

First Continental Congress

In 1774, the British Parliament passed a series of laws collectively known as the Intolerable Acts, with the intent to suppress unrest in colonial Boston by closing the port and placing it under martial law. In response, colonial protestors led by a group called the Sons of Liberty issued a call for a boycott.

Merchant communities were reluctant to participate in such a boycott unless there were mutually agreed upon terms and a means to enforce the boycott's provisions.

Across North America, colonists rose in solidarity with the people of Massachusetts. Goods arrived in Massachusetts from as far south as Georgia, and by late spring 1774, nine of the colonies called for a continental congress. Virginia's Committee of Correspondence is largely credited with originating the invitation. The colony of Connecticut was the first to respond.

Colonial legislatures empowered delegates to attend a Continental Congress which would set terms for a boycott. The colonies elected delegates to the First Continental Congress in various ways. Some delegates were elected through their respective colonial legislatures or committees of correspondence.

The Congress first convened in Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on September 5, 1774, with delegates from each of the 13 colonies except Georgia. (Georgia was facing a war with neighboring Native American tribes and the colony did not want to jeopardize British assistance.)

The good people of the several colonies of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Newcastle, Kent, and Sussex on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina and South-Carolina, justly alarmed at these arbitrary proceedings of parliament and administration, have severally elected, constituted, and appointed deputies to meet, and sit in general Congress, in the city of Philadelphia, in order to obtain such establishment, as that their religion, laws, and liberties, may not be subverted ...

First Continental Congress Delegates:

New Hampshire: John Sullivan, Nathaniel Folsom

Massachusetts Bay: John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Cushing, Robert Treat Paine

Rhode Island: Stephen Hopkins, Samuel Ward

Connecticut: Eliphalet Dyer, Roger Sherman, Silas Deane

New York: Isaac Low, John Alsop, John Jay, Philip Livingston, James Duane, William Floyd, Henry Wisner, Simon Boerum

New Jersey: James Kinsey, William Livingston, Stephen Crane, Richard Smith, John De Hart

Pennsylvania: Joseph Galloway, John Dickinson, Charles Humphreys, Thomas Mifflin, Edward Biddle, John Morton, George Ross

Delaware: Caesar Rodney, Thomas McKean, George Read

Maryland: Matthew Tilghman, Thomas Johnson, William Paca, Samuel Chase, Robert Goldsborough

Virginia: Peyton Randolph, Richard Henry Lee, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Richard Bland, Benjamin Harrison, Edmund Pendleton

North Carolina: William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, Richard Caswell

South Carolina: Henry Middleton, Thomas Lynch, Jr., Christopher Gadsden, John Rutledge, Edward Rutledge



As delegates pondered the fate of Massachusetts, Joseph Warren and a committee of men from Suffolk County, Massachusetts, formulate a plan of resistance. Proposed on September 9, 1774 and, speaking with one voice, the delegates unanimously endorse the document on September 17, their first official act.

This plan encouraged Massachusetts to protest the Intolerable Acts by stockpiling military supplies, operating an independent government, boycotting British goods, and announcing no allegiance to Britain and a king who failed to consider the wishes of the colonists.

Reaction to these Resolves was mixed. While some supported such a bold proposal and felt it was an appropriate reaction to the British, others feared it would cause war.

Debate was later stalled for weeks while a statement of American rights was debated at length. Producing this statement required answering constitutional questions that had been asked for over a century.

The hardest constitutional question surrounded Britain's right to regulate trade. Joseph Galloway, a conservative delegate from Pennsylvania, insisted on releasing a statement clarifying Britain's right to regulate trade in the American colonies. However, other delegates were opposed to giving Britain explicit rights to colonial trade.

During this debate, Galloway introduced A Plan of Union between the American Colonies and Britain. The Plan of Union called for the creation of a Colonial Parliament that would work hand-in-hand with the

British Parliament. The British monarch would appoint a President General and the colonial assemblies would appoint delegates for a three-year term. Galloway's plan was defeated in a 6-5 vote.

On October 14, 1774, the First Continental Congress adopted their Declaration and Resolves. This stated the group's objections to the Coercive Acts, listed the rights of the colonists, and itemized objections to British rule beyond the Intolerable Acts.

The list of rights insisted that Colonists were "entitled to life, liberty, and property" and "that foundation of English liberty, and of all free government, is a right in the people to participate in their legislative council,"

Whereupon the deputies so appointed being now assembled, in a full and free representation of these colonies, taking into their most serious consideration, the best means of attaining the ends aforesaid, do, in the first place, as Englishmen, their ancestors in like cases have usually done, for asserting and vindicating their rights and liberties, DECLARE,

That the inhabitants of the English colonies in North-America, by the immutable laws of nature, the principles of the English constitution, and the several charters or compacts, have the following RIGHTS:

Resolved, N.C.D. 1. That they are entitled to life, liberty and property: and they have never ceded to any foreign power whatever, a right to dispose of either without their consent.

Resolved, N.C.D. 2. That our ancestors, who first settled these colonies, were at the time of their emigration from the mother country, entitled to all the rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural- born subjects, within the realm of England.

Resolved, N.C.D. 3. That by such emigration they by no means forfeited, surrendered, or lost any of those rights, but that they were, and their descendants now are, entitled to the exercise and enjoyment of all such of them, as their local and other circumstances enable them to exercise and enjoy.

Resolved, 4. That the foundation of English liberty, and of all free government, is a right in the people to participate in their legislative council: and as the English colonists are not represented, and from their local and other circumstances, cannot properly be represented in the British parliament, they are entitled to a free and exclusive power of legislation in their several provincial legislatures, where their right of representation can alone be preserved, in all cases of taxation and internal polity, subject only to the negative of their sovereign, in such manner as has been heretofore used and accustomed ...

Resolved, N.C.D. 5. That the respective colonies are entitled to the common law of England, and more especially to the great and inestimable privilege of being tried by their peers of the vicinage, according to the course of that law.

Resolved, N.C.D. 6. That they are entitled to the benefit of such of the English statutes, as existed at the time of their colonization; and which they have, by experience, respectively found to be applicable to their several local and other circumstances.

Resolved, N.C.D. 7. That these, his Majesty's colonies, are likewise entitled to all the immunities and privileges granted and confirmed to them by royal charters, or secured by their several codes of provincial laws.

Resolved, N.C.D. 8. That they have a right peaceably to assemble, consider of their grievances, and petition the king; and that all prosecutions, prohibitory proclamations, and commitments for the same, are illegal.

Resolved, N.C.D. 9. That the keeping a standing army in these colonies, in times of peace, without the consent of the legislature of that colony, in which such army is kept, is against law.

Resolved, N.C.D. 10. It is indispensably necessary to good government, and rendered essential by the English constitution, that the constituent branches of the legislature be independent of each other;

that, therefore, the exercise of legislative power in several colonies, by a council appointed, during pleasure, by the crown, is unconstitutional, dangerous and destructive to the freedom of American legislation.

All and each of which the aforesaid deputies, in behalf of themselves, and their constituents, do claim, demand, and insist on, as their indubitable rights and liberties, which cannot be legally taken from them, altered or abridged by any power whatever, without their own consent, by their representatives in their several provincial legislature.

In the course of our inquiry, we find many infringements and violations of the foregoing rights, which, from an ardent desire, that harmony and mutual intercourse of affection and interest may be restored, we pass over for the present, and proceed to state such acts and measures as have been adopted since the last war, which demonstrate a system formed to enslave America. ...

Furthermore, the delegates promptly began drafting and discussing the Continental Association. This would become their most important policy outcome. The Continental Association, adopted October 20, 1774, reaffirmed the Colonists' British connections and allegiance to the King,

We his Majesty's most dutiful and loyal Subjects, the Delegates of the several Colonies of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Three Lower Counties of Newcastle, Kent, and Sussex, on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina,

deputed to represent them in a Continental Congress, held in the City of Philadelphia on the 5th Day of September 1774,

avowing our Allegiance to his Majesty, our Affection and Regard for our Fellow Subjects in Great Britain and elsewhere,

However, it also expressed their objection to the actions in 1763. (In 1763, the British government emerged from the French and Indian/Seven Years' War burdened by heavy debts. This led British Prime Minister George Grenville to prohibit colonists from settling on lands acquired from the war and increase revenue for the British Government and served to increase the taxes paid by the colonists.)

affected with the deepest Anxiety, and most alarming Apprehensions at those Grievances and Distresses with which his Majesty's American Subject^s are oppressed, and having taken under our most serious Deliberation the State of the ^whole Continent,

find that the present unhappy Situation of our Affairs is occasioned by a ruinous System of Colony Administration, adopted by the British Ministry about the Year 1763, evidently calculated for enslaving these Colonies, and, with them, the British Empire



Carpenters' Hall – Site of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Association called for an end to British imports starting in December 1774 and an end to exporting goods to Britain in September 1775. This policy would be enforced by local and colony-wide committees of inspection.

These committees would check ships that arrived in ports, force colonists to sign documents pledging loyalty to the Continental Association, and suppress mob violence. The committees of inspection even enforced frugality, going so far as to end lavish funeral services and parties. Many colonial leaders hoped these efforts would bond the colonies together economically.

Virginia secured the Continental Association's delay in ending exports to Britain. Before the Continental Congress, Virginia had passed its own association that delayed ending exports to avoid hurting farmers with a sudden change in policy. The delegates from Virginia showed up to the Continental Congress united, and refused to waiver on the issue of delaying the ban on exports to Britain.

The idea of using non-importation as leverage was neither new nor unexpected. Prior to the Continental Congress, eight colonies had already endorsed the measure and merchants had been warned against placing any orders with Britain, as a ban on importation was likely to pass.

Some colonies had already created their own associations to ban importation and, in some cases, exportation. The Virginia Association had passed at the Virginia Convention with George Washington in attendance.

Washington's support of using non-importation as leverage against the British can be traced back as far as 1769 in letters between him and George Mason. When the colonies first started publicly supporting non-importation, Bryan Fairfax, a longtime friend of Washington's, wrote to him urging him to not support the Continental Association and to instead petition Parliament.

Washington dismissed this suggestion, writing "we have already Petitiond his Majesty in as humble, & dutiful a manner as Subjects could do." Washington, like many delegates at the First Continental Congress, no longer saw petitioning as a useful tool in changing Parliament's ways.

Many delegates felt that using the Continental Association as leverage would be impractical without explicit demands and a plan of redress. However, Congress struggled to come up with a list of rights, grievances, and demands.

Furthermore, to only repeal laws that were unfavorable to the delegates without a list of rights would be a temporary fix to the larger issue of continued British abuse. To address these issues, Congress formed a Grand Committee.

Finally, at the end of the First Continental Congress, the delegates adopted a Petition addressed to "The King's Most Excellent Majesty" on October 26, 1774. In part, it states,

WE your majesty's faithful subjects of the colonies of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts-Bay, Rhode-Island and Providence plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, the counties of Newcastle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, and South-Carolina,

in behalf of ourselves and the inhabitants of those colonies, who have deputed us to represent them in general congress, by this our humble petition, beg leave to lay our grievances before the throne. ...

By several acts of parliament made in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth years of your majesty's reign, duties are imposed on us, for the purpose of raising a revenue, and the powers of admiralty and vice-admiralty courts are extended beyond their ancient limits, whereby our property is taken from us without our consent ;

the trial by jury, in many civil cases, is abolished ; enormous forfeitures are incurred for slight offences ; vexatious informers are exempted from paying damages to which they are justly liable, and oppressive security is required from owners before they are allowed to defend their rights.

Both houses of parliament have resolved, that the colonists may be tried in England for offences alleged to have been committed in America, by virtue of a statute passed in the thirty-fifth year of Henry the eighth ; and in consequence thereof attempts have been made to enforce that statute. ...

To a sovereign, who "glories in the name of Briton, 'the bare recital of these acts must, we presume, justify the loyal subjects who fly to the foot of his throne and implore his clemency for protection against them.

From this destructive system of colony administration, adopted since the conclusion of the late war, have flowed those distresses, dangers, fears, and jealousies, that overwhelm your majesty's dutiful colonists with affliction ...

Had our creator been pleased to give us existence in a land of slavery, the sense of our condition might have been mitigated by ignorance and habit ; but, thanks be to his adorable goodness, we were born the heirs of freedom, and ever enjoyed our rights under the auspices of your royal ancestors, whose family was seated on the British throne to rescue and secure a pious and gallant nation from the popery and despotism of a superstitious and inexorable tyrant.

Your majesty, we are confident, justly rejoices, that your title to the crown is thus founded on the title of your people to liberty ; and therefore we doubt not but your royal wisdom must approve the sensibility that teaches your subjects anxiously to guard the blessing they received from divine providence, and thereby to prove the performance of that compact which elevated the illustrious house of Brunswick to the imperial dignity it now possesses.

The apprehension of being degraded into a state of servitude from the pre-eminent rank of English freeman, while our minds retain the strongest love of liberty, and clearly foresee the miseries preparing for us and our posterity, excites emotions in our hearts which, though we cannot describe, we should not wish to conceal.

Feeling as men, and thinking as subjects, in the manner we do, silence would be disloyalty.

By giving this faithful information we do all in our power to promote the great objects of your royal cares, the tranquillity of your government and the welfare of your people. ...



Yielding to no British subjects, in affectionate attachment to your majesty's person, family, and government, we too dearly prize that privilege of expressing that attachment, by those proofs which are honourable to the prince who receives them, and to the people who give them, ever to resign it to any body of men upon earth. ...

We ask but for peace, liberty and safety. We wish not a diminution of the prerogative, nor do we solicit the grant of any new right in our favour. Your royal authority over us and our connection with Great-Britain, we shall always carefully and zealously endeavour to support and maintain.

Filled with sentiments of duty to your majesty and affection to the parent state, deeply impressed by our education and strongly confirmed by our reason ;

and anxious to evince the sincerity of these dispositions, we present this petition only to obtain redress of grievances and relief from fears and jealousies, occasioned by the system of statutes and regulations adopted since the close of the late war, for raising a revenue in America, extending the power of courts of Admiralty, and Vice-Admiralty, trying persons in Great-Britain for offences alledged to be committed in America, affecting the province of Massachusetts-bay, and altering the government, and extending the limits of Quebec, by the abolition of which system, the harmony between Great-Britain and these colonies, so necessary to the happiness of both, and so ardently desired by the latter, and usual intercourses, will be immediately restored.

In the magnanimity and justice of your majesty and parliament, we confide for a redress of our other grievances, trusting, that when the causes of our apprehensions are removed, our future conduct will prove us not unworthy of the regard we have been accustomed in our happier days to enjoy. ...

Permit us then, most gracious sovereign, in the name of all your faithful people in America, with the utmost humility to implore you, for the honour of Almighty God, whose pure religion our enemies are undermining ; for your glory, which can be advanced only by rendering your subjects happy, and keeping them united ; for the interest of your family depending on an adherence to the principles that enthroned it ; for the safety and welfare of your kingdoms and dominions threatened with almost unavoidable dangers and distresses :

That your Majesty, as the loving father of your whole people, connected by the same bands of law, loyalty, faith and blood, though dwelling in various countries, will not suffer the transcendent relation formed by these ties, to be farther violated, in uncertain expectation of effects, that if attained, never can compensate for the calamities through which they must be gained.

We therefore most earnestly beseech your majesty, that your royal authority and interposition may be used for our relief, and that a gracious answer may be given to this petition.

That your majesty may enjoy every felicity, through a long and glorious reign, over loyal and happy subjects, and that your descendants may inherit your prosperity and dominions, till time shall be no more, is, and always will be, our sincere and fervent prayer.

Many delegates were skeptical about changing the king's attitude towards the colonies, but believed that every opportunity should be exhausted to de-escalate the conflict before taking more radical action.

They did not draft such a letter to the British Parliament as the colonists viewed the Parliament as the aggressor behind the recent Intolerable Acts. Not fully expecting the standoff in Massachusetts to explode into full-scale war, the Congress agreed to reconvene in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775.

By the time Congress met again, war was already underway, and thus the delegates to the Second Continental Congress formed the Continental Army and dispatched George Washington to Massachusetts as its commander.

Information here is primarily from US State Department; Mount Vernon Foundation; Massachusetts Historical Society; US History-org

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young