

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT THE BOSTON MASSACRE?

Paul Revere's famous engraving of the Boston Massacre played fast and loose with the facts. While the event occurred on a cold winter's night, the engraving features a clear sky and no ice or snow. Crispus Attucks, the revolution's first martyr, was African American, although the engraving depicts him as a white man seen lying on the ground closest to the British soldiers. Popular propaganda such as this engraving—and even dubbing the incident a “massacre”—did much to stoke anti-British sentiment in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War.



Company, a British exporter of tea. The colonists' boycott had left that trading company with more than 18 million pounds of tea in its warehouses. To rescue British merchants from disaster, in 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Act, which granted a monopoly to the financially strapped East India Company to sell tea imported from Britain. This act allowed the company to funnel business to American merchants loyal to the Crown, thereby undercutting dissident colonial merchants who could sell only tea imported from other nations. This practice drove down the price of tea and hurt colonial merchants who were forced to buy tea at higher prices from other sources.

When the next shipment of tea from Britain arrived in Boston, the colonists responded by throwing the Boston Tea Party; other colonies held similar tea parties up and down the eastern coast. King George III flew into a rage upon hearing of the actions of his disloyal subjects. “The die is now cast,” the king told his prime minister. “The colonies must either submit or triumph.”

King George III's first act of retaliation was to persuade Parliament to pass the Coercive Acts of 1774. Known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts, they contained a key provision calling for a total blockade of Boston Harbor, cutting off Bostonians' access to many foodstuffs until restitution was made for the tea. Another provision reinforced the Quartering Act. It gave Massachusetts's royal governor the authority to house British soldiers in the homes of Boston citizens, allowing Britain to send an additional 4,000 soldiers in a show of force.

The First and Second Continental Congresses

The British could never have guessed how the cumulative impact of these actions would unite the colonists. The Committees of Correspondence spread the word, and the people of Boston received food and money from all over the thirteen colonies. The tax itself was no longer the key issue; now the extent of British authority over the colonies presented the far more important question. At the request of the colonial

assemblies of Massachusetts and Virginia, all but Georgia's colonial assembly agreed to select a group of delegates to attend a continental congress authorized to communicate with the king on behalf of the now-united colonies.

The **First Continental Congress**, comprising fifty-six delegates, met in Philadelphia from September 5 to October 26, 1774. The colonists had yet to think of breaking with Great Britain; at this point, they simply wanted to iron out their differences with the king. By October, they had agreed on a series of resolutions to oppose the Coercive Acts and to establish a formal organization to boycott British goods. The Congress also drafted a Declaration of Rights and Resolves, which called for colonial rights of petition and assembly, trial by peers, freedom from a standing army, and the selection of representative councils to levy taxes. The Congress further agreed that if the King did not capitulate to its demands, it would meet again in Philadelphia in May 1775.

King George III refused to yield, tensions continued to rise, and a Second Continental Congress was deemed necessary. Before it could meet, fighting broke out on April 19, 1775, at **Lexington and Concord**, Massachusetts, with what was later called "the shot heard 'round the world." Eight colonial soldiers, called Minutemen, were killed, and 16,000 British troops besieged Boston.

When the **Second Continental Congress** convened in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, delegates were united by their increased hostility to Great Britain. In a final attempt to avert conflict, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Olive Branch Petition on July 5, 1775, asking the king to end hostilities. King George III rejected the petition and sent an additional 20,000 troops to quell the rebellion; he labeled all in attendance traitors to the king and subject to death.

In January 1776, **Thomas Paine** issued (at first anonymously) *Common Sense*, a pamphlet paid for by statesman Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, forcefully arguing for independence from Great Britain. In frank, easy-to-understand language, Paine denounced the corrupt British monarchy and offered reasons to break with Great Britain. "The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries 'Tis Time to Part,'" wrote Paine. *Common Sense*, widely read throughout the colonies, helped to change minds in a very short time. In its first three months of publication, *Common Sense* sold 120,000 copies—one for every thirteen people in the colonies.

Common Sense galvanized the American public against reconciliation. On May 15, 1776, Virginia became the first colony to call for independence. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia rose to move "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, and that all connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, dissolved." His three-part resolution—which called for independence, the formation of foreign alliances, and preparation of a plan of confederation—triggered hot debate among the delegates. A proclamation of independence from Great Britain constituted treason, a crime punishable by death. Although six of the thirteen colonies had already instructed their delegates to vote for independence, the Second Continental Congress was suspended to allow its delegates to return home to their respective colonial legislatures for final instructions. Independence was not a move the colonists took lightly.

The Declaration of Independence

The Congress set up committees to consider each point of Richard Henry Lee of Virginia's proposal. The Committee of Five (Chair **Thomas Jefferson**, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman) began work on the **Declaration of Independence**, which drew heavily on the works of the Enlightenment period. On July 2, 1776, twelve of the thirteen colonies (with New York abstaining) voted for independence. Two days later, on July 4th, the Second Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence. On July 9, 1776, the document, now with the approval of New York, was read aloud in Philadelphia.⁶

First Continental Congress

Meeting held in Philadelphia from September 5 to October 26, 1774, in which fifty-six delegates (from every colony except Georgia) adopted a resolution in opposition to the Coercive Acts.

Lexington and Concord

The first sites of armed conflict between revolutionaries and British soldiers, remembered for the "shot heard round the world" in 1775.

Second Continental Congress

Meeting that convened in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, at which it was decided that an army should be raised and George Washington of Virginia was named commander in chief.

Thomas Paine

The influential writer of *Common Sense*, a pamphlet that advocated for independence from Great Britain.

Common Sense

A pamphlet written by Thomas Paine that challenged the authority of the British government to govern the colonies.

Thomas Jefferson

Principle drafter of the Declaration of Independence; second vice president of the United States; third president of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Co-founder of the Democratic-Republican Party created to oppose Federalists.

Declaration of Independence

Document drafted largely by Thomas Jefferson in 1776 that proclaimed the right of the American colonies to separate from Great Britain.

social contract theory

The belief that governments exist based on the consent of the governed.

political culture

Commonly shared attitudes, behaviors, and core values about how government should operate.

In simple but eloquent language, the Declaration set out the reasons for separation of the colonies from Great Britain. Most of its stirring rhetoric drew heavily on the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophers, particularly the French Enlightenment theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the English philosopher John Locke. Locke's (as well as Rousseau's) theory of natural liberty and equality and his advocacy of **social contract theory**, which holds that governments exist based on the consent of the governed, heavily influenced Jefferson who was credited with primary authorship of the Declaration. According to Locke, people agree to set up a government largely for the protection of property rights, to preserve life and liberty, and to establish justice. Furthermore, argued Locke, individuals who give their consent to be governed have the right to resist or remove rulers who deviate from those purposes. Such a government exists for the good of its subjects and not for the benefit of those who govern. Thus, rebellion is the ultimate sanction against a government that violates the rights of its citizens.

It is easy to see the colonists' debt to John Locke. In Jefferson's stirring language, the Declaration of Independence proclaims:

- We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Jefferson and others in attendance at the Second Continental Congress wanted to have a document that would stand for all time, justifying their break with Great Britain and clarifying their notions of the proper form of government. So, the Declaration continued:

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

After its stirring preamble, the enumeration of the wrongs suffered by the colonists under British rule, its final words are apt. All pertain to the denial of personal rights and liberties, many of which would later be guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution through the Bill of Rights.

The Basic Tenets of American Democracy

The British had no written constitution. Delegates to the Second Continental Congress were attempting to codify many arrangements that had never before been expressed in legal terminology. Thus, a second committee of delegates sat down to draft a document creating a new government necessary to wage war and to reflect the unique **political culture** of the colonies. We define political culture as commonly shared attitudes, behaviors, and core values about how government should operate. American political culture emphasizes several key values.

Liberty and equality, borrowed from the French, who were to come to the colonists' aid in the Revolutionary War, are the most important characteristics of the American republican form of government. Popular consent, the principle that governments must draw their powers from the consent of the governed, is another distinguishing element of American political culture. So, too, is majority rule. This principle means that election of officials and transformation of policies into law will take place only if the majority (normally 50 percent of the total votes cast plus one) of citizens in any political unit support such changes. American democracy also places heavy importance on the individual. In the U.S. system, all individuals are deemed rational and fair and endowed "with certain unalienable rights." This is quite different from many European democracies and Canada to the north. Their respective governments are founded on the idea of group rights, minimizing those of individuals for the greater good.