

Stamp Act (March 22, 1765)

The French and Indian War (1754-1763) was the North American phase of a worldwide conflict between Britain, the French and Native Americans. (The more-complex European phase was the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) involved all the great powers of Europe (generally, France, Austria, Saxony, Sweden, and Russia were aligned on one side against Prussia, Hanover, and Great Britain on the other.))

Despite facing such a formidable alliance, British naval strength and Spanish ineffectiveness led to British success. British forces seized French Caribbean islands, Spanish Cuba, and the Philippines. Fighting in Europe ended after a failed Spanish invasion of British ally Portugal.

By 1763, French and Spanish diplomats began to seek peace. In the resulting Treaty of Paris (1763), Great Britain secured significant territorial gains in North America, including all French territory east of the Mississippi river, as well as Spanish Florida, although the treaty returned Cuba to Spain.

The French and Indian War had been enormously expensive and left Great Britain with a heavy debt. And, the expense of protecting the English possessions in America seemed likely to increase rather than diminish. The war and the British government's attempts to impose taxes on colonists to help cover these expenses resulted in increasing colonial resentment of British attempts to expand imperial authority in the colonies.

One of the early taxes to be imposed was the Stamp Act. Its title and text noted it was,

An Act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, towards further defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the same; and for amending 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.

WHEREAS, by an act made in the last session of Parliament several duties were granted, continued, and appropriated toward defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the British colonies and plantations in America; and

whereas it is just and necessary that provision be made for raising a further revenue within your majesty's dominions in America toward defraying the said expenses;

we, your majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of Great Britain, in Parliament assembled, have therefore resolved to give and grant unto your majesty the several rates and duties hereinafter mentioned;

and do humbly beseech your majesty that it may be enacted, and be it enacted by the king's most excellent majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, that from and after the first day of November, one thousand seven hundred and sixty five, there shall be raised, levied, collected, and paid unto his majesty, his heirs, and successors, throughout the colonies and plantations in America, which now are, or hereafter may be, under the dominion of his majesty, his heirs and successors ...

Then, a long list of items related to *“every skin or piece of vellum or parchment, or sheet or piece of paper, on which shall be ingrossed, written or printed within such British Colonies .. [shall pay] a stamp duty ...”*

Effectively, the Act required the colonists to pay a tax, represented by a stamp. Included under the act were bonds, licenses, certificates, and other official documents as well as more mundane items such as plain parchment and playing cards. It imposed a tax on all papers and official documents in the American colonies, though not in England.

It was a direct tax imposed by the British government without the approval of the colonial legislatures and was payable in hard-to-obtain British sterling, rather than colonial currency.

Further, those accused of violating the Stamp Act could be prosecuted in Vice-Admiralty Courts, which had no juries and could be held anywhere in the British Empire. (Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History)



The colonists had recently been hit with three major taxes: the Sugar Act (1764), which levied new duties on imports of textiles, wines, coffee and sugar; the Currency Act (1764), which caused a major decline in the value of the paper money used by colonists; and the Quartering Act (1765), which required colonists to provide food and lodging to British troops under certain circumstances.

With the passing of the Stamp Act, the colonists’ grumbling finally became an articulated response to what they saw as the mother country’s attempt to undermine their economic strength and independence.

They raised the issue of taxation without representation, and formed societies throughout the colonies to rally against the British government and nobles who sought to exploit the colonies as a source of revenue and raw materials.

Although most colonists continued to accept Parliament’s authority to regulate their trade, they insisted that only their representative assemblies could levy direct, internal taxes, such as the one imposed by the Stamp Act.

While townspeople rioted, colonial assemblies debated. Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin were among the most influential voices arguing that since the American colonies were not represented in the British Parliament, that body had no right to tax them.

The British countered with the theory of virtual representation, which held that members of Parliament were obligated to defend the interests of British subjects and colonists alike.

In October 1765, delegates from the colonies convened in New York City at the Stamp Act Congress, where they drew up formal petitions to the British Parliament and to King George III to repeal the act. It was the first unified colonial response to British policy and it provided the British a taste of what would come soon thereafter.

The British had been receiving reports of mob violence in the colonies, and Prime Minister Grenville had been replaced by Lord Rockingham, who proved more sympathetic than his predecessor to the colonists' demands. (Khan Academy)

The colonists also took exception with the provision denying offenders trials by jury. A vocal minority hinted at dark designs behind the Stamp Act. These radical voices warned that the tax was part of a gradual plot to deprive the colonists of their freedoms and to enslave them beneath a tyrannical regime.

By October of that year, nine of the 13 colonies sent representatives to the Stamp Act Congress, at which the colonists drafted the "Declaration of Rights and Grievances," a document that railed against the autocratic policies of the mercantilist British empire.

Realizing that it actually cost more to enforce the Stamp Act in the protesting colonies than it did to abolish it, the British government repealed the tax the following year. (History-com)



Political cartoon showing a mock funeral procession for the Stamp Act, 1766. (Library of Congress)

Information here is primarily from Stamp-Act-History; Massachusetts Historical Society; Yale Law School; Britannica; Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History; History-com; Khan Academy

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