

“Tea-Pot Tempest”: The Power of Place in the Boston Tea Party

Water is a powerful force of change in history, which forges empires, fuels agriculture, and facilitates wars. The British Empire and her colonies in North America were built on the waves, created in exploration through navigation combined with naval power, shipbuilding industries, and the spoils of maritime trade. The northern seaports in the thirteen colonies, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, lived by and of the water, which determined wealth, employment, and the nature of their mercantilist relationship with Great Britain. Water is, however, a double-edged sword, and the same maritime attributes that fostered the British Empire in North America would ultimately force it to sever ties with the thirteen colonies. The American Revolution, glorified as a symbol of democracy in modern media, political campaigns, and the American social consciousness, is often presented as the first step in divine-right manifest destiny in America. In fact, the American Revolution and the events that preceded it are products of broader political, economic, and social issues, intrinsically linked to location and historical context – and they, too, cannot be separated from the water.

With regards to the Boston Tea Party, the maritime economy was vital in shaping the minds – and holding the purse strings – of the men who destroyed the infamous tea on December 16, 1773. Although Boston, Philadelphia, and New York all had similar economies as a result of maritime trade exploits, as well as similar responses to British efforts to curb American trade and self-governance, the Tea Party steeped in Boston

Harbor. While the other two cities did toss tea in the 1770s, tensions in Boston were the first to bubble over and the Boston Tea Party holds the greatest significance of such colonial “tea parties” in Revolutionary historiography today, which begs the question: Why not New York or Philadelphia? To answer this, we must dig deeper into the political, social, and economic factors that separated Boston from its sister cities and examine how those factors combined with the power of place within the maritime economy to spark one of the catalysts of the American Revolution.

Colonial Seaports

In order to study the reasons for the Boston Tea Party, which saw laborers of all trades protest alleged tyranny through the destruction of more than 46 tons of tea, we must first analyze the influence of Boston’s maritime heritage as a primary seaport in the northern colonies. ⁱ The colonial seaports of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston “gathered in timber, fish, and agricultural produce from the rural settlers who made up the vast majority of the colonial population, sent it to West Indian and European markets, and distributed finished European goods throughout the regions they served.”ⁱⁱ This made these cities the centers of commerce for the colonies, creating distinct social strata to sustain the colonial import-export economy necessitated by British mercantilist policy. This system supported the merchants that controlled the exchanges of goods at the ports, creating a chain of production and distribution that spurred large population growth and the accumulation of wealth in the northern seaports throughout the eighteenth century. Local artisans produced finished goods, the farmers provided raw goods and resources, mariners and dock workers contributed hard labor to ensure that the goods arrived and left the cities safely and in good condition, and the gentry and

merchants of the northern seaports had almost total control of the maritime economy, engaging in trade with the colonies in the Caribbean and with other European powers, and engaging heavily in smuggling. The second and third-tier merchants who “tried to gain a competitive edge by buying low-cost, smuggled Dutch tea that they could sell at prices well below those of dutied English teas” enjoyed a level of autonomy in price-fixing and profit-making that became the proverbial thorn-in-the-side of Parliamentarians who tried to institute new tax laws in the late 1760s. ⁱⁱⁱ

Why Boston?

Boston, unlike New York and Philadelphia, fought several wars with Native Americans in the early eighteenth century that brought crippling debt and poverty to its laboring classes even before the Seven Years’ War. In order to pay for military efforts in the era of Queen Anne’s War, Bostonians voted in a crucial Town Meeting to choose “a public solution to the problem, approving the printing of more paper money and keeping the management of the money supply in the hands of the court.”^{iv} As the value of the currency dropped during the recession despite inflation in the price of goods, the colonists in Boston experienced a period of economic difficulty, best described by the modern term “stagflation,” that would last beyond the Seven Years’ War. In addition, impressment in the three decades prior to the Tea Party was a “critical factor in the stagnancy” of the crippled economy in Boston, which was harmful to maritime commerce and to the lives and liberty of the sailors taken from their homes and their ships.^v

When Parliament imposed duties through the Stamp Act in 1765, the Townshend Acts in 1767, and the Tea Act in 1773, Boston already had economic issues that limited the real wage of its workers, especially the mariners who required stability in the maritime economic market to survive. Thus, its tax burden became more difficult to bear than that of Philadelphia or New York, which did not experience hardships of the same caliber. Coupled with an uneven distribution of wealth that made rich merchants richer and poor laborers poorer, Boston became the most “politically volatile” of the northern seaports. The average Bostonian had a history throughout the eighteenth century of determined resistance “to those with great economic leverage who used it in disregard of the traditional restraints on entrepreneurial activity” (i.e. the earlier Puritan notion that merchants and wealthy landowners should not become rich at the expense of the poor). This sprang to life again to protest the Stamp and Townshend Acts.^{vi}



While Bostonians rejoiced in the "funeral" of the Stamp Act, depicted in this 1766 engraving, the methods of protest they used against Parliament in the first half of the eighteenth century would serve as precursors to the Tea Party. Library of Congress

By viewing the complete picture of Boston in the last quarter of the eighteenth century – the importance of its physical location as a vitally accessible and profitable seaport, the assumed authority over the maritime economy that merchants stood to lose under stricter British economic regulations, and its troubled economic and social history for the laboring classes – the reasons why Bostonians threw the tea become clearer. In short, they had less to lose and more to gain from challenging Parliamentary decisions. Parliament chose to keep the tax on tea after repealing the Townshend Acts to assert its right to tax the colonies, and despite the fact that it enacted a drawback of the tax on tea to three-fifths its former value in the Tea Act of 1773, this display of authority became an important issue of political tension.^{vii} We are left with an important question: did Parliament have a right to legislate for the colonies when the colonists did not have direct representation in Parliament? Although most citizens of Great Britain did not at the time have direct representation in Parliament due to antiquated processes of determining voting districts, this was an important issue for the colonists, as they had previously experienced little-to-no interference from the British Parliament in colonial legislative and economic affairs. They felt that they had a right to control their maritime way of life as they pleased – and as they had done for the last century – despite the legal authority that the Crown had to govern and raise revenue from its subjects.



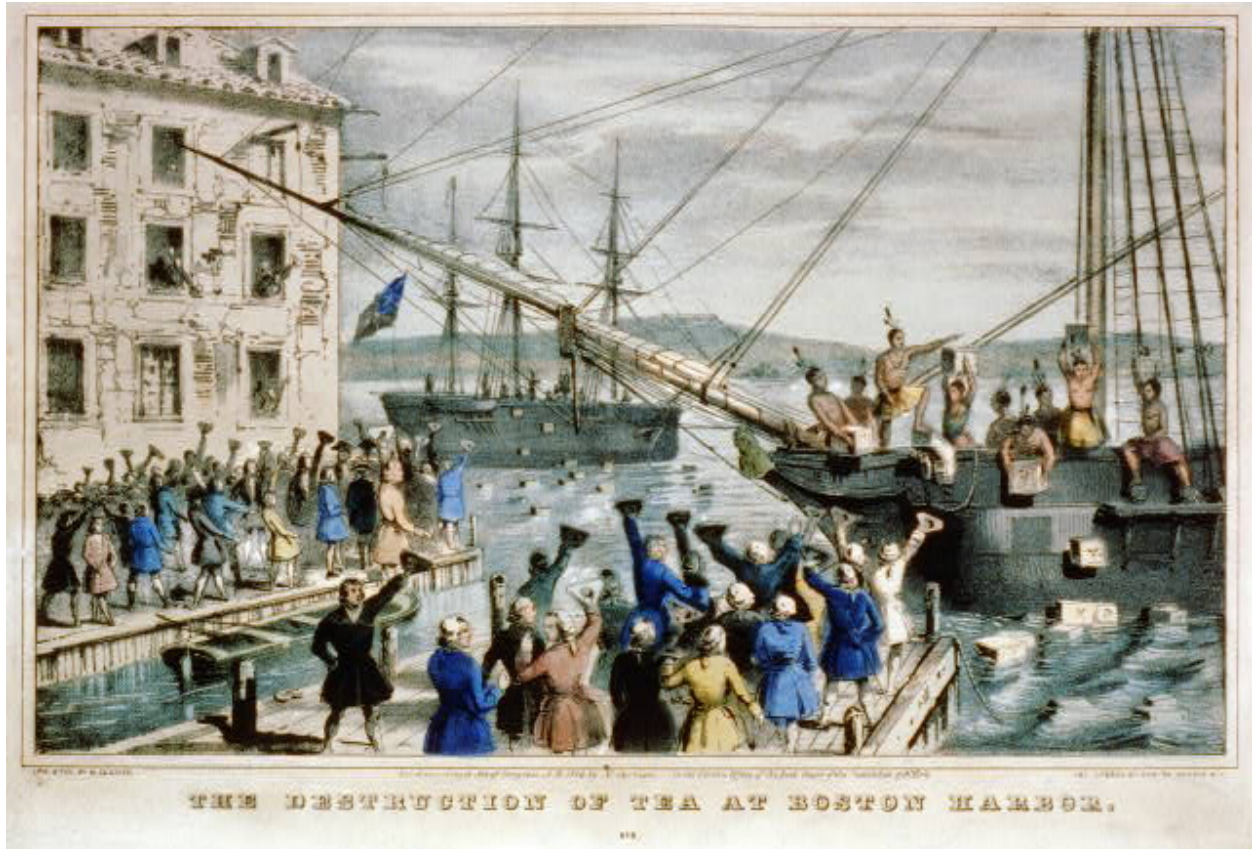
The pews and gallery seating shown here in the interior of Old South Meeting House held over 5000 Bostonians during the deliberations on December 16, 1773. Library of Congress

The Tea Party

It is with these frames of reference that we turn to the fateful meetings at Old South Meeting House in November and December 1773 concerning the landing of three ships with stores of tea; the first stores arrived on the *Dartmouth* on November 28. The customs officers had a twenty-day grace period to clear the vessel, meaning that the *Dartmouth* had until the evening of December 16 before it would be seized by the royal authorities and sold.^{viii} Wanting to follow previous policies of nonconsumption and nonimportation used to protest the Stamp and Townshend Acts, the people of Boston wanted the ship to turn back to London with the cargo still on board. Calling themselves

“The Body of the People” so as not to hold the Town Meeting liable for direct confrontation with Parliament (and meeting at a Quaker meetinghouse rather than the usual Faneuil Hall to accommodate the sheer size of the crowd), the people of Boston present at Old South voted to return the tea, but their deliberations and correspondence with customs officers proved that to be an unviable course of action. An attendee of these Town Meetings, including the one held only hours before the Tea Party on December 16, described their resulting decision to take matters into their own hands as thus:

...I heard a hideous Yelling in the Street at the S. West Corner of the Meeting House and in the Porch, as of an Hundred People, some imitating the Powaws of Indians and others the Whistle of a Boatswain, which was answered by some few in the House... I staid in the House till they had all dispersed except about fifty or an hundred Persons among which (as near as I can recollect) were all the following Persons viz Mr. Samuel Adams Mr. John Hancock, Mr. William Cooper Mr. John Scollay Mr. John Pitts Dr. Thomas Young, Dr. Joseph Warren who were also about coming away. I went to the Wharf where the Tea was, where I saw several who were Spectators as I was, with whom I am personally acquainted... Of those who were disguised and armed with Clubs, Sticks or Cutlasses (of which I saw several) and of those who were immediately concerned in unloading the Vessels or watching for Spies (as they called them) I don't know any. After a considerable Quantity of Tea was thrown overboard, several small Boats were rowed towards the Tea, which were ordered away, and a Man standing by me with a Musket in his Hand, swore he would shoot any Person that offered to touch the Tea. Having staid about an Hour on the Wharf I came away it being about 8 o Clock.^{ix}



This famous 1846 Currier & Ives print of the Boston Tea Party illuminates the lasting impact that the demonstration had on the memory of the American Revolution. Library of Congress.

Almost two-thirds of these men were artisans, and the rest were retailers, petty traders, mariners, farmers, or laborers – those whose “grievances were linked to the town’s economic troubles” and who understood that their futures depended on recognizing the power of place in a center of maritime trade to shape political, economic, and social status.^x In the end, a century’s worth of economic and social struggle with authority in a place that derived its livelihood from the intrinsic relationship between maritime trade and mercantilism had created a sense of individual power that brought the everyday man to the forefront of fight against British policy.

Conclusion

The events that followed – the occupation of Boston, the Nonimportation Agreements of 1774, the Intolerable Acts, the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolutionary War – could not have been foreseen by the mariners, artisans, and laborers that became tea destroyers that day. Their act of defiance created a ripple effect throughout the colonies that turned grievances between a mother country and her colonies into opposing political systems that changed the course of American history. Without viewing the Boston Party in its proper context as a maritime center and as a city with a long history of economic struggle for the lower classes, it is difficult to understand the destruction of property – which eighteenth-century men held so dear – taken in the Boston Tea Party. Peering at Griffin’s Wharf through the social, political, and economic lenses of eighteenth-century Boston, however, we can see that the Boston Tea Party did not just happen by the water; it happened *because* of the water.

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The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, DOI, or the United States Government.

ⁱ Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Kindle edition, loc. 196.

ⁱⁱ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, abridged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harlow G. Unger, *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011), 2.

^{iv} Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 50.

^v Jesse Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1968): 383, 387.

^{vi} Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 46-47.

^{vii} Tea Act of 1773.

^{viii} L.F.S. Upton, "Proceedings of Ye Body Respecting the Tea," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1965): 298.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 298-299.

^x Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, loc. 2815.