

Sons of Liberty

In 1765 the American Stamp Act was introduced into Parliament by Mr. Grenville; in support, Mr. Charles Townshend concluded an able speech in its support by exclaiming,

“And now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished by our indulgence until they are grown to a degree of strength and opulence; and protected by our arms; will they grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burthen which we lie under?”

“On this colonel Barre rose, and, after explaining some passages in his speech, took up Mr. Townsend's concluding words in a most spirited and inimitable manner, saying,

They planted by your care! No, your oppressions planted them in America.

They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country, where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable; and among others, to the cruelties of a savage foe, the most subtle, and I will take upon me to say, the most formidable of any people upon the face of God's earth;

and yet, actuated by principles of true English liberty, they met all hardships with pleasure, compared with those they suffered in their own country from the hands of those that should have been their friends.

They nourished by your indulgence! They grew by your neglect of them.

As soon as you began to care about them, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule them, who were, perhaps, the deputies of deputies to some members of this House, sent to spy out their liberties, to misrepresent their actions, and to prey upon them; men whose behaviour on many occasions has caused the blood of these Sons of Liberty to recoil within them;

men promoted to the highest seats of justice; some who to my knowledge were glad, by going to a foreign country, to escape being brought to the bar of a Court of Justice in their own.

They protected by your arms! They have nobly taken up arms in your defence; have exerted a valour amidst their constant and laborious industry, for the defence of a country, whose frontier was drenched in blood, while its interior parts yielded all its little savings to your emolument.

And believe me,-remember I this day told you so, the same spirit of freedom which actuated that people at first will accompany them still, but prudence forbids me to explain myself further.

God knows I do not at this time speak from motives of party heat; what I deliever are the genuine sentiments of my heart.

However superior to me in general knowledge and experience the respectable body of this house may be, yet I claim to know more of America than most of you.

The people, I believe, are as truly loyal as any subjects the king has; but a people jealous of their liberties, and who will vindicate them if ever they should be violated. But the subject is too delicate. I will say no more.

“These sentiments were thrown out so entirely without premeditation, so forcibly and so firmly, and the breaking off was so beautifully abrupt, that the whole house sat a while amazed, intently looking, without answering a word.” (History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America, Gordon)



Col. Isaac Barre

Sons of Liberty was an organization formed in the American colonies in the summer of 1765 to oppose the Stamp Act. The Sons of Liberty took their name from this speech given in the British Parliament by Isaac Barré (February 1765), in which he referred to the colonials who had opposed unjust British measures as the “sons of liberty.”

The origins of the Sons of Liberty are unclear, but some of the organization’s roots can be traced to the Loyal Nine, a secretive Boston political organization.

Loyal Nine

The Loyal Nine (“Loyall Nine”), a well-organized Patriot political organization shrouded in secrecy, was formed in 1765 by nine likeminded citizens of Boston to protest the passing of the Stamp Act.

“Little reliable documentary information is available on the organization known as the Loyal Nine. Consequently the group has remained something of a historical mystery. The group appears to have acted as liaison between the radical policy makers such as Samuel Adams and James Otis, Jr, and street-level activists, especially Ebenezer Mackintosh and Samuel Swift.”

“The Loyal Nine included. John Avery, a distiller and club secretary; John Smith and Stephen Cleverly, both Braziers [one who works in brass]; Thomas Crafts, a printer; Benjamin Eades, who along with John Gill produced an important Boston Gazette; Thomas Chase, a distiller; Joseph Field, a ship’s captain; George Trott, a jeweler; and Henry Bass, a merchant who was related to Samuel Adams.”

“This political organization acted in the tradition of Elisha Cooke’s Caucus, playing a vital role in formulating, coordinating, and implementing country party opposition to royal authority.” (Walmsley)

The Loyal Nine evolved into the larger group Sons of Liberty and were arguably influential in that organization.

Liberty Tree

The Boston chapter of the Sons of Liberty often met under cover of darkness beneath the “Liberty Tree,” a stately elm tree in Hanover Square (at the corner of Essex Street and Orange Street (the latter of which was renamed Washington Street)).

On the night of January 14, 1766, John Adams stepped into a tiny room in a Boston distillery to meet with a radical secret society. “Spent the Evening with the Sons of Liberty, at their own Apartment in Hanover Square, near the Tree of Liberty,” Adams wrote.

Over punch and wine, biscuits and cheese, and tobacco, Adams and the Sons of Liberty discussed their opposition to Britain's hated Stamp Act, which required that American colonists pay a tax on nearly every document they created.

Mortgages, deeds, contracts, court papers and shipping papers, newspapers and pamphlets – all had to be printed on paper with tax stamps. (Smithsonian)

Throwing off the British and creating a new nation required a mix of Adams' approach and the Loyal Nine's: both high-minded arguments about natural rights and angry crowds' threats and violence.



After his visit, Adams assured his diary that he heard “No plotts, no Machinations” from the Loyal Nine, just gentlemanly chat about their plans to celebrate when the Stamp Act was repealed. “I wish they mayn't be disappointed,” Adams wrote.

Throughout these early years before the revolution, the ancient elm across from the distillery became Massachusetts' most potent symbol of revolt. In the decade before the Revolutionary War, images of the Liberty Tree, as it became known, spread across New England and beyond: colonists christened other Liberty Trees in homage to the original.

Yet unlike Boston's other revolutionary landmarks, such as the Old North Church and Faneuil Hall, the Liberty Tree is nearly forgotten today. Maybe that's because the British army chopped down the tree in 1775. Or maybe it's because the Liberty Tree symbolizes the violent, mob-uprising, tar-and-feathers side of the American Revolution – a side of our history that's still too radical for comfort. (Smithsonian)

The Stamp Act was passed, over the strong objections of American colonists, in order to help pay off the massive debt incurred by the British government during the French and Indian War. The act was important in that it united many of the colonies in their opposition to British rule.

On August 14, 1765, violence broke out in colonial Boston. Over the course of that day and several ensuing days, rioters attacked several buildings in the city, including the homes of colonial officials.

The protest resulted from the Stamp Act, passed by the British Parliament on March 22, which would require the colonists to pay taxes on most circulating paper items-such as pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, playing cards, and legal and insurance documents.



The August riot, which arose largely from the agitation of this group, contributed to the eventual repeal of the Stamp Act. The Sons of Liberty claimed as members many of the later leaders of the Revolution, including Paul Revere, John Adams, and Samuel Adams.

The Sons of Liberty rallied support for colonial resistance through the use of petitions, assemblies, and propaganda, and they sometimes resorted to violence against British officials. Instrumental in preventing the enforcement of the Stamp Act, they remained an active pre-Revolutionary force against the crown. (Britannica)

For a number of years after the Stamp Act riot, the Sons of Liberty organized annual celebrations to commemorate the event.

In 1768, the city had a parade and a large gathering at the Liberty Tree near Boston Common, where Andrew Oliver, the stamp-distributor elect, had hanged in effigy during the 1765 riot.

In 1769, 350 members of the Sons of the Liberty attended a great dinner under a tent at the Liberty Tree Tavern in Dorchester. The revelers flew flags, played music, fired cannons, and offered up 45 toasts to everything from "All true Patriots throughout the World" to "The Speedy Removal of all Task Masters."

John Adams, one of the participants, reflected in his diary that such patriotic celebrations "tinge the Minds of the People, they impregnate them with the sentiments of Liberty. They render the People fond of their Leaders in the Cause, and averse and bitter against all opposers." Adams also noted that despite the dozens of toasts, "I did not see one Person intoxicated."

Due to the increasing success of the Sons of Liberty, the British Parliament eased many of the duties in the colonies. However, the Parliament continued the high tax on tea, as the British Crown desperately needed money.

Via the Tea Act, the British Government was forcing the colonists to pay extremely high taxes on British tea, while the British tea importers paid no taxes or import duties. These actions created a monopoly for the British East India Company in the colonial tea market, undercutting local merchants and other foreign tea importers.

In 1773, the refusal to pay for British tea on behalf of the colonists fell upon deaf ears, and the East India Company's trading ships were to enter Boston Harbor to sell the tea. However, rather than purchase the tea, on the night of December 16th, 1773 the Sons of Liberty boarded the trade ships docked in Griffin's Wharf and threw the shipments of tea overboard in an event known as the Boston Tea Party.

Members of the Sons of Liberty allied with local patriot tea merchants, smugglers of Dutch tea, and any patriot infuriated by the taxation without representation to wear traditional Native American garments to signify that these colonials identify more with their American roots rather than their status as British subjects. After three hours, over 342 chests of tea were heaved into the harbor. The destruction of the tea imports cost the British Empire, valued today at over \$1,700,000.

In retaliation, the British Government passed the Intolerable Acts, which were called the Coercive Acts in the colonies. These Acts covered four major points. The Act shut down Boston Harbor, suspended trials by jury, prohibited elections and the meeting of the state assembly, and aggressively forced the quartering of British soldiers in private buildings and homes.

Eventually, the patriotic resistance to British rule became too much to handle and revolution and war was inevitable. When lawmakers of Virginia gathered in 1775 to discuss negotiations with the British King, Sons of Liberty member, Patrick Henry exclaimed to the Second Virginia Convention "Give me liberty or give me death!"

Thus, cementing the American stance for independence from British rule and initiating the American commitment to the Revolutionary War. (Battlefields)

Information here is primarily from History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America; Smithsonian, Britannica, Patrician, Massachusetts Historical Society; Battlefields

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