

# Dickinson, Adams and the Seizure of John Hancock's Ship

## **I. Introduction**

Brief overview of John Dickinson as a key colonial thinker and writer.

Context: Rising tensions between the American colonies and British Parliament.

Importance of Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania as a literary and political event.

## **II. John Dickinson's Perspective**

### **1. Personal Introduction in the Letters**

Dickinson's humble lifestyle and focus on contentment and gratitude.

His belief in moderate, rational discourse.

### **2. Critique of British Parliamentary Acts**

Focus on the New York Restraining Act (response to noncompliance with the Quartering Act).

Argument against Parliamentary overreach:

Fear of broader implications (supply of goods, arms, etc.).

### **3. Conditions for Resistance**

Discussion of justified use of force.

Force only acceptable if further submission would destroy happiness and liberty.

## **III. Dickinson's Call to Action**

Appeals to other colonial leaders (e.g., James Otis Jr. and the Sons of Liberty).

Emphasis on unity among colonies and constitutional methods of resistance.

## **IV. Samuel Adams and the Massachusetts Circular Letter**

### **1. Massachusetts Assembly's Petition to King George**

Key arguments:

Taxation without representation.

Economic contributions of colonies.

Emphasis on loyalty to Britain while opposing unjust taxation.

### **2. British Response to the Circular Letter**

Demand for its retraction and dissolution of the Massachusetts Assembly.

Assembly's refusal (92 to 17 vote).

## **V. Rising Tensions in Boston**

### **1. John Hancock and the Seizure of the Liberty**

Targeting of Hancock by customs agents.

Protests sparked by the ship's seizure.

Mob violence and resistance to British authority.

### **2. Arrival of British Military Forces**

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Customs agents seek military protection.  
Deployment of troops and warships to Boston.

### **VI. Colonial Unity and Resistance**

#### 1. NonImportation Agreements

Economic boycotts as a form of peaceful protest.  
Spread of the agreements among colonies.

#### 2. Samuel Adams' Leadership

Organization of town meetings and assemblies.  
Call for collaboration across Massachusetts and beyond.

### **VII. Conclusion**

Dickinson's influence as a voice of moderation and constitutional protest.  
The growing shift from peaceful resistance to calls for armed defense.  
Prelude to the American Revolution: How seizure of The Liberty and following events set the stage for later conflicts.

## **The Seizing of The Liberty**

(from the Sons of the American Revolution)

John Hancock's ship Liberty is confiscated

June 10, 1768, John Hancock's ship Liberty is confiscated for alleged smuggling. Many of the measures of Parliament with which the American colonies were in disagreement were created in order to raise revenue. Smuggling was a vast enterprise in the thirteen colonies and many of Parliament's measures were directed at reducing it. Smugglers evading customs officials and the taxes they enforced reduced the Royal Treasury's income.

On May 9, 1768, a ship owned by John Hancock sailed into Boston Harbor. The following day, the Liberty's goods were inspected and the customs officials suspected Hancock of smuggling. The reason was that the ship only carried 25 barrels of Madeira wine, but it had the capacity for much more. They alleged that Hancock must have unloaded the rest of the cargo during the night before the goods were examined, but they had no evidence. Two customs officials were stationed on the ship during the night and they said nothing was unloaded... at first.

This followed another incident in April during which Hancock's ship Lydia was boarded, also for suspected smuggling. In that incident, Hancock physically had the customs officials removed from the ship because they did not have a proper warrant. Suit was filed against Hancock, but later dropped because of the missing warrant. This may have made Hancock a marked man in the eyes of the humiliated customs officials.

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A month after the original investigation into the Liberty's alleged smuggling, one of the customs officials changed his story, saying some cargo actually had been removed in the night and the officials were forced to remain silent. On June 10, the Liberty was impounded, along with a new shipment of goods already loaded on her. The Liberty was hauled into the harbor and placed under guard by the HMS Romney, a British warship. When the Liberty was confiscated, a riot broke out in Boston. The homes of several customs officials were destroyed, causing several of them and their families to flee to the Romney.

Two suits were filed against Hancock, the first led to the permanent confiscation of the Liberty, which was put into the customs service and later burned by angry Rhode Island residents the following year. The second suit alleged Hancock smuggled wine and charged him for lost customs revenue plus damages. Hancock was represented by a young attorney named John Adams who would one day be president. The suit was finally dropped for lack of evidence.

It should be noted that no evidence has ever surfaced that Hancock was involved in any smuggling at all, even though he has that reputation. Of course, no records would have been kept about smuggling because it was illegal. Boston officials had already been calling for more security as they began enforcing the Townshend Acts. Boston had earned the ire of Parliament by issuing a circular letter calling for all the colonies to resist the Townshend Acts. The Liberty Incident only reinforced Britain's decision to occupy Boston with military troops in October, 1768, to enforce customs laws, protect officials and reign in the rowdy citizens. The occupation would lead to the Boston Massacre in March, 1770.

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*"... a great Uproar was raised in Boston, on Account of the Unlading in the Night of a Cargo of Wines from the Sloop Liberty from Madeira, belonging to Mr. Hancock, without paying the Customs. Mr. Hancock was prosecuted upon a great Number of Libells for Penalties, upon Acts of Parliament, amounting to Ninety or an hundred thousand Pounds Sterling. He thought fit to engage me as his Counsell and Advocate; and a painfull Drudgery I had of his cause. There were few days through the whole Winter, when I was not summoned to attend the Court of Admiralty. It seemed as if the Officers of the Crown were determined to examine the whole Town as Witnesses. Almost every day a fresh Witness was to be examined upon Interrogatories. They interrogated many of his near Relations and most intimate Friends and threatened to summons his amiable and venerable Aunt, the Relict of his Uncle Thomas Hancock, who had left the greatest Part of his Fortune to him. I was thoroughly weary and disgusted with the Court, the Officers of the Crown, the Cause, and even with the tyrannical Bell that dongled me out of my House every Morning; and this odious Cause was suspended at last only by the Battle of Lexington, which put an End for ever to all such Prosecutions." -John Adams, Autobiography*

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This protracted admiralty case, Advocate General Jonathan Sewall v. John Hancock, occurred in 1768–1769. It followed the seizure in Boston harbor of Hancock's sloop *Liberty*, 10 June 1768, by members of the crew of the *Romney* man-of-war at the instance of the new board of customs commissioners, not for smuggling but for failing to obtain a permit for a cargo it had loaded. The *Liberty* was condemned in August and sold in September. The following month, after British troops had garrisoned Boston (also at the behest of the customs commissioners), a suit was filed against Hancock, not by a grand jury indictment but by an "information" and an admiralty court order, for the enormous sum of £9,000. The charge was for smuggling wine that had been brought in earlier by the *Liberty*. JA's notes on this case are in his "Admiralty Book" (Adams Papers, Microfilms, Reel No. 184) and are printed, with introductory commentary and valuable references, in [Quincy, Reports](#), p. 456–463.

In his stubborn and eloquent defense before Judge Auchmuty, JA questioned the validity of the legislation under which the case was tried, because it denied his client the right of a jury trial and thus, by repealing "Magna Charta, as far as America is concerned," "degraded [Hancock] below the Rank of an Englishman." The defense was successful. At the end of the record appears this notation, dated 25 March 1769: "The Advocate General prays leave to Retract this Information and says our Sovereign Lord the King will prosecute no further hereon. Allow'd" (Suffolk co. Court House, Records, Court of Vice Admiralty, Province of Massachusetts Bay, 1765–1772).