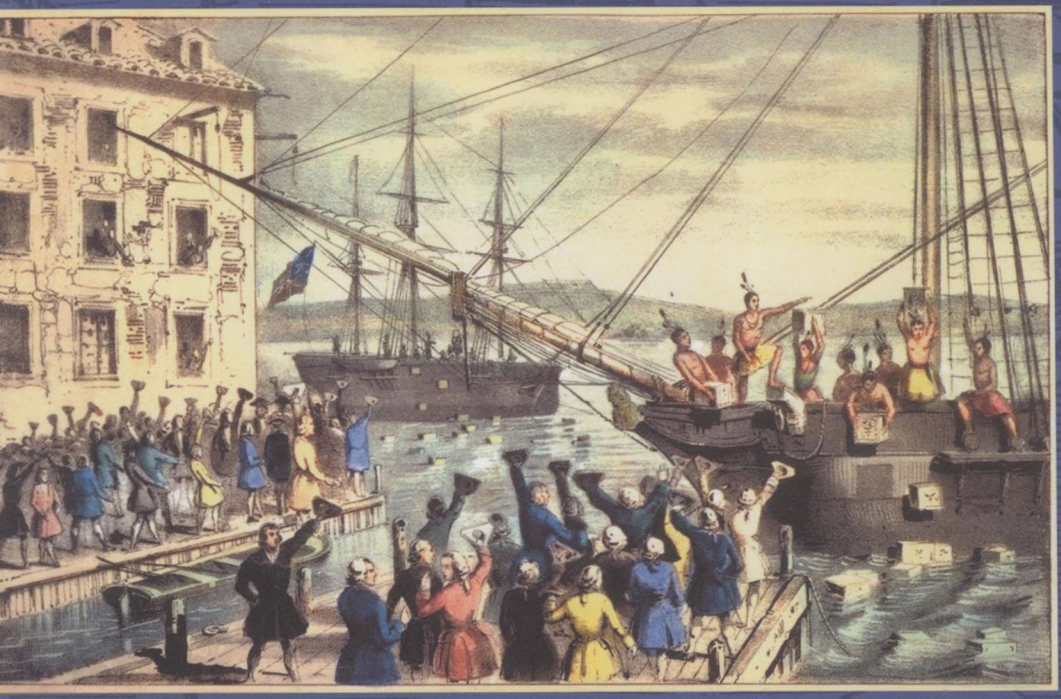
THE BOSTON TEA PARTY

The Foundations of Revolution



JAMES M. VOLO

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PRAEGER

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The Boston Tea Party

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Introduction

Who knows how well tea will mingle with salt water?
—*John Rowe, merchant of Boston, 1773*

Our old North-Enders in their spray
Still taste a Hyson flavor.
And Freedom's tea-cup still o' flows,
With ever-fresh libations.[1]

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

THE INCIDENT AT GRIFFIN'S WHARF

On the night of December 16, 1773, several thousand people massed on the chilly streets of Boston to listen to a speech given by political radical and longtime colonial rabble-rouser Samuel "Sam" Adams. With white plumes of frosted breath rising from the audience that strained to hear his words through the open windows of the Old South Meeting House, Sam Adams targeted the shipment of tea belonging to the East India Company (EIC) sitting on three ships tied up at Griffin's Wharf. His speech was filled with bold utterances of colonial consensus and dire warnings of an impending loss of liberty. These filtered through the open windows of the packed hall and were repeated in bits and snatches from neighbor to neighbor throughout the immense crowd. This made it difficult to follow the gist of the speech, but

the handbills announcing the meeting beforehand had given its main thrust. "Whoever supports the unloading, the vending, or the receiving of the tea [is] an enemy to his country."[2]

That night, almost half the population of Boston listened, and cheered, and booed at appropriate moments during Adams' harangue. Although described at times as fractious and unrestrained, no other man in Boston seemed to have a greater influence over or a better understanding of the popular mind of the city. People liked tea, but the tax imposed on it by Parliament had given offense to all but the staunchest friends of the Crown. Their indignation was manifest not only in terms of ideological concepts like taxation without representation and government by the consent of the people but also with regard to the practical consequences in America of granting the powerful EIC an even stronger monopoly over a heavily restricted colonial trade. "Friends! Brethren! Countrymen! That worst of plagues, the detested tea . . . is now arrived in this harbor."[3]

Mr. Samuel Savage of Weston (president of the Massachusetts Colonial Board of War) was the appointed moderator of the meeting, but Adams was clearly in charge. As Adams spoke, a mock Indian war whoop split the night air, and a few in the crowd made to answer it. But rather than spur on his listeners to give further voice to their discontent, Adams commanded complete silence. A peaceable, almost religious deportment overcame the crowd as first one, then another, and another in the assembly suggested quiet to his neighbor. This was pure political theater. No Mark Antony speaking his part over the blood-soaked corpse of Caesar in a Shakespearean tragedy could have employed better stagecraft than Sam Adams. He fully apprehended the gravity of the moment, but he was less certain that his own seething passion to be free of British rule would overcome the natural inertia of his audience to accept the tea at its greatly reduced price and submit to the tax. Although among the first to articulate the call for independence from Britain, it is doubtful that Adams knew on this specific occasion that he was helping to give birth to the newest great nation on the earth.

"This meeting can do nothing more to save the country," he finally pronounced with all the gravity he could summon.[4] With this statement, a group of men, loosely disguised as Mohawk Indians beforehand, and joined by their confederates from the Sons of Liberty and the Patriot Party, made their way through the crowd to Griffin's Wharf bearing torches, followed by a nearly silent throng of eager onlookers. The disguised "Indians"—using no more words than necessary—boarded the three ships in the harbor and smashed 342 chests of tea

worth approximately £18,000 (pounds sterling) and tossed them into the water. This was equivalent to £1.4 million sterling or $2.2 million (USD) in today's money.[5] Each chest represented the value of a full year's income for an average working-class family. Its loss would seriously sting the proprietors of the Company and its investors among the members of Parliament in faraway London. The incident at Griffin's Wharf has come to be known as the Boston Tea Party—one of the most iconic events in the history of the United States.

To consider the Boston Tea Party as an isolated incident, however, is equivalent to watching only a small scene in a long three-act play. No matter how dramatically staged or well written, much is missed. The Tea Party was a brief incident among the many scenes composing an economic and political crisis that ultimately produced a revolution. That which went before is necessary to the meaning and understanding of what took place, and that which follows provides the observer with context and closure.

Moreover, the silence necessarily preserved by the actors in this daring exploit has rendered the task of writing its history one of no little difficulty. Their secrets were remarkably well kept; and but for the family traditions and scraps of documents which survive, we should know very little of the people who comprised the cast of the famous Boston Tea Party. Henry Bass, a cousin of Sam Adams and one among the many that planned the Tea Party, wrote to his father-in-law describing his part in the plot and sending him some incriminating letters and documents. Bass, at least, seemed acutely aware of the historic nature of what was taking place: "I must desire you'd keep this a profound Secret and not to Let any Person see these Papers, and should be glad when you come to town you'd bring them with you, as we have no other Copies, and choose to keep them as Archives. We do every thing in order to keep this . . . Affair Private."[6]

It is the purpose of this book, through insights like this, to give the reader a front-row seat before the entire drama—all three acts, from the prelude to the climax to the final curtain call. The cast of characters is immense and appropriate to the significance of the drama: firebrand radicals and a subjugated but hardworking populace; a youthful king, devious advisers, corrupt officials, and greedy businessmen; self-interested conspirators, dedicated ideologues, an army of occupation, and an arrogant navy; animated mobs and passive extras; and more than one buffoon to provide comic relief. The reader will find that, in a period that valued formality and ceremony in society, commonsense restraint and essential decorum were conspicuously absent from many

political processes. To be fair, the identities of the protagonists and antagonists, of the good guys and the villains if you will, must be left to an understanding assessment of the facts and the educated impartiality of the reader.

TO RIDE UPON THE WINDS OF HISTORY

Historian Colin G. Galloway has aptly described the fundamental nature of historiography and importance of studying history: "Battles over history—dry, old history—and whose history gets to be told can become heated and emotional because the ways we behaved *then* say so much about the kind of people, society, or nation we have become."[7] Many modern readers labor in ignorance under an incapacity with history—that is not their fault—that comes from an incomplete knowledge of the *then*, to which they must be exposed in order to form a better understanding of the *now*. They should be more than curious in the passing of these inquiries, for it is by the means of a wider knowledge that centuries-old connections between fundamental principles are made. There are important connections between the Magna Carta of 1215 and the Declaration of Independence of 1776, between the battle for political freedom in Scotland at Stirling Bridge in 1297 and the battle for independence in Massachusetts at Concord Bridge in 1775, and between the evangelical revolution of John Knox in 1560 and the political revolution of Samuel Adams in 1773—and among all of these and our present day.

On the surface, the causes of the American Revolution have disappeared along with its lappets, bonnets, and periwigs. We no longer wear fichus, embroidered pockets, and hip-enhancing panniers, or hunting shirts, knee breeches, and neck stocks; but the causes of dissatisfaction with government were deep rooted and sprout new growth periodically. In almost every case, a widespread and unremitting contempt for established authority coupled with a libertarian leave-me-alone attitude seems best to characterize many of the cross-generational attitudes toward government passed down throughout these histories. There is perhaps no better example of this fundamental character in American history than the importance and meaning of the Boston Tea Party *then* to the rise of the T.E.A. Party political movement *now*.[8]

Historian Jill Lepore has written, "The importance of the American Revolution to the twenty-first-century T.E.A. Party movement might

seem to have been slight, as if the name were a mere happenstance, the knee breeches knickknacks, the rhetoric of revolution unthinking, but that was not entirely the case."[9] Political opponents and media pundits have derided the three-cornered hats, the red, white, and blue ribbons, and the yellow "Don't Tread on Me" flags; and they have berated the T.E.A. Party demonstrators as clinging to their Bibles and guns in ignorance of more socially progressive ideals.

However, activists from a variety of political viewpoints have invoked the Boston Tea Party as a symbol of protest. For instance, when the university-trained lawyer Mohandas K. Gandhi in frock-coat, striped tie, and vest led a mass protest against institutionalized racism by burning the registration cards issued to those from India living in British South Africa in 1908, a British newspaper compared the event to the Boston Tea Party. Some years later in 1930, the same man was the now revered *Mahatma* (Great Soul) with his head shaven, dressed in the traditional *dhoti* and shawl of India, woven by his wife, Kasturba, with yarn he had spun by his own hand. Gandhi met with the British viceroy after his walk to the sea during the India salt tax protests. During the meeting, he took some duty-free sea salt from inside his shawl and reminded the official again of the Boston Tea Party. Would the modern media pundits have disparaged him for his choice of traditional dress the way they do T.E.A. Party demonstrators for their colonial dress, or is their own partisanship coloring their analysis?

The Boston Tea Party has often been indirectly referenced in protests from both extremes of the American political spectrum. In 1973, on the 200th anniversary of the original Tea Party, a mass meeting of liberal protestors and environmental activists at Faneuil Hall—calling for the impeachment of President Richard Nixon—retired to a replica tea ship in Boston Harbor to hang Nixon in effigy and throw empty oil drums into the harbor in the cause of environmentalism. In 1998, two conservative U.S. congressmen put the federal tax code into a chest marked "TEA" and dumped it also into Boston Harbor to protest added taxation under the Clinton administration. In 2006, the modern T.E.A. Party was founded, and one year later, on the 234th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, Libertarian candidate Ron Paul, evoking many fundamental American ideals concerning smaller government, broke the existing one-day political fund-raising record by raising $6 million (USD) in just 24 hours.

It must be remembered, moreover, that the American Revolution began first as a crisis of trust, over-taxation, debt, and out of control

spending, coupled with an arrogance of big government, partisanship, and demagoguery. This may sound familiar to the modern reader. The British government, in the person of its monarch, had a long history of extending its sovereignty over unwilling peoples. These included the Welsh, the Scots, and the Irish; the Native Americans of trans-Appalachia and Canada; and the populations of India, Australia, and parts of Africa and Indonesia. British policies in the 18th century were designed to defend the empire from foreign threats. American colonials did not consider themselves either threatening or foreign.

Modern America is exhibiting many of the characteristics and governmental challenges of its colonial period, but they are only symptoms of a deeper crisis—a culture war for the soul of America. Big government has entered beyond the thresholds of American homes dictating by law the size of toilet tanks, the efficiency of refrigerators, the mechanism of light bulbs, the flow of showerheads, and a myriad of other regulations on everyday devices. For the protestors *then* (and *now*), government had come to stand for extensive disruptions of their chosen lifestyle, intrusions into the social fabric of their communities, and a loss of control over their local policies and their most heartfelt issues. It was shared issues of personal, economic, political, and religious liberty that brought on demonstrations and calls for change in the 1770s.

Moreover, it must be recognized—and often is not addressed in standard treatments of the subject—that 18th-century Americans were acutely aware of the business climate and political activities taking place across the British Empire and not only those of local importance. While the speed of modern communications would be incomprehensible to colonials, Anglo-Americans did not live in a box sealed off from the rest of the 18th-century world. As will be seen, there is ample evidence that Anglo-Americans affected and were affected by occurrences that took place right across the globe. They were expansionists, not isolationists. Theirs was the first *emerging economy* of the New World in an era during which Europe attempted to colonize and overrule the globe. An emerging economy is one that experiences rapid growth under conditions of limited or partial industrialization, a definition that certainly reflects 18th-century Anglo-America. Moreover, colonial Americans were seamen, merchants, and traders; students, visitors and expatriates, who—living and acting under the British flag—fully participated in an empire of goods governed from London but coming from sources in every corner of the world. Even the everyday English word for money, *cash*, was derived from the Tamil dialect

of Southeast India (*kaasu*). The term *cash* was used with great specificity in the 18th century to describe legal tender and various instruments of value transfer and payment other than gold and silver coins. The availability of coins and the severe demands made on the stock of precious metal coinage in America, Britain, and around the world will be a repeated theme of this work.

Unreasonable demands on the imperial economy were especially evident in the case of the business affairs of the EIC, the greatest corporate monopoly in recorded history up to that time. If corrected for inflation and fluctuations in the value of money, the EIC would be rated among the greatest non-manufacturing corporations of all time. Yet there is evidence that more gold and silver was transferred through the EIC to China and India in the 18th century to satisfy the desires of European fashion than the Spanish Conquistadors stripped from all the mines and native temples of America in two centuries of rapine and greed. This circumstance left the British Empire rich in goods but with a net loss in real wealth.[10]

When the EIC and its corrupt allies in Parliament and the government ministry precipitated a world credit crisis in the 1770s, Americans were made to suffer and were asked to pay for it. The despised Tea Act that caused protests in America over the demand for increased taxes in silver coin was passed almost simultaneously with the East India Company Act (Regulating Act) that transferred £1.4 million of scarce imperial revenues from the colonies to the EIC to prevent its bankruptcy. This is the approximate equivalent in modern money of £1.3 billion sterling or $2.1 billion (USD).[11]

Here is the nexus, the unheralded financial connection between British policy and American protest. Asian trade sucked up Britain's wealth as a sponge absorbs water. The Company's failed attempt at landing a few hundred chests of China tea in Boston had been initiated by economic, political, and military concerns in far away London, Calcutta, and Canton. A historian of the Company has observed of the EIC, "What was supposed to have been a trading company with an eastern monopoly vested by Parliament had become a rogue state." To those it enriched, the EIC was the familiar John Company; to those it impoverished, it was the Devil's Company.[12]

The British Crown was, and had been for almost two centuries, the legitimate government of the Anglo-American colonies before the revolution. Anglo-Americans were a conscious part of the empire and lawfully subject to its legitimate ruler, who from 1760 to his death in 1820 was King George III. Americans today bristle at the concept that

they are subjects in any way. They believe that government should be subject to its citizens, not the other way around. Yet no serious American in 1773, even among the radicals, ever questioned the king's legitimate right to govern the empire, only the necessity that he expand his absolute rule in America.

Moreover, poorly defined political groups, such as Whigs and Tories or Patriots and Loyalists, continue to populate the history texts in American classrooms as if opposing one another on a weekly football schedule with the Battle of Yorktown (1781) looming as the Super Bowl of the revolution. Yet, even after two centuries, the political, economic, and social opinions that each group held remain somewhat unclear. Ironically, the least loyal to their legitimate and rightful king are commonly called "Patriot," yet the members of the so-called Patriot Party were no more patriotic (in the traditional sense of the word) than those colonials who ultimately became members of the Loyalist Party—just the reverse was true. The very name of Patriot was borrowed from a decades-old opposition political faction in Parliament known in Britain as the Patriot Whigs, who promulgated many of the same small government, free market, and strict constitutional principles aspired to by proponents of the American Revolution and by T.E.A. Party activists today.

Among the so-called Patriots were the Sons of Liberty—agitators, reactionaries, and, frankly, thugs—who habitually denied to the Tory opposition many of the fundamental freedoms Americans would ultimately demand for themselves in the Bill of Rights. This is not to disparage their devotion to the cause of independence. Sometimes a little benevolent thuggery is necessary in a crisis. Those loyal to the Crown had formed no parallel street organizations, relying instead on the instruments of government to maintain the status quo until it was too late to avoid the crisis.

Among the objectives of this book is an attempt to make the reader aware of the parallelism and relevance to modern times of the history surrounding the Boston Tea Party and its role in the genesis of the modern T.E.A. Party movement. In this regard, those who attended the Boston Tea Party of the late 18th century and those who demonstrated in the streets of the 21st century seem to be driven by similar circumstances. Among these were intrusive regulations and an unresponsive government; a credit-starved global economy increasingly dependent on foreign resources; and an arrogant cadre of public employees dictating debilitating lifestyle changes to average Americans while attempting to maintain their own position of advantage. Among these

Americans was a vocal minority who seemingly found such intrusions into their daily routine unacceptable and un-American.

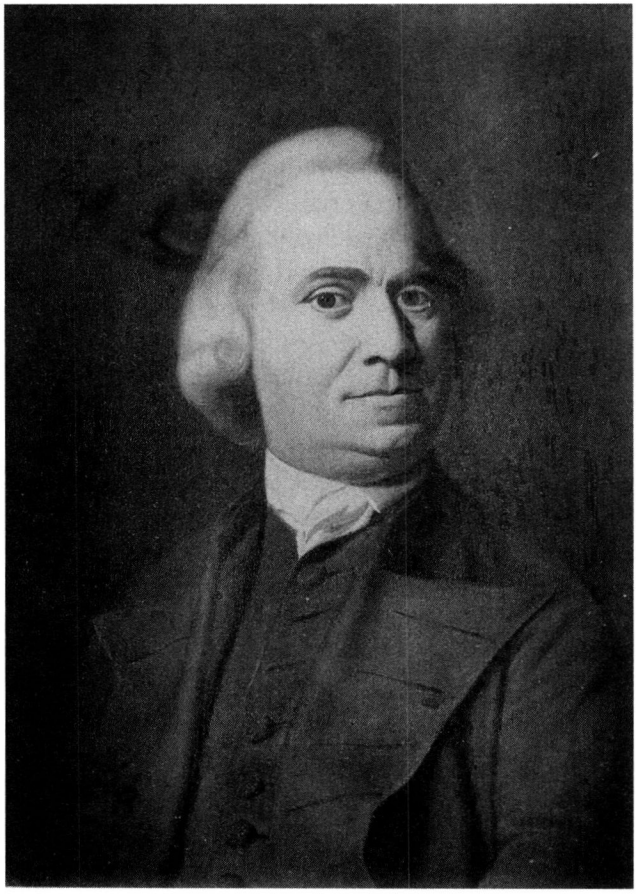
The recent electoral successes of 2010 for T.E.A. Party-backed candidates strongly suggest that, under circumstances similar to those of the late 18th century, modern Americans remain equally as cynical as their revolutionary predecessors toward government and its officials and as unsympathetic and distrustful of government's underlying goals and regulatory policies. In both cases there seems to have taken place a substantial deterioration in the underpinning of trust that is necessary between the governed and the government.

A central theme of all recorded history has been the use or abuse of power—how it lurks in the shadows behind the professed idealism of politicians and reformers and the compelling reasons they expound when they encourage their followers to expand their influence and thereby secure for themselves the privileges enjoyed by their class or their associates, even unto war. Compelling and persuasive words are often used to cloak from closer scrutiny those who would wield political power indiscriminately and redistribute it unfairly among themselves or their supporters. In a crisis, whether real or imagined, both sides seem swayed more by the demagogue than the compromiser, and the best dissembler is often thought to be in ascendance. Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian of the Peloponnesian Wars, urged historians to embrace a healthy skepticism in their analysis of grand events and impressive speeches and to look to personal self-interest rather than publicized grievances and high-sounding intentions when writing their analyses. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, historians and chroniclers are privileged to enter their task where they choose, to come and go as through keyholes, to ride upon the winds of events, to overcome with their pen all the obstacles of distance, time, and place.[13]

Because the American Revolution gave birth to a nation, it has received the attention of countless historians, yet few have produced serious studies of the role of tea in America or of the integration and implications of business, society, politics, and religion in an import-based, mercantile economic model like that in the colonies. The Boston Tea Party itself is often reported as an amusing anecdote in the struggle between Britain and America, populated by fake Mohawks wielding tomahawks and urged on by a wild-eyed and slightly disheveled fanatic, Sam Adams, who railed against taxation without representation. Teachers are fond of this last concept, but few know that Cotton Mather raised the question of representation from the pulpit in a different war almost eight decades earlier (1689). It was resurrected in

the political ranting of James Otis and finally made popular in Sam Adams' cutting series of articles in the *Boston Gazette* (1764–1772).

Shaking from palsy, weakened with age, disheveled, and poorly dressed in the crisis of the revolution that he had supported for almost two decades, Sam Adams is somehow portrayed as less important to the achievement of independence than his more reserved and erudite cousin, the future president, John Adams. Had Sam left a treasure trove of touching and whimsical letters to his wife, fathered a future president (or even a lowly congressman), and been portrayed as the main protagonist in a hit Broadway play and film *1776*, he would



The American radical and founder Samuel Adams in his prime. (Library of Congress)

perhaps have been better served by history. Yet in recent years, a like-minded segment of the voting public has rediscovered Sam Adams, the small government radical and firebrand revolutionary.

Many historians and academics writing during the 19th century took liberties with the facts surrounding the first Tea Party. The term *Boston Tea Party* did not appear in print in an American published history before 1834. Previous histories, many printed in Britain, began their chronologies with the aftermath of the Tea Party or skipped over it completely. "It became fashionable for American historians to make the 18th-century British look less oppressive and more sympathetic than they actually were by depicting Samuel Adams as a hate-filled and cunning conniver."[14] These 19th-century Federalist Era historians portrayed their revolutionary forbears as political geniuses and religious paragons. Sam Adams exhibited too many human foibles to fit the mold of genius, and James Otis became too clearly insane to stand long as a paragon. These Federalist writers also generally failed to note that the so-called Founders of the American republic were also inflexible ideologues and materialistic profit seekers caught up in the economic undercurrents surrounding the death of a mercantilist age and the birth of a capitalist one—a capitalism that gave these Federalist Era commentators the financial wherewithal to spend time writing history books in the first place.

Among the objectives of this book is an effort to relieve the reader of the many myths surrounding the Boston Tea Party. Although the incident warms the pens of historians and arouses the popular imagination with regard to calls for liberty and independence and protests against unfair taxation and tyrannical government, it was neither the only nor the most effective outpouring of Anglo-American ire toward the Crown during the 18th century. Moreover, although none called for their taxes to be raised, not all Americans agreed with the ongoing protestations. In fact, even a tenuous consensus for protest was not to be had outside New England.

In 1774, as the revolutionary crisis approached, John Adams wrote to a friend saying that about one-third of Anglo-Americans were loyal to the British Crown, one-third in favor of the cause of independence, and one-third undecided or too timid to take a stance either way. The characterization of timidity made by Adams was patently unfair. Most Anglo-Americans were deeply conscious of their British roots. Some, like Sam Adams, James Otis, and the radicals who hotly pursued independence, were anxious to remove the "Anglo" from their Anglo-American identity. Many more colonials simply could not countenance

the traumatic loss of any part of their British being and were willing to take up arms as Loyalists.

For others—among them men of cooler political temper—submission to a traditional monarchial authority restrained by law, custom, and Constitution seemed preferable to submission to a new and untested American authority openly supported by mob violence and underwritten by foreign agents and recent former enemies. A successful Franco-American farmer living in New York and married to an Anglo-American woman, Hector St. John de Crévecoeur, a British subject by choice rather than by birth, anguished over the dilemma presented to him by loyalty to the traditions of monarchical rule or the innovations of an untried democracy. "How easily do men pass from loving, to hating and cursing one another!" he wrote. "I am a lover of peace."[15] Ultimately, these last undecided citizens were overwhelmed by the breaking storm.[16]

Much of what had happened at Griffin's Wharf was the end product of careful, long, and tireless planning, as well as many years of active protests and previous demonstrations targeting government policy. The signs of unrest appearing in the newssheets and diaries of the 18th century provide evidence of this underlying turmoil and are eerily similar to those troubling reports populating the tweets, blogs, and Facebook pages of an online America in the 21st century—unresponsive and arrogant government officials, insecure borders, non-Anglo immigrants, ethnic, racial, and religious hatreds, unfunded mandates, increasing taxation, ill-advised legislation, uninhibited corruption and cronyism, big business bailouts, bloated government spending, excessive executive compensation, partisan bickering, an angry and outspoken populace, and an economy seemingly on the verge of collapse under the weight of senseless regulations, a deficiency of currency, monetary devaluation, lack of credit, a debt crisis, and questionable leadership.

Some of the factors that spawned the Boston Tea Party were more than a decade in the making, with the Proclamation of 1763 and the Stamp Act of 1764 generally being assigned as points of departure between colonial acquiescence and active resistance to royal governance. The enervating Sugar Act and the Currency Act of 1764, the restrictive Townshend Acts of 1767 and 1769, and the despised East India Company Act and the Tea Act of 1773 followed.

As the reader will discover, 1764 was not a good year in American colonial history. Nothing that happened was immediately overwhelming, but nearly everything that happened had awe-inspiring