..."

~George Hewes

December 17, 1773 to April 19, 1775: "The Aftermath"

Many of the **Boston Tea Party** participants fled Boston immediately after the destruction of the tea to avoid arrest. **George Hewes** remembered, "*We then quietly retired to our several places of residence, without having any conversation with each other, or taking any measures to discover who were our associates... There appeared to be an understanding that each individual should volunteer his services, keep his own secret, and risk the consequence for himself. No disorder took place during that transaction, and it was observed at that time that the stillest night ensued that Boston had enjoyed for many months.*" Only one member of the **Sons of Liberty**, Francis Akeley, was caught and imprisoned for his participation. He was the only person ever to be arrested for the Boston Tea Party. No one died during the Boston Tea Party. There was no violence and no confrontation between the Patriots, the Tories and the British soldiers garrisoned in Boston. None of the members of the crews of the **Beaver**, **Dartmouth**, or **Eleanor** were harmed. This was the first organized act of rebellion against British rule and the Sons of Liberty were very careful about how the Boston Tea Party was planned and executed.

This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity in this last Effort of the Patriots that I greatly admire. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, so intrepid, and so inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an Epocha in History.

~ John Adams, December 17, 1773

The News Spreads

Paul Revere rode to Manhattan, New York, arriving on December 21 to deliver the news of the Boston Tea Party. The news the Boston **Committee of Correspondence** sent to New York was the following: "*We had a greater Meeting of the Body than ever. The Country coming in from Twenty Miles round, and every Step was taken that was practicable for returning the Teas. The Moment it was known out of Doors, that Mr. Rotch could not obtain a Pass for his Ship by the Castle, a Number of*

People huzza'd in the Street, and in a very little Time, every Ounce of the Teas on board of Capt. Hall, Bruce, and Coffin, was immersed in the Bay, without the least Injury to private Property. The Spirit of the People on this Occasion surprised all Parties, who viewed the Scene."

Ensuring the Tea was Destroyed

For weeks after the **Boston Tea Party**, Boston Harbor smelled as a result of over 92,000 pounds of tea dumped into the harbor. To keep looters from salvaging the **British East India Company Tea** dumped into Boston Harbor, the **Sons of Liberty** would go out in boats and hit the tea with oars and clubs in an attempt to sink it in hopes of making the tea useless. **George Hewes** remembered, *"The next morning, after we had cleared the ships of the tea, it was discovered that very considerable quantities of it were floating upon the surface of the water; and to prevent the possibility of any of its being saved for use, a number of small boats were manned by sailors and citizens, who rowed them into those parts of the harbor wherever the tea was visible, and by beating it with oars and paddles so thoroughly drenched it as to render its entire destruction inevitable."*

News Reaches London

The news of the Boston Tea Party reached London, England on January 20, 1774, and as a result the British shut down Boston Harbor until all of the 340 chests of British East India Company tea were paid for. This was implemented under the 1774 **Intolerable Acts** and known as the Boston Port Act. In addition to the Boston Port Act, the Intolerable Acts also implemented the **Massachusetts Government Act**, the **Administration of Justice Act**, the **Quartering Act**, and the **Quebec Act**. American colonists responded with protests and coordinated resistance by convening the **First Continental Congress** in September and October of 1774 to petition Britain to repeal the Intolerable Acts.

Sparking the American Revolution

The Boston **Tea Party was the first significant act of defiance** by American colonists and is a defining event in American history. The implication and impact of the Boston Tea Party were enormous ultimately leading to the start of the **American Revolution** which began in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775.

"The Dye is cast: The People have passed the River and cutt away the Bridge: last Night Three Cargoes of Tea, were emptied into the Harbour. This is the grandest, Event, which has ever yet happened Since, the Controversy, with Britain, opened!"

~ John Adams to James Warren, December 17, 1773