

Webinar

The American Revolution

Dr. Richard Shiels

Associate Professor of History

The Ohio State University

January 16, 2010

How revolutionary was it?

- “There seems no doubt that the American Revolution was revolutionary. It belongs within a general category that includes the English Revolution of the 1640s, the French and Haitian revolutions of the 1790s, and twentieth-century revolutions in places as diverse as China, Mexico, Russia and Iran.”
- Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, pp.xiii-xiv

Why did some support, oppose?

- Does Countryman answer?
- Countrymen considers and combines two answers from other historians:
 1. Ideology
 2. Class conflict

The Story Begins in 1763

- Finally France defeated.
- England triumphant.
- Colonies benefit.
- England in debt.

Peace of Paris 1763



Precursors

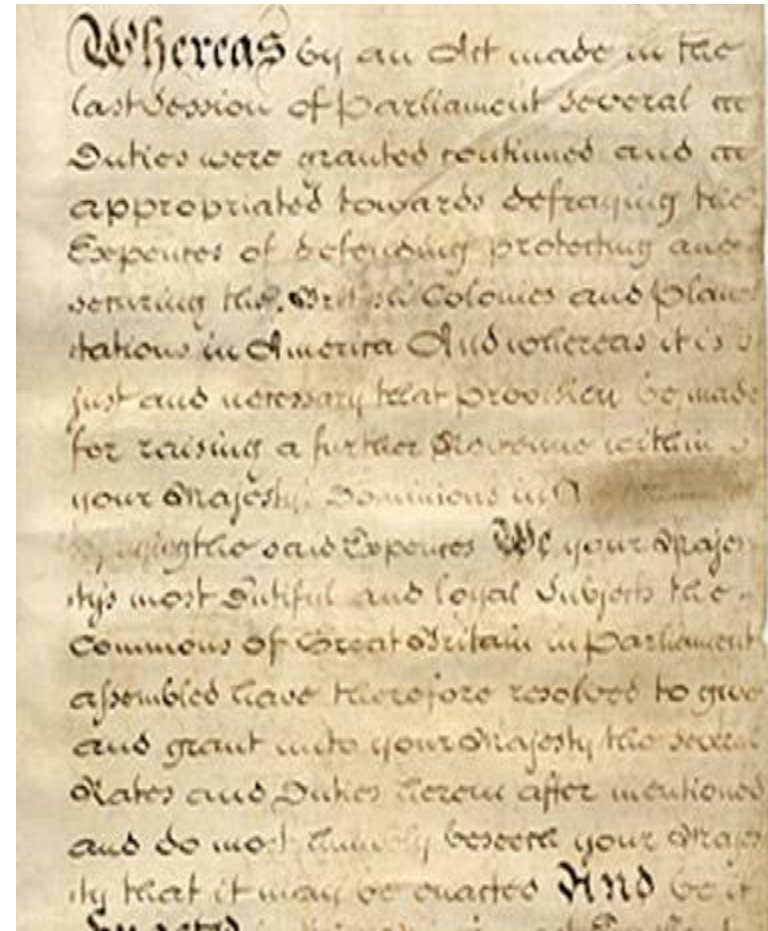
- Proclamation line.
- Sugar Act (technically, the Revenue Act)

Polarizing Events

- The Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend taxes, the Tea Act – these were the major mileposts along the road to imperial crisis. Had Parliament not passed them, there certainly would have been no revolution.

Stamp Act 1765

- An Act for granting and applying certain stamp duties....



Whereas by an Act made in the last Session of Parliament several Duties were granted continued and appropriated towards defraying the Expenses of defending protecting and settling the British Colonies and Plantations in America And whereas it is just and necessary that provision be made for raising a further Revenue within your Majesty's Dominions in England Scotland and Town of Berwick upon Tyne and the said Expenses We your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal Subjects the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament assembled have therefore resolved to give and grant unto your Majesty the several Rates and Duties therein after mentioned and do most humbly beseech your Majesty that it may be enacted And be it enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty in Parliament assembled that

Stamp Act 1765

required colonists to purchase stamps to be affixed to all legal documents, licenses, ship papers, newspapers and other publications and even playing cards/



Stamps





Townshend Taxes

- Parliament wondered why Americans opposed the Stamp Act after a century of accepting taxes on trans-Atlantic trade.
- Franklin answered: we will “external taxes,” not “internal.”
- Parliament repealed the Stamp Act but passed the “Townshend Duties” – taxes on imported goods (textiles; china; tea.)

Tea Act

- Americans boycott anything taxed by the Townshend Duties.
- Parliament repeals most Townshend Duties – but not tax on tea.
- Then Parliament passes the Tea Act, which Americans misunderstand to be an effort to lure them into paying the tax.

Historians focus on the Americans

Whig and neo-Whig school. Focus on ideas, principles – therefore, focus on the educated elites and assume that ordinary people agreed. Assume American consensus.

Progressive and neo-progressive school. Focus on experience, struggle, class – ordinary people fighting for their own interests. Assume class conflict among Americans.

Ideas, Whig ideology

- “The eighteenth-century literate elite lived in a different mental world. They used terms that we also use, such as *liberty*, *virtue* and *corruption*, but they did not necessarily mean what we mean by them.”
- Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, p.54

Intellectual sources

- Italian Renaissance.
- Example: *virtue* connoted not sexual morality but tough independence, physical strength, military courage and public spirit. Virtue was impossible if a man owed his well-being to someone else.

Intellectual sources

- Medieval England.
- Example. *Freedom* not assumed to be a natural or human right, but the right of English subjects.
- Example: *Liberty* is good but can only be enjoyed in specific social conditions and these conditions are easily lost.

Intellectual sources

- 17th-18th century England.
- Example: Britons are uniquely free but live in constant danger that freedom will be lost.
- Radical Whigs constantly warn of conspiracy by monarchs and ministers – plots to take away our freedom, to establish tyranny.

Go to texts

- John Dickinson, *Letters of a Farmer....* To illustrate the notion of virtue.
- Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress to illustrate freedom as rights of Englishmen.
- Summary View to illustrate suspicion of conspiracy.

Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress

October 19, 1765

The members of this Congress, sincerely devoted, with the warmest sentiments of affection and duty to His Majesty's Person and Government, inviolably attached to the present happy establishment of the Protestant succession, and with minds deeply impressed by a sense of the present and impending misfortunes of the British colonies on this continent; having considered as maturely as time will permit the circumstances of the said colonies, esteem it our indispensable duty to make the following declarations of our humble opinion, respecting the most essential rights and liberties Of the colonists, and of the grievances under which they labour, by reason of several late Acts of Parliament.

- That His Majesty's subjects in these colonies, owe the same allegiance to the Crown of Great-Britain, that is owing from his subjects born within the realm, and all due subordination to that august body the Parliament of Great Britain.
-
- That His Majesty's liege subjects in these colonies, are entitled to all the inherent rights and liberties of his natural born subjects within the kingdom of Great-Britain.
-
- 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.
-
- That the people of these colonies are not, and from their local circumstances cannot be, represented in the House of Commons in Great-Britain.
-
- That the only representatives of the people of these colonies, are persons chosen therein by themselves, and that no taxes ever have been, or can be constitutionally imposed on them, but by their respective legislatures.
-
- That all supplies to the Crown, being free gifts of the people, it is unreasonable and inconsistent with the principles and spirit of the British Constitution, for the people of Great-Britain to grant to His Majesty the property of the colonists.

- That trial by jury is the inherent and invaluable right of every British subject in these colonies.
-
- That the late Act of Parliament, entitled, An Act for granting and applying certain Stamp Duties, and other Duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, etc., by imposing taxes on the inhabitants of these colonies, and the said Act, and several other Acts, by extending the jurisdiction of the courts of Admiralty beyond its ancient limits, have a manifest tendency to subvert the rights and liberties of the colonists.
-
- That the duties imposed by several late Acts of Parliament, from the peculiar circumstances of these colonies, will be extremely burthensome and grievous; and from the scarcity of specie, the payment of them absolutely impracticable.
-
- That as the profits of the trade of these colonies ultimately center in Great-Britain, to pay for the manufactures which they are obliged to take from thence, they eventually contribute very largely to all supplies granted there to the Crown.
-
- That the restrictions imposed by several late Acts of Parliament, on the trade of these colonies, will render them unable to purchase the manufactures of Great-Britain.
-
- That the increase, prosperity, and happiness of these colonies, depend on the full and free enjoyment of their rights and liberties, and an intercourse with Great-Britain mutually affectionate and advantageous.
-
- That it is the right of the British subjects in these colonies, to petition the King, Or either House of Parliament.
- Lastly, That it is the indispensable duty of these colonies, to the best of sovereigns, to the mother country, and to themselves, to endeavour by a loyal and dutiful address to his Majesty, and humble applications to both Houses of Parliament, to procure the repeal of the Act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, of all clauses of any other Acts of Parliament, whereby the jurisdiction of the Admiralty is extended as aforesaid, and of the other late Acts for the restriction of American commerce.
-

Importance of ideas

- “Debating fundamental issues is an important part of the process of any revolution. When people begin doing it, that is one sign that something has gone profoundly wrong in their lives. But intense as it was, the debate that Britain’s policies provoked was only one of the elements that turned ordinary Americans from colonials to radicals” Countryman, p.66.

Crowd action: “often angry, sometimes ugly, but never anarchic”

- Stamp Act Riots in Boston, Aug. 1766.
- Stamp Act Riot in New York, Nov. 1766.
- Street fighting in New York, Jan. 1770.
- Boston Massacre, March, 1770.
- Boston Tea Party, Dec. 1773.
- New York Tea Party, March 1774.

Riots in Boston

“If inflated rhetoric, climbing the heights of principle, was a prime social weapon of the elite, crowd action was a prime social weapon of the ordinary people.”

Countryman, p. 70.



THE
RIGHTS
OF THE

British Colonies

Asserted and proved.



By JAMES OTIS, Esq.

The SECOND EDITION.

*Hæc omnia regis et ipsi plura sunt
Cæle unicus Traxerunt: et fœderis æquæ
Diximus leges, facillime in regno vacantes.
Cœlestis, si tantis esset, et meritis condant.*

VIRG.

BOSTON, NEW-ENGLAND, Printed
LONDON Reprinted, for J. ALMON, opposite the
Royal-Exchange, Piccadilly.

[Price Two Shillings.]

Tarring, feathering the agent



Popular leaders

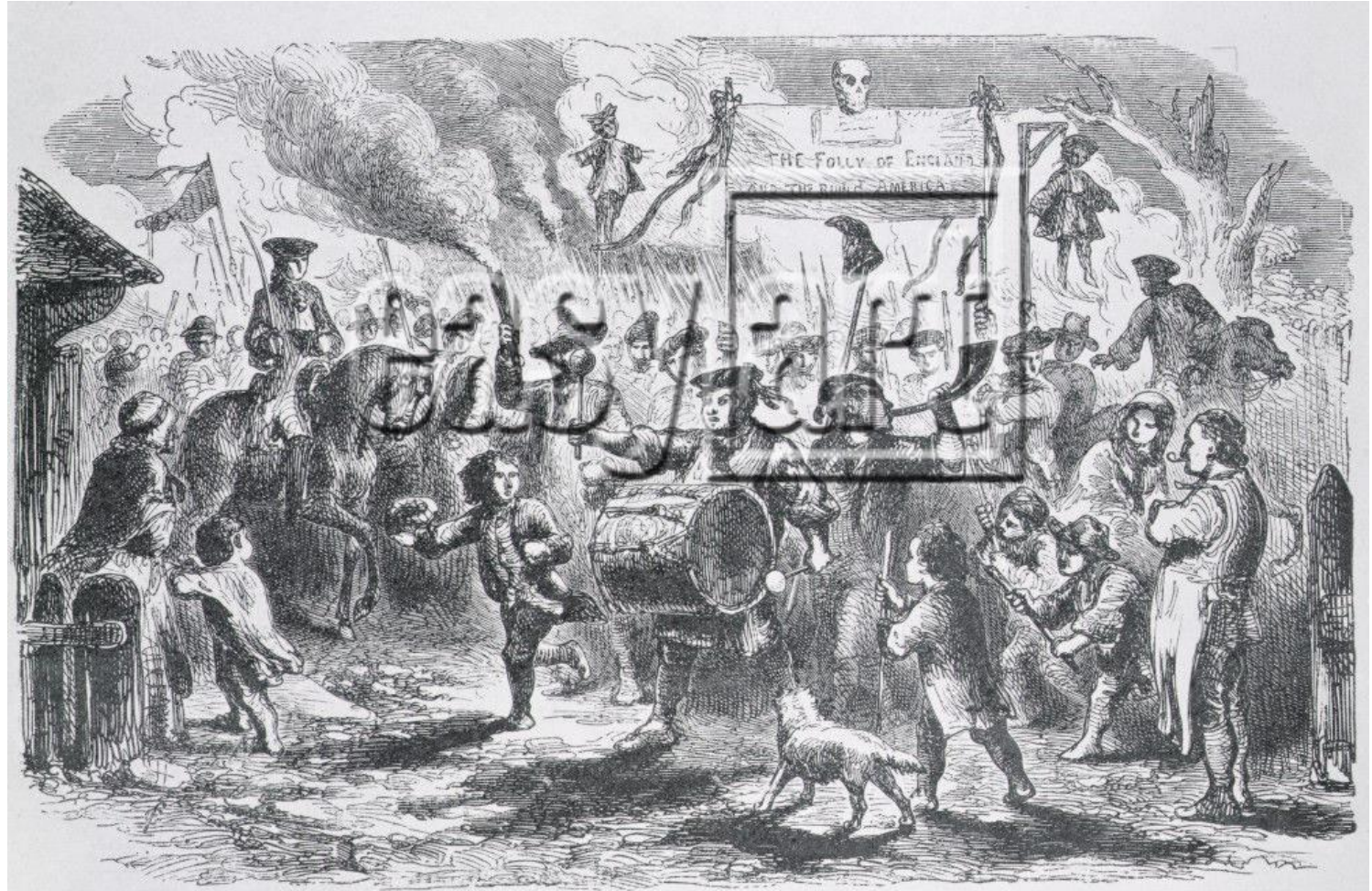
- Isaac Sears, Alexander McDougall in New York
– small merchants, first generation in town.
- Ebenezer MacIntosh, Paul Revere in Boston.
- “They began the job of fusing the imperial issue and domestic problems into the one grand question of what kind of place America would be.”
- Countryman, p.94.

Sam Adams



- Go to Governor Bernard's account of the second Boston Stamp Act Riot.

New York Riot



THE STAMP ACT RIOTS AT BOSTON.



- Threats to Stamp Agents in New York

Bristol Merchants request repeal

65

To the right Honorable the Lords Spiritual
and Temporal in Parliament assembled.

The humble Petition of the Master Wardens and Commonality of the Society
of Merchants Venturers of the City of Bristol under their Common Seal.

Sheweth

That their Trade to the Colonies is of the utmost Importance and from which their Kingdom
derives greater Advantages than from any other branch of Trade, as it takes up large Quantities of our Native
Commodities, and thereby supports many Thousands of our Manufactures.

That the said Colonies have their Trade to your Majesty's Colonies in the West Indies is involved in a
general Calamity, without of utter ruin several Millions are now owing from the Colonies which they
declare themselves in the present Situation of Affairs to be unable to pay, and in which your Majesty's
Advances total to the amount of several hundred thousand Pounds.

That the Colonies not only declare themselves unable to pay such their present Debts, but have absolutely
declined sending Orders for any more Goods & have countermanded others already sent, so that the said
will become void and the Interest of our Indian Trade will soon be ruined, unless a
remedy is speedily applied.

That the reasons given by the Colonies for their inability to pay your Majesty's Debts are, that the

Copy

40

Sir

Since the late Sheet at Boston & the inflammatory & seditious letters printed in the Colonies, & People of this City are so incensed against me as a Distributer of stamps for this Province, that I find it will be attended with the greatest Danger of my Honour and Character, to attempt and indeed impossible for me to resume the Office, to prevent the same evil shall I'll have met with at Boston.

(As I had certain information from several of my particular Friends that a storm was rising, and I should soon feel it.)

I have been under the necessity of declining that I had declined the Office, and have accordingly writ to the Commissioners signifying that I cannot submit to a Service that will be attended with very dangerous Consequences upon the first attempt to execute. I have signed the



New York Stamp Agent resigns

Stamp Act Repealed

Act to repeal the Stamp Act

Whereas an Act was passed in the last session of parliament intitled an Act for granting and applying certain Stamp Duties and other Duties in the said Colonies and Plantations in America for towards further defraying the Expences of defending protecting and settling the same and for amending such Parts of the several Acts of Parliament relating to the Trade and Revenue of the said Colonies and Plantations as direct the manner of determining and recovering the said Duties and forfeitures therein mentioned And whereas the Continuance of the said Act would be attended with many Inconveniences and may be productive of Consequences greatly detrimental to the Commercial and Interests of these Kingdoms: *1766* Therefore please your most Excellent Majesty that it may be enacted And be it Enacted by the Kings most Excellent Majesty by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords spiritual and Temporal and Commons in this present Parliament assembled and by the authority of the same That from and after the first Day of May One thousand seven hundred and sixty -

What led to independence?

- In a chapter entitled “The British Challenge, “ Countryman writes:
- “The Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend taxes, the Tea Act – these were the major mileposts along the road to imperial crisis. Had Parliament not passed them there certainly would have been no American Revolution.”
- Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, p.47.

What led to Revolution?

- Chapter Four: “Independence and Revolution”
- “As the empire was sundered, colonials found reason and opportunity for thoroughgoing political revolution....
- “The internal revolution and the final collapse of the empire began when the people of Massachusetts decided to resist the punishment rather than pay for the tea.”
- Countryman, p.99

How revolutionary was it?

- “There seems no doubt that the American Revolution was revolutionary. It belongs within a general category that includes the English Revolution of the 1640s, the French and Haitian revolutions of the 1790s, and twentieth-century revolutions in places as diverse as China, Mexico, Russia and Iran.”
- Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, pp.xiii-xiv