



A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those “heirs of all the ages” who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.

Written by Mildred Tenney Handy

Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society.

June-July 1973 — Volume I, Lesson Fourteen

The Birth Of Independence

LESSON IDEA

To make American history in the 1700s more vivid, to show how the Revolutionary War began and why the Declaration of Independence was written.

PREPARATION

Prepare cards for each member of the family containing the Patrick Henry quote. (See page three.) For grade schoolers, shorten the quote to begin with: “Is life so dear...?” Smaller youngsters could be given the four-line ditty describing the Boston Tea Party.

* * * * *

TONIGHT WE ARE TAKING a time trip — back more than 200 years to the time of the English giant and the American dwarf. On the far side of the Atlantic Ocean sat prosperous, powerful England and on this side, the struggling American colonists who had managed to hack a thin strip of civilization out of a huge expanse of wilderness and stretch it as far north as New Hampshire and as far south as Georgia.

The Americans had close ties to the English in 1765 and were loyal subjects of the British King, George III. They had brought fame and wealth to the English giant by building towns and businesses under the British flag and fighting England’s enemies on the American continent. In return, they enjoyed more freedom than any other people in the civilized world — most especially the privilege of electing their own assemblies, which levied taxes to support the colonial governments.

But the independence with which they ran their businesses, trading such things as tobacco, salt, molasses, cotton, shoes, and furniture with each other and with

countries like Spain or Africa or the West Indies, irritated the English parent. Americans were supposed to work for the profit of England — not for themselves. To assure this, Parliament had passed the Navigation Acts (which were a series of laws extending over a period of 150 years) and, in 1733, the Molasses Act.

BUT THE AMERICANS continued to resist being treated as dependent children confined to the English nursery, and the mother country continued to be indignant at the spirited growth and independence of her colonies. Tempers flared when England passed the Stamp Act in 1765 — a new tax law which ignored the long-standing colonial system of representative taxation and thrust the parental hand directly into the colonial pocket.

Suppose that were to happen to us. Suppose that after years of freedom, the head of the United Nations suddenly decreed a Stamp Act as Britain did in 1765; and every time we bought a newspaper or magazine we were forced to pay the additional price of a UN stamp for the paper? [*Encourage everyone to give his reaction.*] Suppose when one of you graduated from college we had to buy a \$10 UN stamp for your diploma before it was officially yours? [*Again, ask for reactions. Point out how dictatorial it would be.*]

The Stamp Act was not only a dictatorial practice but also a financial hardship for many. Some newspapers and publishers were forced out of business. In the last edition of the *Pennsylvania Journal*, publisher William Bradford printed a skull and crossbones in the spot reserved for the British stamp. On the front page, he explained his situation to his subscribers:

“I am sorry,” he wrote, “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 so that he could not only survive during the interval but be better prepared to proceed again with his paper whenever possible — which he hoped would be soon.

And it was soon — a short four-and-one-half months — for the news of the colonists’ anger had traveled the ocean and caused Parliament to change its mind about stamps. But not about taxes. Stubbornly, the English Lords declared their right to tax colonial subjects directly even though no American was allowed to vote on how much or what kind. Americans violently disagreed. It wasn’t that they were unwilling to pay taxes. Colonial assemblies and town meetings had been levying taxes for years. But it was colonial money voted by colonial representatives; and in most colonies, it paid the governor’s salary. Which meant that if the King’s executive in America opposed the will of the colonists, it was a simple matter to “forget” to vote the governor’s pay and, thus, to bring his actions into line.

FOR ENGLAND suddenly to transfer taxing power from American hands into its own was an outrage — and Britain’s idea of representation was an insult. The royal argument was that the colonists were as well represented in Parliament as the people of England because there were farmers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and tradesmen among its members. Which meant, by British reasoning, that all farmers, all doctors, all lawyers, all merchants, and all tradesmen were represented whether they lived in England or the colonies.

Applying that thinking today would mean the UN General Assembly in New York — to which our country belongs — would have the right to tax Americans directly simply because members of the United Nations have the same types of jobs or professions that people in our country have. How would you like to have half of your allowance taken in UN taxes and told you were “represented” because some of the people in the General Assembly were students? Regardless of how much or how little was taken, would you think it fair? [*Name the specific amount of each family member’s allowance*

and ask each what he would think if the UN took half of it or more. Make it clear that there would be no chance 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 England demanded of her colonists which upset them, but the fact that it was taken without their consent.

A new English taxing scheme — called the Townshend Acts — started in 1767. Now an extra premium was required for the purchase of glass, paper, paints, and tea. In protest, more and more colonists refused to buy *anything* that was British-made. Patriots wore homespun clothes and scorned those who dressed in linens and woolens imported from England.

PROTEST OR NOT, the taxes stayed as feelings grew more explosive each year. Town meetings were called; patriotic groups organized; and news was carried by riders from colony to colony over country roads and woodland trails.

In December, 1773, three British ships moored in Boston harbor — loaded with three hundred and forty-two chests of tea — tea that could not be unloaded until the royal tax was paid, and tea that merchants dared not accept with the tax, regardless of its low price; for to do so would be to risk public outrage. The dilemma was solved on December 16 under cover of night by about fifty young men dressed as “wild Indians” — John Hancock was one of them — who boarded the ships and dumped the untaxed tea into the water. This was the famous Boston Tea Party; and Samuel Adams, the originator of the patriotic Committees of Correspondence, sent messengers dashing in all directions with news of it. A popular ditty celebrating the event ended with these lines:

We made a plaguey mess of tea
In one of the biggest dishes
I mean we steeped it in the sea
And treated all the fishes!

Five months later, in May, 1774, England retaliated with the Port Bill. The harbor of Boston was to be closed to all shipping on the first day of June if the citizens did not pay for the tea destroyed by the “wild Indians.” To do so would be to admit that Parliament had the right to tax the colonists, and this admission the Massachusetts Committees of Correspondence would never make. Samuel Adams wrote a circular letter notifying the other colonies of the “we-do-not-intend-to-

pay” decision. All rallied to the needs of Boston, realizing that if Massachusetts lost its freedom, others would suffer the same fate. Colonies as far away as Georgia sent rice, money, and supplies; church bells tolled; flags flew at half-mast. [*Ask family members to picture what would happen in your town if the UN were to close the harbors or highways because a tax on 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 us today.*]

The closing of the Boston harbor was the fuse that ignited the powder keg of protest and led to the calling of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in September, 1774. Every colony except Georgia (which was sparsely populated and more dependent on England than the others) sent delegates to the Congress — men like Samuel Adams, George Washington, Patrick Henry, and John Adams.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Edmund Burke was one of several English statesmen who were sympathetic to 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*, available at 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.

AFTER 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. No mention was made 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 for justice were flicked aside by the British King and Parliament like so much waste paper. By February, the English government had declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion and, at Salem, had made an unsuccessful attempt to seize colonial military supplies.

On March 22, 1775, from the British side of the ocean, Edmund Burke, longtime friend of America in Parliament, 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, Virginia, to deliver his spirited “We Must Fight” speech to the second revolutionary convention of Virginia.

Beginning with a recap of wrongs suffered by the col-

onists, the fiery Virginian ended his speech by demolishing the arguments for peace with these now 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? — 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 ready to leave for the May 10 meeting of the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. On April 14, the British commander, General Gage, was ordered to break up the colonial rebellion. Four nights later British troops were on the march to capture guns and powder which the colonists had stored at Concord — a move which the Boston patriots were expecting. The only question was which route would be taken — land or water.

From the tower of Boston’s North Church a watchman eyed the British movement and flashed the lantern signal which sent William Dawes and Paul Revere riding to Lexington and Concord to awaken the people, warn Adams and Hancock, and call out the militia. As April 19 drew to a close, most of the colonists’ guns and powder were secure; Adams and Hancock were safely on their way to Philadelphia; shots had been exchanged; and the War for Independence had begun.

In Philadelphia, Congress formed the Continental Army and appointed George Washington its commander-in-chief. Three months later, on 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 the same time, Congress was sending the Olive Branch Petition to King George — a final appeal for peace and justice.

In August, England smashed the 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 royal proclamation in late 1775 closing the colonies to all trade effective March 1, 1776.

Still the talk of independence — a total break with England — was slow to come. It was a difficult decision for the colonists to make. To do so meant to become traitors and, hence, criminals in the courts of England.

Concluding Thought

There is nothing in the story of the American revolution to indicate that the colonists acted hastily or hot-headedly. Ten years elapsed from the time of the Stamp Act in 1765 to the first battle of the Revolutionary War in 1775. During those ten years, every lawful means was tried to correct English injustices, all without success. Even as the colonial army trained for battle, Congress petitioned for reforms and another year lapsed before the final break came.

Looking Ahead

Next week we'll take a closer look at the dramatic events in July of 1776 that marked our independence and birth as a nation.

DURING THE WEEK

After the lesson tonight, ask each member of the family to memorize all or part of Patrick Henry's quote or the Boston Tea Party ditty. Cards for this purpose should be prepared prior to the lesson and the quotes adjusted in length or kind to suit the age and capabilities of the family. Use the dinner or breakfast hours to test the memorization progress and to review the events described in this lesson.

The Family Heritage Series

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

The Family Heritage Series is an outstanding series of weekly lessons for the home, written to stimulate interest and spark discussion about the legacy we have received.

The Family Heritage Series is for all parents with school-age children. It is sure to be valued by all Americans who participate in its Heritage Hour discussions, and would be especially welcomed as a gift.

The Family Heritage Series is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. Address all inquiries to The John Birch Society, 770 N Westhill Blvd, Appleton, WI 54914. Please visit the website at jbs.org for more information. For more books about this topic, please visit westernisland-publishing.com.

© 2025 by The John Birch Society