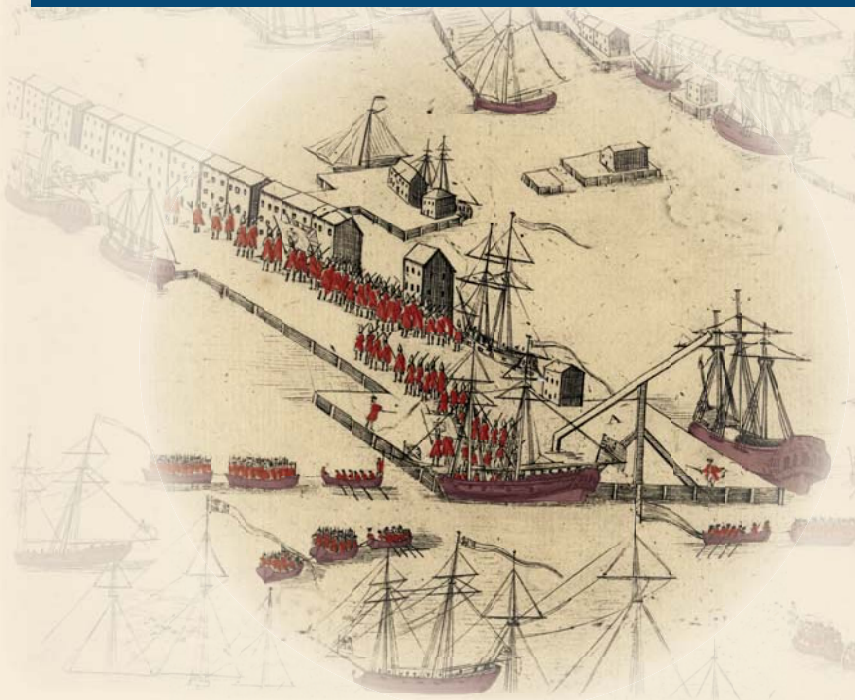
Road to Revolution: The Stamp Tax Crisis of 1765



King George the III was twenty-five years old in 1764. Although not an absolute monarch, he wielded considerable power over the world's greatest empire. Some thought that the young king put his confidence in the wrong people. "We must call in bad men to govern bad men," he explained.

Deeply in debt after the French and Indian War, the King's advisors proposed two unpopular revenue measures for the colonies: The Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765.

The Sugar Act included a customs duty paid by merchants. It was unwelcome but not unfamiliar. The Stamp Act was something new, a direct, internal tax that affected most colonists. Former Prime Minister William Pitt had known better. When the idea was proposed to him a few years earlier he had declined "to burn [his] fingers with an American Stamp Act." Now nearly every piece of paper in the colonies would require a revenue stamp. There was a firestorm of protest.

School children know what happened next: the debate about "taxation without representation," the birth of the Liberty Tree and the Sons (and Daughters) of Liberty, the role of James Otis, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock. The story is familiar but not the back story. The events of 1765, two hundred and fifty years ago, started a complex debate about the principles of government, the importance of individual rights, and the identity of colonists as "Americans."

A Tale of Two Cities

In 1760 a Boston newspaper reported on the lavish coronation of King George the Third.

King George III in coronation robes
National Portrait Gallery, London

London 1760-1765

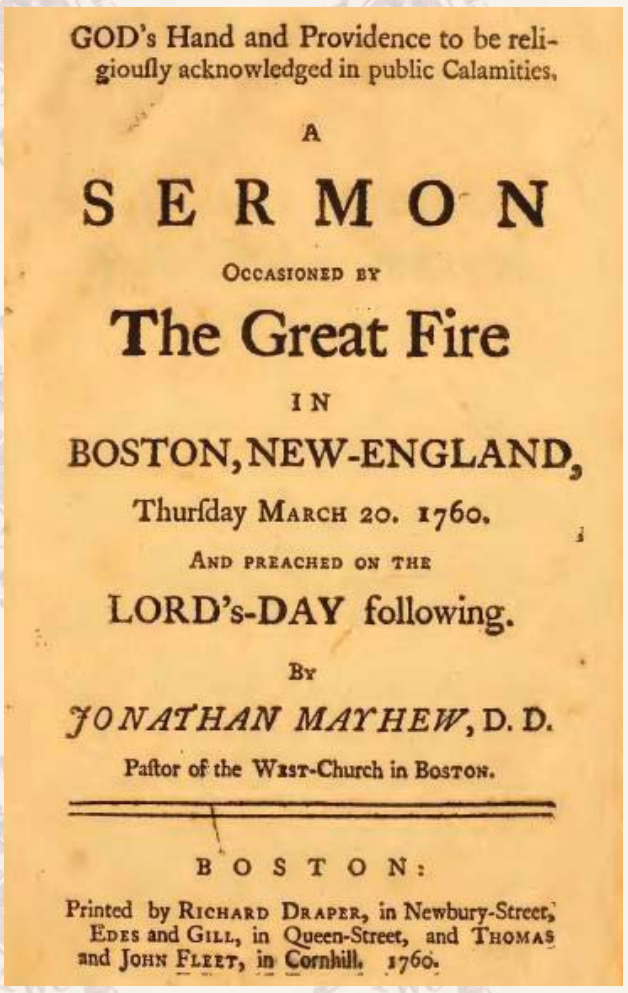
"The King's herb woman" began the coronation procession, "with her six maids, two and two throwing sweet herbs." The Queen's garment," the richest thing of this kind ever seen," was "valued at one hundred thousand" pounds.

Ironically George's realm faced a staggering debt. In 1763, with success in the Seven Years War, Britain emerged as the greatest world power. By one estimate its debt reached 122.6 million pounds that year on an annual budget of eight million.

The young king pressed his ministers for revenue.

Boston 1760-1765

A great fire engulfed the town of Boston in 1760. Raging for three days it destroyed 174 houses, 175 shops and left 220 families homeless. Lacking fire insurance many were wiped out financially. The fire was followed in 1764 by a devastating small pox epidemic.



GOD's Hand and Providence to be religiously acknowledged in public Calamities.

A

SERMON

OCCASIONED BY

The Great Fire

IN

BOSTON, NEW-ENGLAND,

Thurſday MARCH 20. 1760.

AND PREACHED ON THE

LORD's-DAY following.

BY

JONATHAN MAYHEW, D. D.

Paſtor of the WEST-Church in BOSTON.

BOSTON:

Printed by RICHARD DRAPER, in Newbury-Street, EDES and GILL, in Queen-Street, and THOMAS and JOHN FLEET, in Cornhill. 1760.

Victory in the French and Indian War (the North American phase of the Seven Years War) brought celebration but also economic recession. Merchants had grown rich supplying British forces. Now, some began to struggle.

Tax collectors, like Samuel Adams, showed leniency.

Many local ministers preached sermons on the Boston fire as well as the small pox epidemic. Some saw them as warnings to repent. Boston Fire Historical Society

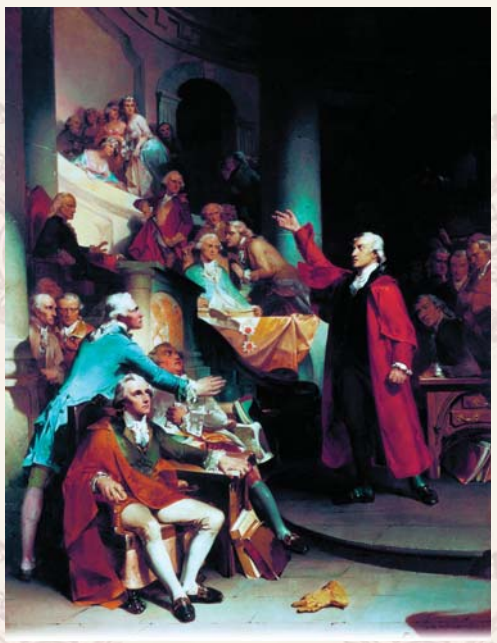
This bucket, owned by merchant John Rowe, was used to fight the fire of 1760. Boston's Rowe's Warf still bears his name. Boston Fire Historical Society

Taxing Matters

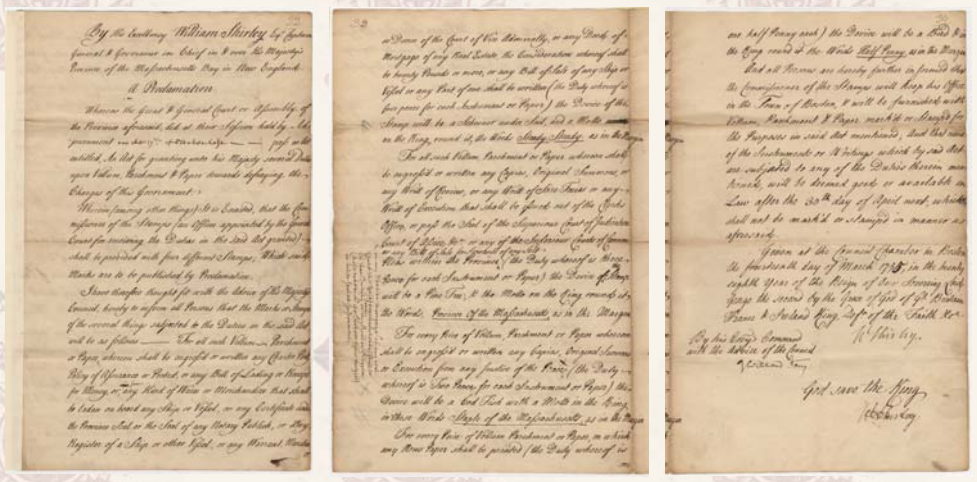
"That a Revenue be raised in Your Majesty's Dominion in America defraying the expenses of defending, protecting and securing same..."
Preamble to the Sugar Act 1764

Among colonial ports, Boston was locked in the deepest recession when news arrived of two revenue measures, the Sugar Act of 1764, and Stamp Act of 1765.

A two pence stamp
Courtesy of the Bostonian Society



The Virginia House of Burgesses was in session when the Stamp Act was announced. Patrick Henry became famous for his vehement protest. He may have been influenced by arguments circulated by Samuel Adams against the Sugar Act the previous year. Henry said that colonial legislatures, not Parliament, had the right to levy taxes — a theme that resounded across the American colonies. Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation



Taxation with Representation
In 1755 the Massachusetts Assembly approved a Stamp Tax to fund the French and Indian War. Designs are described in this proclamation: a schooner with the motto, "Steady : Steady," a Pine Tree with the words "Province of the Massachusetts," and a cod fish with the words, "Staple of the Massachusetts." There was some grumbling but acceptance because the tax was approved by the Massachusetts legislature. Massachusetts Archives

Stamp Act, 1765

The Stamp Act was a formidable document – 13,000 words, in 63 sections, each marked by a Roman numeral. It seemed that nearly every piece of paper required a stamp: real estate transactions, wills and other legal documents, newspapers, broadsides, almanacs, bills of sale, liquor licenses, even playing cards. The courts could not open without them nor would ships be allowed to sail. Ominously the penalty for making counterfeit stamps was death "without benefit of clergy."

Sugar Act, 1764

The Sugar Act especially damaged Boston merchants. Many depended on the importation of molasses – produced by slave labor in the West Indies – for the production of rum. By 1750 Massachusetts exported two million gallons per year. While the Sugar Act reduced the customs duty on imported molasses, a crack down on smuggling brought a sense of harassment to Boston merchants. It also produced a sharp decline in trade.

Ruminations on the Sugar Act

New Englanders consumed a million and a quarter gallons of rum each year – the equivalent of four gallons for every man woman and child. Rum also played a central role in the African slave trade.

The View from King Street

Thomas Hutchinson hoped to suppress dissent. His mind ran toward "firmness not subtlety" wrote Bernard Bailyn. "He didn't understand people who were sensitive to what power was because they had never been able to share in it." Massachusetts State House Arts Collection

"My temper does not incline to enthusiasm."

Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson

More than any other official in Boston, Thomas Hutchinson came to personify unpopular British policies.

Located on the former "King Street," the Boston Town House (now the Old State House) was the seat of British government in Massachusetts. The lion and unicorn symbolized royal power.

Thomas Hutchinson

At the time of the Stamp Act Thomas Hutchinson served simultaneously as lieutenant governor and chief justice. His brother-in -law Andrew Oliver was designated as Stamp Tax agent. Privately, Hutchinson counseled against the Stamp Act but publicly defended Parliament's authority to tax the colonies. Out of step with a growing democratic spirit, Hutchinson became a lightening rod. "He was never able to empathize with people who were not, as he was, part of the establishment," wrote his biographer Bernard Bailyn.

A Talent for Making Enemies

When Hutchinson, who was not a lawyer, accepted the position of Chief Justice, he angered the Otis family. The position had been promised to James Otis, Senior, father of "patriots" James Otis and Mercy Otis Warren.

Mercy Otis Warren later wrote "melodramas" satirizing the role of Thomas Hutchinson. Museum of Fine Arts

James Otis reportedly pledged to "set the whole province in a flame" after Hutchinson's appointment as Chief Justice. Library of Congress

Samuel Adams by John Singleton Copley. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The Adams Family

Samuel Adams father, Deacon Samuel Adams, was active in establishing a "land bank." Farmers could borrow paper money against the value of their land. Hutchinson favored "hard money," gold and silver. He campaigned to destroy the bank and Deacon Adams was ruined financially. His son Samuel inherited debts and lawsuits.

Arguing before Chief Justice Thomas Hutchinson, whom he resented personally, James Otis rallied opinion against the "writs of assistance," broad search warrants issued to restrict smuggling during the French and Indian War. Later he protested "taxation without representation." Brilliant but unstable, Otis eventually withdrew from public life. Massachusetts State House Arts Collection

The View From Chase and Speakman's Distillery

"I was very cordially and respectfully treated by all present. We had punch wine, pipes and tobacco, biscuit and cheese etc." John Adams describing a meeting at Chase and Speakman's

Wealthy colonial merchants like Thomas Hutchinson tended to accept British policy. People of the "middling sort" were struggling through hard economic times.

A soon to be famous Elm tree was visible from the meeting place of the Loyall Nine. ***Old Boston Taverns and Tavern Clubs, by Samuel Adams Drake and Walter K. Watkins***

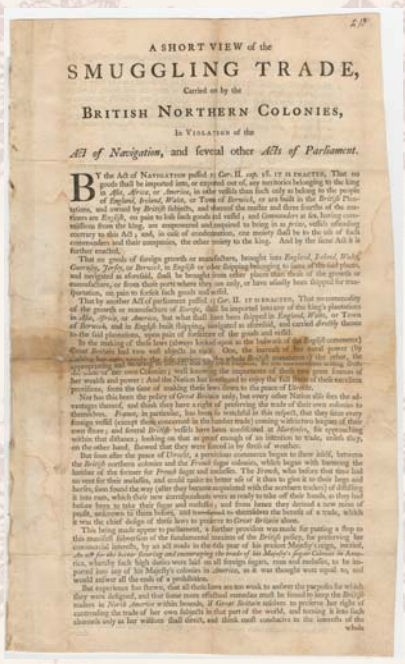
The Loyall Nine

In a counting room at Chase and Speakman's Distillery, overlooking a prominent Elm tree, a group began meeting to discuss the new taxes, and organize protests. Although not wealthy they were substantial citizens. Two distillers and a sea captain had been shut down for smuggling. A newspaper editor, Benjamin Edes, would become a master propagandist. They called themselves the "Loyall Nine." Although not a member, Samuel Adams attended their meetings.

What's in a Word? Caucus

Today the word caucus represents a political faction. Possibly the word originated in Boston during this period. Political clubs were forming, often representing economic interests. The Caulkers Club met in the North End, the town's center for shipbuilding. (Wooden ships used caulking between planks to prevent leaks.) The term "caucus" may be derived from the name of this group.

Several members of the Loyall Nine had been accused of smuggling. This Parliamentary report from 1751 concluded "effectual remedies must be found to keep the British trader in North America within bounds." With historical hindsight, perhaps more thought should have been given to this issue. Massachusetts Archives



A SHORT VIEW of the
SMUGGLING TRADE,
Carried on by the
BRITISH NORTHERN COLONIES,
In VIOLATION of the
Act of Navigation, and several other *Acts of Parliament.*

The Boston Gazette and Country Journal

The Boston Gazette and Country Journal encouraged Stamp Tax protests. Massachusetts Historical Society

Benjamin Edes was a member of the Loyall Nine. With partner John Gill he produced an influential newspaper that challenged British policy. *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal* began a drumbeat of criticism against the Stamp Act and helped define issues for general readers. Printers feared that the added expense of the tax could actually put them out of business. In an early version of social media they also printed broadsides and announcements that attracted crowds to demonstrations and protests.

The Commonwealth Museum's Revolution Gallery displays a facsimile of an eighteenth century printing press.

The View from the Street

"In the fray many were much bruised and wounded in their heads and arms some dangerously." Account of Pope Night, Evening Post, November 11, 1764

The Outsiders

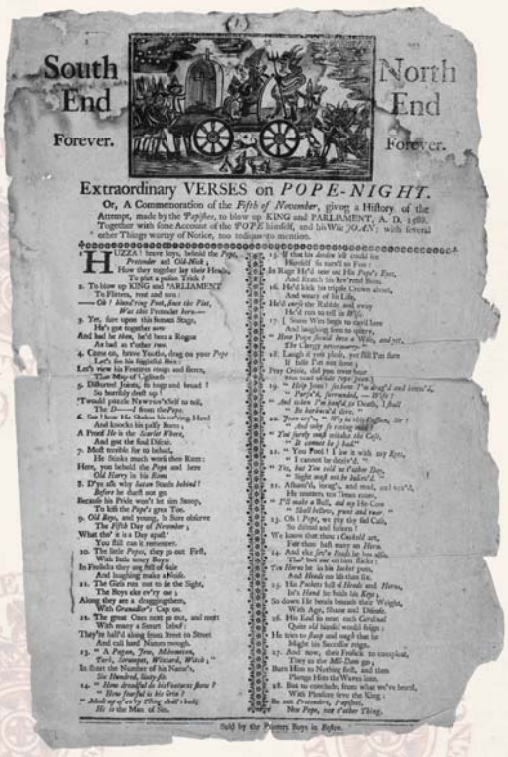
In the eighteenth century they were called the "people out of doors," to signal that they were outsiders in the political process. The "people in doors" made policy. At the top were respectable artisans, "the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker," according to historian Alfred Young. Below them was an angry group of unemployed dockworkers, sailors, transients, and the very poor. They were receptive to the idea that British policies were responsible for their plight and ready to protest, even violently, whatever needed protesting.

This painting depicts one of the "leather apron" men who worked with their hands and were called "mechanics" during the eighteenth century. Later Samuel Adams convinced some to give up their leather aprons as part of a boycott of British goods. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

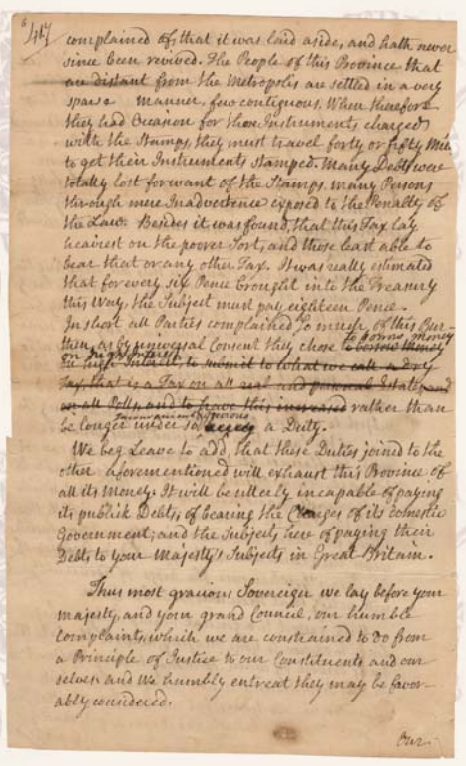
The Stamp Tax crisis brought disadvantaged groups into the political process in ways that were unsettling to British colonial officials.

Pope Night

November 5th was called Pope Day in Boston. It echoed the annual celebration of Guy Fawkes Day in England when a plot by Catholic dissidents to blow up Parliament was foiled. That evening North and South End gangs carried effigies of the Pope and the devil before descending on each other with rocks, fists, and clubs. In 1764 a child was killed when run over by a cart. Samuel Adams thought that these energies could be put to better use and introduced himself to the leader of the South End gang.



Pope Night in Boston
Library of Congress



This petition from the Massachusetts legislature to King and Parliament protests the Stamp Act's burden on the poor. The rural population will have difficulty traveling "forty to fifty miles" to the "metropolis" to buy stamps. "Besides it was found that this tax lay heaviest on the poor sort, and those least able to bear that or any other tax." Massachusetts Archives

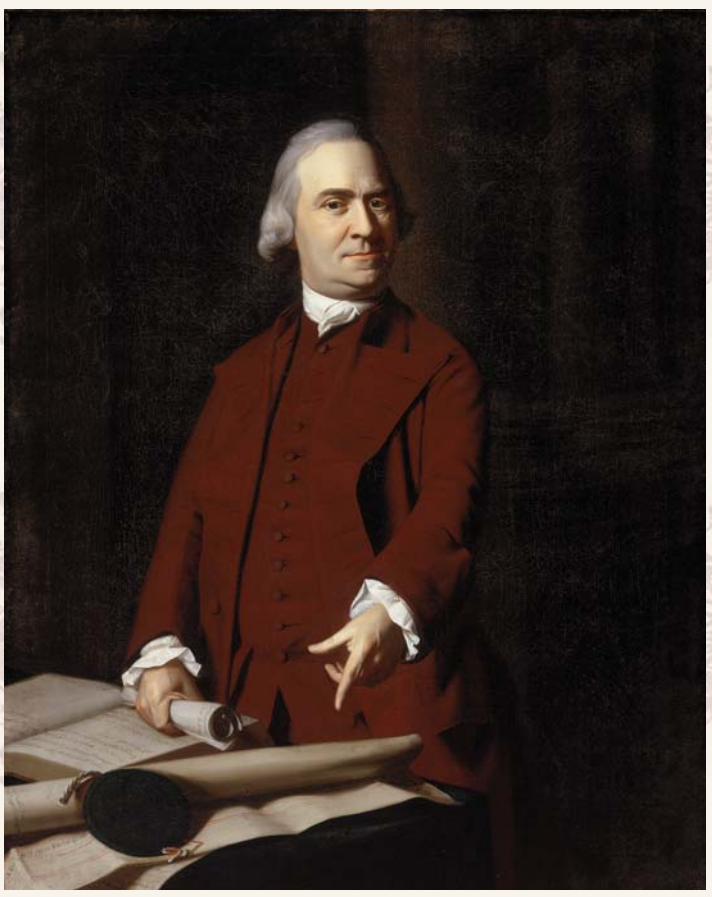
Youthful Indiscretions

For a time in the 1760's Henry Knox, hero of the American Revolution and President Washington's Secretary of War, was a lieutenant in the South End gang.

Henry Knox by Gilbert Stuart
Museum of Fine Arts

The View from Samuel Adams Study

"This we apprehend annihilates our Charter Rights to govern and tax ourselves."
Samuel Adams, on the Sugar Act, 1764



Samuel Adams by John Singleton Copley

Adams is dressed simply befitting his democratic values and Puritan ancestry. He points to the 1691 province charter. Adams alleged many British violations of the charter particularly its provisions for taxation. He also holds instructions from Boston Town Meeting to its delegation in the General Court. The original charter is on display in the Commonwealth Museum Treasures Gallery. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

To Thomas Hutchinson he was the "Grand Incendiary." Others have dubbed him the "Father of the American Revolution." Samuel Adams came to prominence during the Stamp Tax crisis.

Samuel Adams

He preferred to be called Samuel, or Mr. Adams, not the more diminutive "Sam." Yes, he inherited a malt business but Adams was no businessman. That is not to say that he was impractical. He had a genius for organization and propaganda. Adams crafted arguments to appeal to each segment of the population and developed innovative methods to spread his message from Boston, to other Massachusetts towns, to the thirteen American colonies, and London itself.

Detail of the 1691 "William and Mary Charter" shown in Copley's portrait of Samuel Adams. Commonwealth Museum Treasures Gallery

A Theory of the Case

Most people did not like taxes but Samuel Adams put the issue into a moral context. "Taxation without representation" was not merely unpleasant but a denial of self-government. People who had no role in making decisions for themselves were reduced to the status of slaves. Adams saw that British efforts to stop dissent would further erode rights. Admiralty courts in Halifax – trying violations of the Sugar and Stamp Acts – undermined the tradition of trial by jury. Royal governors dismissed unruly legislatures elected by the people. Adams predicted that British troops would be called in one day.

Taxachusetts?

In the seventeenth century Massachusetts had the highest taxes among the American colonies. An interest in education was one reason. In a world historic experiment, the Puritan government mandated the establishment of public schools. People approved taxes through town meeting or through representatives elected to the "General Court."

Where did you get those ideas, Mr. Adams?

Samuel Adams combined the moral outlook of seventeenth century Puritans with an eighteenth century belief in rights and limited constitutional government.

The Puritan fleet, with flagship Arbella, arrived to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. W.F. Halsall, An Elementary History of Our Country, by Eva March Tappan

Samuel Adams was deeply conscious of his Puritan ancestry. English Puritans fought a civil war against the King and aristocracy, seeing them as corrupt and repressive. The lingering influence of Boston's Puritan founders helps explain Massachusetts' role in events leading to the American Revolution.

Old South Meeting House

Samuel's father "Deacon Samuel Adams" had a profound influence. He had a malt business but was deeply religious and active in the Old South Meeting House. He was also a skilled politician who taught his son the art of retail politics by visiting taverns and political clubs.

The Commonwealth Museum Treasures Gallery displays the 1691 Province Charter. Massachusetts Archives

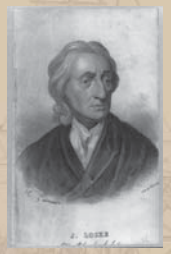
Deacon Adams and friends discussed issues surrounding the province charter. Granted by King William and Queen Mary in 1691, it had a frame of government and rules for governing. Young Samuel Adams learned that the document was important for protecting rights. He called it our "Magna Carta." Legalistic arguments, based upon the charter, were central to Adams message.

Harvard College
Library of Congress

Puritans founded Boston Latin School and Harvard College. Adams was an alumnus of both. At Harvard Samuel studied history and modern political theory. Like many, he was deeply influenced by the writings of John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers.

Green Dragon Tavern Old Boston Taverns and Tavern Clubs, by Samuel Adams Drake and Walter K. Watkins

Above all, Samuel Adams was a true democrat who valued the opinion of common people. He frequented taverns to gauge public sentiment and worked to establish an elected government responsive to the will of the people. In contrast to many revolutionaries he did not seek personal power.



John Locke
Library of Congress

Locke wished to justify the "Glorious Revolution" of 1689 that replaced King James II with a limited constitutional monarchy. He described the "state of nature" before government was established. There were natural rights, most importantly "life, liberty, and property." Natural law protected them and could never be breached. To protect rights and improve living conditions people formed a government with limited powers through a social contract. If a ruler violated rights revolution was justified.

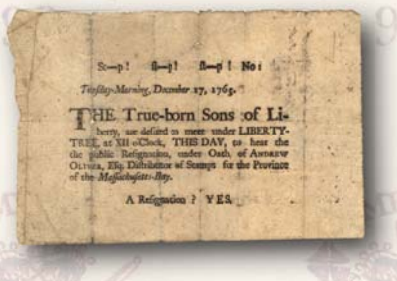
These ideas, particularly the concept of "natural rights" and "natural law" were reflected in the rhetoric of the Stamp Tax crisis. Rowdy mobs chanted "Liberty, Property, and No Stamps."

Liberty!

"Armed with axes – the British soldiers made a furious attack upon it...foaming with malice diabolical, they cut down a tree because it bore the name of Liberty." Essex Gazette, 1775, after British evacuation of Boston

For Samuel Adams August 14, 1765 was a day to be remembered and celebrated. It began with an episode of street theater.

Stamp Tax protesters hung effigies in Massachusetts and other colonies. Marchand Archive



This announcement by the Sons of Liberty summoned Andrew Oliver to appear before the Liberty Tree to resign a second time as stamp agent. Massachusetts Historical Society

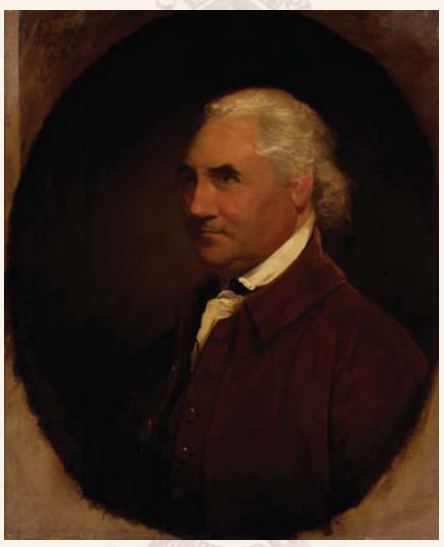
Birth of the Liberty Tree

At Boston Neck, the one road into town, visitors were stopped in a playful manner to check for stamps. Soon an effigy of stamp agent Andrew Oliver was hung from the branches of the Elm tree near Chase and Speakman's Distillery. Decorations included a large boot with a devil peeking out, a reference to Lord Bute one of the King's ministers.

Later in the evening a rougher crowd gathered, cut down the effigies and paraded them past the Town House. They beheaded the effigy of Andrew Oliver, demolished a building thought to be the potential stamp office, and vandalized Oliver's home. Oliver resigned as stamp agent the next morning.

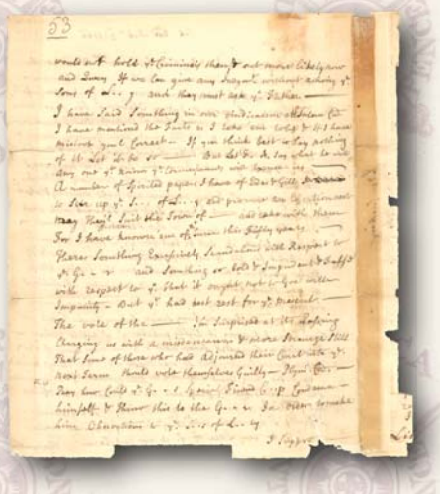
Sons of Liberty

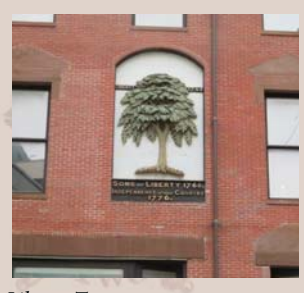
In the British Parliament, Isaac Barre opposed the Stamp Act. A veteran of the French and Indian War he was sympathetic to Americans. Although he did not originate the phrase, Barre called American dissidents "Sons of Liberty." As their support grew, the Loyall Nine began issuing statements under that name. Barre Massachusetts is named for Isaac Barre.



Isaac Barre. Brooklyn Museum

"A number of Spirited papers I have of Edes and Gill to stir up the S...of L...and procure an election next May." This letter to Thomas Hutchinson from Judge John Cushing uses an abbreviation for the phrase "Sons of Liberty." Perhaps it was not politically correct to spell out the name. February 2, 1766, Massachusetts Archives





Today, markers identify the site of Boston's Liberty Tree.

Where was the Liberty Tree?

Officially named the "Tree of Liberty" the old Elm was located at the corner of today's Boylston and Washington Streets in downtown Boston. It was the site of many demonstrations until chopped down by British soldiers before evacuating Boston.

Crossing the Line

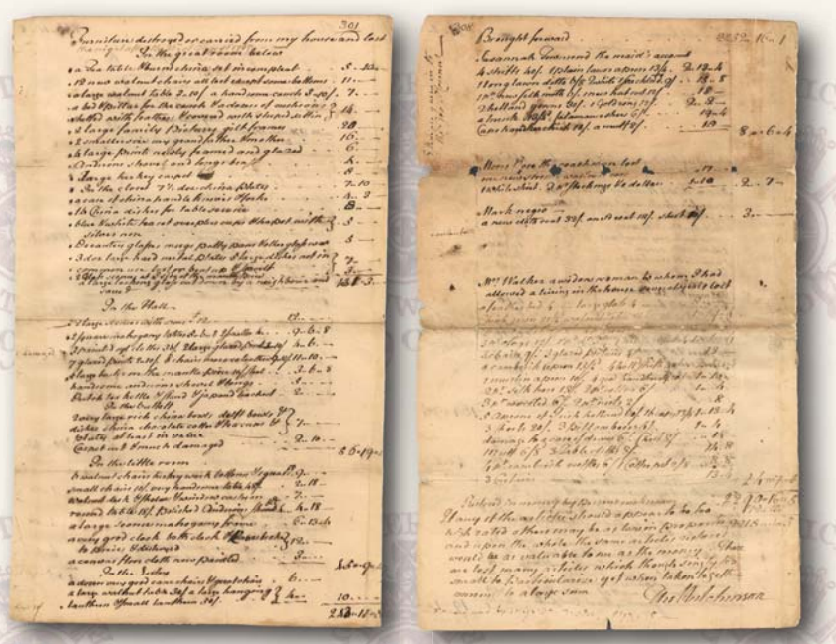
"Liberty and Property ... the Usual Notice of their Intention to plunder and pull down a house."
Governor Francis Bernard describing the chant of Boston mobs

On the evening of August 26, 1765 a mob destroyed the home of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, one of the most elegant buildings in North America.

The attack on Thomas Hutchinson's home
National Park Service © Louis S. Glanzman

Destruction of Hutchinson's Home

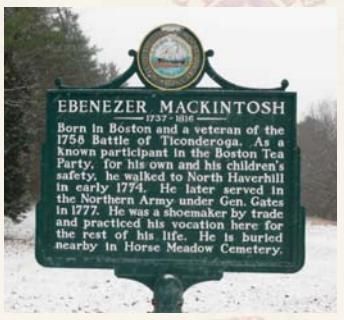
Bent on total destruction and fortified with alcohol, angry protesters broke down the front door with axes, ripped paneling and wainscoting from walls, proceeded to destroy inner walls, furniture, and paintings, and carried off silver and clothing. Hutchinson's notes for a history of Massachusetts were scattered and mud stained. (The notes, discolored with mud, remain in the vaults of the Massachusetts Archives.)



Seeking compensation, Hutchinson submitted this meticulous list of damages. In addition to personal property he claims reimbursement for "a plain lawn apron" for Susannah, a maid, and a "new cloth coat" for "Mark negro." After a delay, Hutchinson was reimbursed by the legislature. Massachusetts Archives

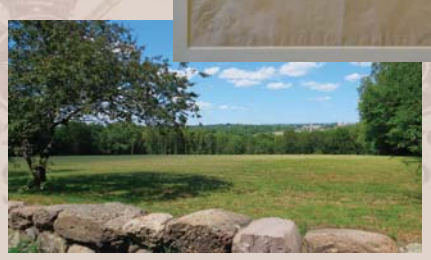
Ebenezer Mackintosh – Captain of the Liberty Tree

Shoemaker Ebenezer Mackintosh, the leader of the South End gang, was arrested after the destruction of Hutchinson's home. Samuel Adams secured his release but may have had second thoughts. Mackintosh was given a blue and gold uniform as "Captain of the Liberty Tree" but surrounded by more respectable Sons of Liberty in later peaceful demonstrations.



Mackintosh also participated in the Boston Tea Party before moving to Haverhill, New Hampshire. This historical marker highlights other events in his life. New Hampshire Department of Transportation

This is the only contemporary drawing of Hutchinson's country home. Milton Historical Society



Hutchinson's Country House

Thomas Hutchinson also had a country home in Milton overlooking the Neponset River Valley. The home no longer stands but "Governor Hutchinson's Field" remains as conservation land. Close by is the birthplace of President George Herbert Walker Bush. Like Thomas Hutchinson, Bush is a descendant of Puritan dissident Anne Hutchinson. Other Anne Hutchinson descendants include Franklin Roosevelt and Mitt Romney.

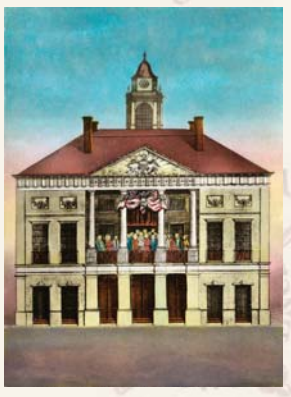
Reaching Out

"There will be a necessity of stopping in a great measure the importation of English goods." Samuel Adams to Massachusetts' agent in London Dennys DeBerdt

Samuel Adams advocated a Stamp Tax Congress to unite the colonies and a boycott of British goods to gain the attention of London merchants.

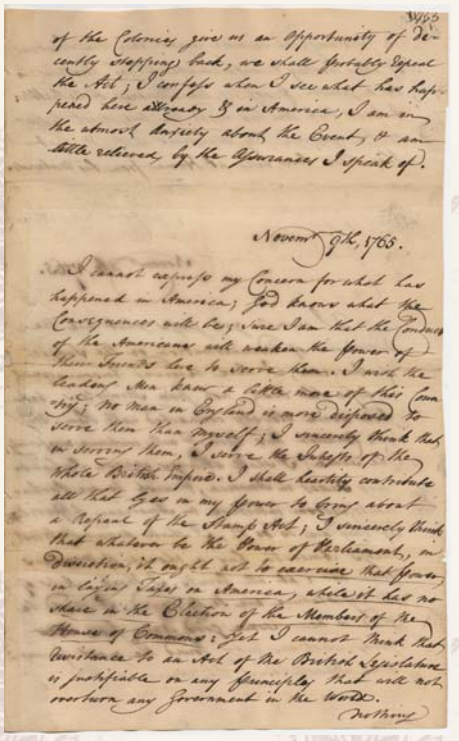
The Stamp Tax Congress

The Stamp Tax Congress was a Massachusetts initiative. In June 1765 the House of Representatives voted to contact each colonial legislature with the idea. Delegates met in New York in October. Petitioning the King and Parliament, Congress maintained that taxation without representation was a violation of basic rights and that Admiralty courts trying offenders in Halifax were illegal. Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina captured the spirit: "There ought to be no more New England men, no New Yorkers... but all of us Americans."



The Stamp Tax Congress met in New York's City Hall on Wall Street. Later known as Federal Hall, it was the site of President Washington's inauguration. Library of Congress

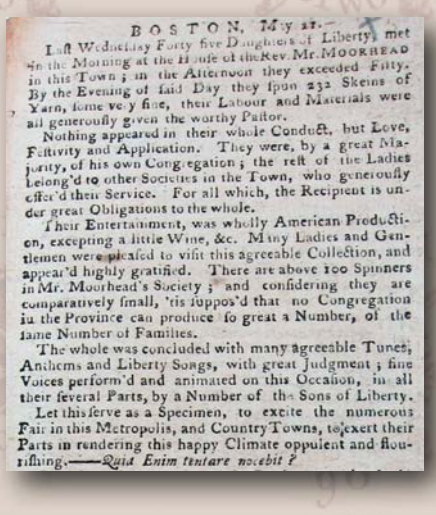
James Otis played a prominent role in debates but was showing signs of instability. Returning to Boston he challenged British Prime Minister George Grenville to resolve the issue by fighting it out, one on one, on the floor of the House of Commons. He died in dramatic fashion when struck by lightening. Wichita Art Museum



For a time British businessman Richard Jackson represented Massachusetts' interests in London. Alarmed by news of the Stamp Tax Congress, he warns: "I cannot express my concern for what has happened in America, God knows what the Consequences will be, sure I am that the Congress of the Americans will weaken the power of their friends here to service them." Massachusetts Archives

Non-Importation

Samuel Adams realized that London merchants were vulnerable to the boycott of English goods and worked to persuade merchants in Boston, New York and Philadelphia to stop imports. Two hundred New York merchants, 400 Philadelphia merchants, and 250 Boston merchants joined. British exports to the colonies quickly declined by 14% and many English merchants began to panic.



BOSTON, May 21.—

Last Wednesday Forty five Daughters of Liberty met in the Morning at the House of the Rev. Mr. MOORHEAD in this Town; in the Afternoon they exceeded Fifty. By the Evening of said Day they spun 232 Skeins of Yarn, some very fine, their Labour and Materials were all generously given the worthy Pastor.

Nothing appeared in their whole Conduct, but Love, Festivity and Application. They were, by a great Majority, of his own Congregation; the rest of the Ladies belong'd to other Societies in the Town, who generously offer'd their Service. For all which, the Recipient is under great Obligations to the whole.

Their Entertainment, was wholly American Production, excepting a little Wine, &c. Many Ladies and Gentlemen were pleased to visit this agreeable Collection, and appear'd highly gratified. There are above 100 Spinners in Mr. Moorhead's Society; and considering they are comparatively small, 'tis suppos'd that no Congregation in the Province can produce so great a Number, of the same Number of Families.

The whole was concluded with many agreeable Tunes, Anthems and Liberty Songs, with great Judgment; fine Voices perform'd and animated on this Occasion, in all their several Parts, by a Number of the Sons of Liberty.

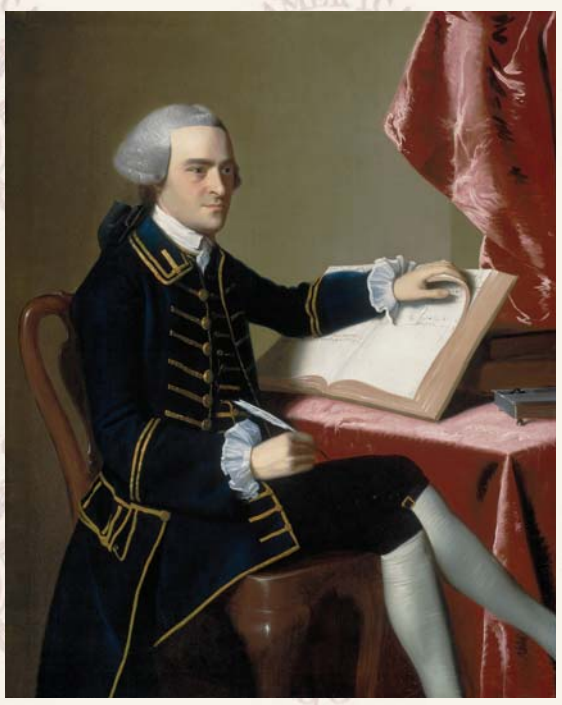
Let this serve as a Specimen, to excite the numerous Fair in this Metropolis, and Country Towns, to exert their Parts in rendering this happy Climate oppulent and flourishing.—*Quid Enim tentare nocebit?*

This 1770 article in the Boston Gazette uses the phrase "Daughters of Liberty."

Women played a significant role in the boycott by discouraging neighbors from buying British goods and substituting home made products. In 1765 many Boston women agreed not to serve lamb in order to increase the production of wool.

Merchant Prince

"The town has done a wise thing this day. They have made this young man's fortune their own." Samuel Adams to his cousin John, on the occasion of John Hancock's election to the Massachusetts legislature, 1766



John Hancock by John Singleton Copley. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In November 1765 John Hancock, reputedly Boston's wealthiest merchant, publicly sided with Samuel Adams in opposition to the Stamp Tax.

John Hancock's Beacon Hill Home. Its destruction during the nineteenth century stimulated the historic preservation movement.

While Hancock's Boston home no longer stands, visitors can see the childhood home of his wife Dorothy Quincy (in the city of Quincy.) It became a meeting place for Hancock and other patriots before the revolution. Quincy Sun Photo/Robert Noble

House of Hancock

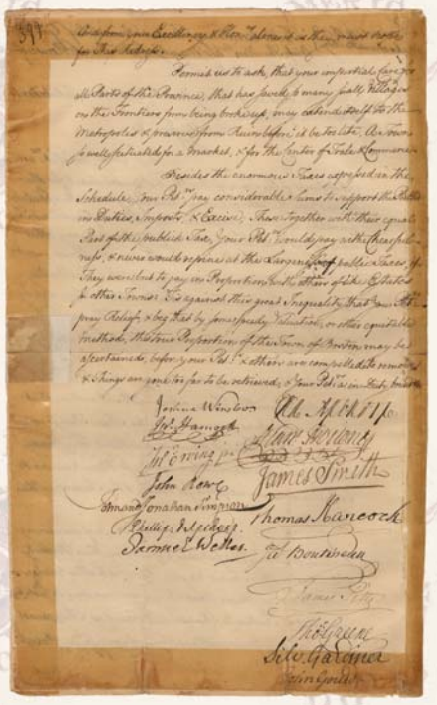
His benefactions were many, including maintenance of Boston Common, provision of firewood and food for the poor, and donating Boston's first fire engine. In the depressed economy of 1765 he offered loyal workers a chance to have their own branch store under the name "House of Hancock" with a 50/50 profit sharing agreement. Four clerks accepted the offer. Possibly this was America's first business franchise.

Taking a Stand

John Hancock observed attacks on the homes of Oliver and Hutchinson with concern. He did not wish to be next. Yet he had genuine sympathy for the poor and a desire for popularity. Privately he had written to his London agents protesting the Stamp Act. In November 1765 he signed a non-importation agreement. Not yet married, he wrote a note in his letterbook to document his stand for future Hancock children. "It is the united Resolution & Determination of the people here not to Carry on Business under a Stamp."

Pope Day 1765

November 1 was the date for implementation of the Stamp Act. In Boston the stamps were in storage at Castle William (now Castle Island.) It was too dangerous to unload them. On October 31st, during the season of Pope Day, John Hancock made a dramatic public statement. Samuel Adams had organized a "Union Feast" bringing together members of the North and South End gangs, with respectable politicians and merchants, "with Heart and Hand in flowing Bowls and bumping Glasses." John Hancock paid the tab and never looked back.



In 1758 young John Hancock signed a merchants' petition protesting taxes. Notice the curlicues under the signature. It is not yet the famous version on the Declaration of Independence but Hancock is working on it. Massachusetts Archives.

Repeal

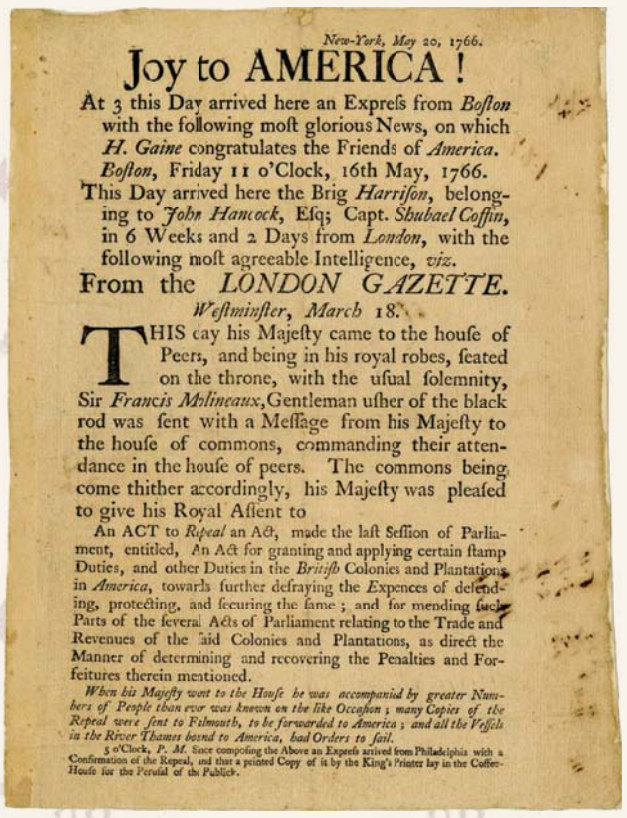
"The expectation of a rupture with the colonies...has struck the people of Great Britain with more terror than they ever felt for the Spanish Armada...It was this terror...which rendered the repeal of the Stamp Act, among the merchants at least, a popular measure."
Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations

The Merchants of London

At eleven o'clock on the morning of March 17, 1766 London merchants boarded fifty coaches and traveled as a caravan to the House of Lords. That morning they had approved a petition to King George III to accept Parliament's vote repealing the Stamp Act. The following day the twenty-seven year old king agreed. Reports of violent protest across colonial America, the impossibility of unloading stamps, and the damaging boycott of British goods had been decisive.

An eighteenth century English coach.

An eighteenth century brigantine.



New-York, May 20, 1766.

Joy to AMERICA!

At 3 this Day arrived here an Expreſs from *Boſton* with the following moſt glorious News, on which *H. Gaine* congratulates the Friends of *America*.

Boſton, Friday 11 o'Clock, 16th May, 1766.

This Day arrived here the Brig *Harriſon*, belonging to *John Hancock*, Eſq; Capt. *Shubael Coffin*, in 6 Weeks and 2 Days from *London*, with the following moſt agreeable Intelligence, *viz.*

From the *LONDON GAZETTE.*

Weſtminſter, March 18.

THIS day his Majeſty came to the houſe of Peers, and being in his royal robes, ſeated on the throne, with the uſual ſolemnity, Sir *Francis Molineaux*, Gentleman uſher of the black rod was ſent with a Meſſage from his Majeſty to the houſe of commons, commanding their attendance in the houſe of peers. The commons being come thither accordingly, his Majeſty was pleaſed to give his Royal Aſſent to

An ACT to *Repeal* an Act, made the laſt Seſſion of Parliament, entitled, An Act for granting and applying certain ſtamp Duties, and other Duties in the *Britiſh* Colonies and Plantations in *America*, towards further defraying the Expences of defending, protecting, and ſecuring the ſame; and for mending ſuch Parts of the ſeveral Acts of Parliament relating to the Trade and Revenues of the ſaid Colonies and Plantations, as direct the Manner of determining and recovering the Penalties and Forfeitures therein mentioned.

When his Majeſty went to the Houſe he was accompanied by greater Numbers of People than ever was known on the like Occaſion; many Copies of the Repeal were ſent to Falmouth, to be forwarded to America; and all the Veſſels in the River Thames bound to America, had Orders to ſail.

5 o'Clock, *P. M.* Since compoſing the Above an Expreſs arrived from Philadelphia with a Confirmation of the Repeal, and that a printed Copy of it by the King's Printer lay in the Coffee-Houſe for the Peruſal of the Publick.

Broadside announcing repeal
New York Historical Society

Celebration

News of repeal reached Boston with the arrival of the brigantine *Harrison*, on May 16th. London merchants had sent word on one of John Hancock's ships. It was a piece of luck. Many thought that Hancock was responsible for repeal. Perhaps he thought so himself. There was universal rejoicing. Church bells pealed, and guns fired. John Hancock paid for fireworks on Boston Common and for the release of every person in debtors' prison. He set out casks of Madeira wine in front of his Beacon Hill home.

Afterword

The joy was short lived because Parliament quickly approved the Declaratory Act reiterating its right to tax the colonies. The Stamp Act crisis was a beginning, not an end. It defined the issues that would lead to the American Revolution, "taxation without representation" and the need for a democratic government that would protect rights. During the crisis several figures stepped out of the provincial shadows and onto the historical stage. They presented a world-view that is still revolutionary today.

What's in a word? Boycott

Samuel Adams used the term Non-Importation Agreement. The word 'boycott" originated in Ireland in 1880 when tenant farmers used this strategy against estate agent Charles C. Boycott to protest high rents.