

Turmoil *in a* Teapot

One act of vandalism would challenge royal rule



Ironically, few Americans know the true and entire story of the original Tea Party and the patriots who staged it. In his new book *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution*, veteran journalist and colonial historian Harlow Giles Unger describes this pivotal event, whose dramatic political and economic consequences would affect almost every American then and today.

Bostonians had just stepped out of their homes to go to work when they spotted the notices on fence posts and trees: “Friends! Brethren! Countrymen! That worst of plagues, the detestable tea is now arrived. ... The hour of destruction or manly opposition to the machinations of tyranny stare you in the face.”

It was Monday morning at 9, Nov. 29, 1773, when the first church bell tolled, then a second, and another—until every church tower in the city rocked in the fearful crescendo. All but paralyzed

with fear by the din, neighbors glanced at each other, then began trotting down the narrow alleys to the waterfront. Shopkeepers who had just opened for business shuttered their doors and joined the flow of people—hundreds, at first, then thousands, from all directions swarming into the square in front of Faneuil Hall. All tried forcing their way in—rich, poor; merchants, craftsmen, farmers, shipfitters, seamen, laborers; men and boys; clubs, rifles, pistols, and a variety of missiles in hand, ready to shatter windows of the capitol or fire at the gods in heaven.

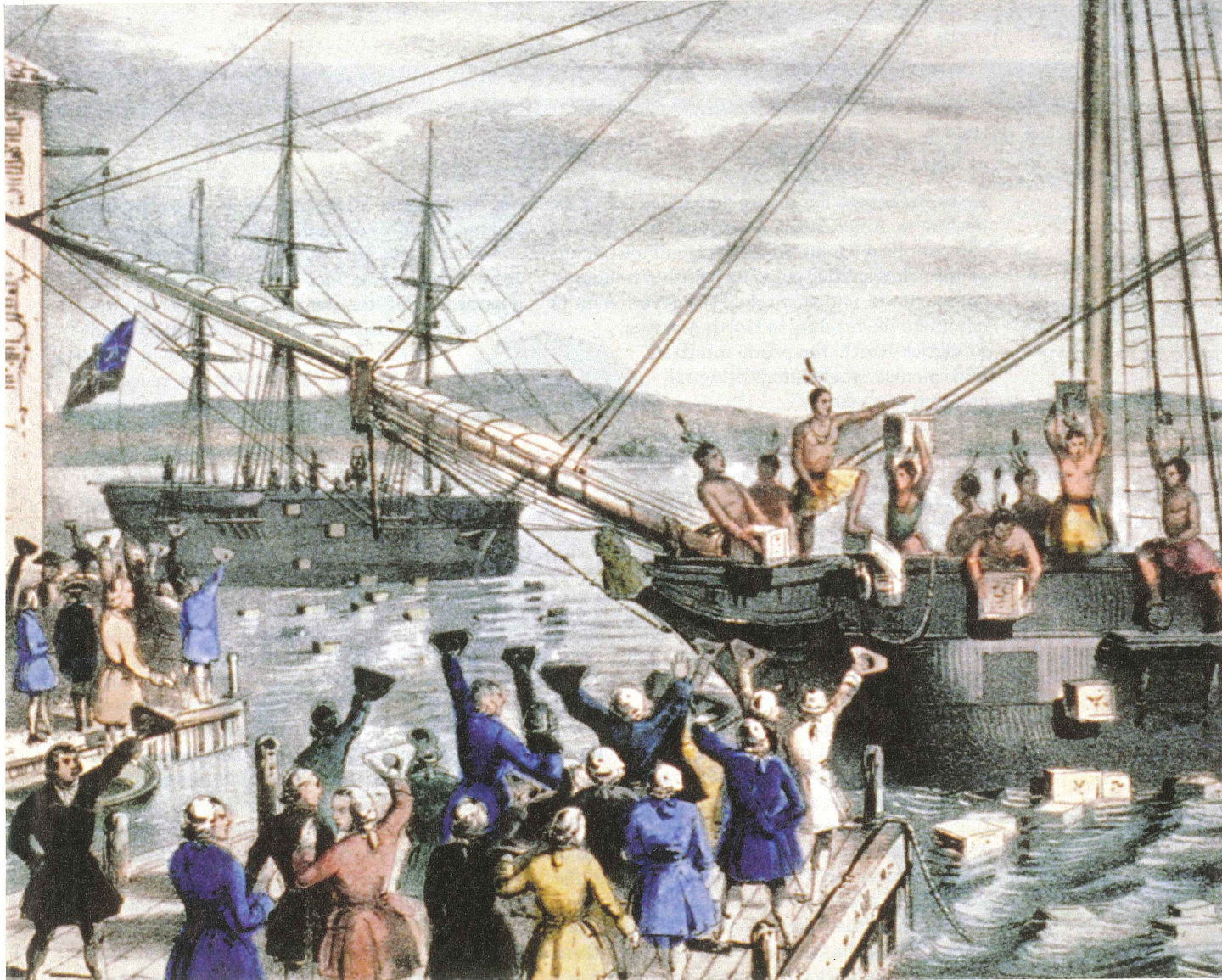
They called for the blood of those they hated—British officials, those who supported British rule, those who deprived them of what they perceived as liberty. They called for the overthrow of a government that had fostered their prosperity for generations and protected them from enemy attacks by hostile Indians, French troops, and Spanish conquistadors for a century and a half.

Massachusetts Chief Justice Peter Oliver puzzled over the tempest swirling around him: “For a colony which had been nursed in its infancy with the most tender care and attention ... to plunge into an unnatural rebellion ... must strike some with a degree of astonishment.” The cause of the ruckus was indeed astonishing: a 3-penny-per-pound tax on British tea, which was nothing more than a “social beverage” largely consumed by women as “a mark of civility and welcome.”

The largest, wealthiest merchant groups rou-



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tea, a mere social beverage.**



tinely paid whatever duties the government demanded and absorbed the tiny extra costs, but second-tier and third-tier merchants on the edge of failure evaded duties and tried to gain a competitive edge by buying low-cost, smuggled Dutch tea that they could sell at prices well below those of dutied English teas.

The British government, however, badly needed to collect those duties. It had accumulated debts of more than £1 million in the French and Indian War [1754-63] in the north and west, and Parliament was determined to step up tax enforcement to force Americans to assume more of the costs of their own defense.

On Aug. 1, 1768, 60 “Merchants and Traders of the Town of Boston” had adopted a sweeping two-part nonimportation agreement. The first part banned imports of paper, glass, painters’ colors, and tea beginning Jan. 1, 1769, “until the acts imposing duties on these articles are repealed.” The second part of the agreement was a one-year ban on all other products imported from Britain except 10 essentials, including salt, coals, fishhooks and lines, hemp, duck, and shot. In the months that

followed, merchant groups in New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island adopted similar agreements. [Most of the taxes were repealed in 1770, except the one on tea.]

Although men seldom drank it, the drinking of tea had become a quasi-religious ritual for Britain’s aristocrats along with those Americans—especially the ladies—who aped the mother country’s nobility. “They all drink tea in America—as they drink wine in the south of France,” one French observer concluded. Indeed, every home of substance had a silver, silver plate, or china tea service.

So it was inevitable that tea acquired a symbolic value that far exceeded its economic importance. Even some of Boston’s grandest dames joined the boycott. Many citizens turned to substitutes such as raspberry bush leaves (“a detestable drink, which the Americans had the heroism to find good”) and labradore or hyperion tea, an insipid concoction the American Indians had derived from the red root bush that grew in New England swamps.

By 1773, shares of the British East India Co. had plunged from 280 to 160 pence on the London

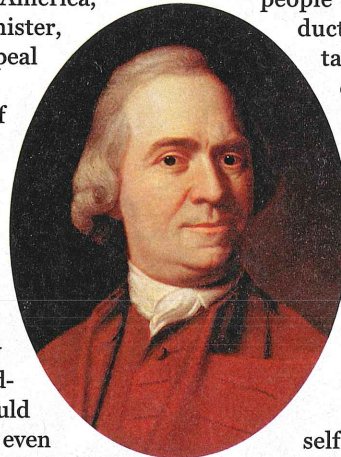
Men disguised as Mohawks raided ships in Boston Harbor, tossing their tea cargoes into the water.

Stock Exchange. The duties on tea had led to the decline in American consumption and left the company near bankruptcy, with 17 million pounds of unsold tea spilling out of its British warehouses. Although the company asked the government to eliminate the tea duty in North America, Frederick North, the prime minister, said colonists would interpret repeal as a sign of weakness.

Samuel Adams, a prominent patriot leader, was the chief agitator behind the Boston Tea Party.

Instead, Parliament, many of whose members owned East India shares, passed a new law: the Tea Act of 1773, which gave the company a tea monopoly in America by letting it appoint its own licensees to sell tea directly to consumers and bypass wholesalers and retailers. By eliminating “middle men,” a handful of East India Co. licensees would be able to sell tea at prices below even the cheapest smuggled tea, although they would drive untold numbers of small colonial merchants and shopkeepers out of business.

To compound the government’s blunder, the East India Co. named as agents in Massachusetts the two merchant-banking houses run by the sons of the royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson, and the sons of loyalist Richard Clarke, whose daughter had married one of the Hutchinson boys. Their appointment as East India Co. agents would now give them a monopoly on the tea trade in Massachusetts.



ots, he sought to strengthen his ties with Samuel Adams, a leading agitator and propagandist.

According to his cousin, the Boston attorney John Adams, Sam had the most thorough understanding of “the temper and character of the people” along with a gift for intellectual seduction. “Everywhere he went in every tavern, on the streets, he recruited ceaselessly for his rebellion against royal rule and those who had destroyed his father,” a brewery owner who had been all but bankrupted when Parliament outlawed a “land bank” he had started when the bank’s paper currency began undermining the value of British currency. This action converted the Adams family into bitter foes of British rule in America.

Hancock’s opportunity to ally himself with Adams came almost immediately when Benjamin Franklin, who served as agent for both Massachusetts and Pennsylvania in Britain, received a packet of letters that Gov. Hutchinson and his brother-in-law, Lt. Gov. Andrew Oliver, had sent to a friend in Parliament. The letters urged “an abridgment of English liberties” in the American colonies and stripping self-government from “the hands of the populace ... by degrees.”

Franklin sent the letters to Thomas Cushing, speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, who passed them on to Sam Adams. He read them to the House. A committee headed by Hancock concluded that the letters were “designed to overthrow the [provincial] government and introduce arbitrary rule into the Province.” Adams subsequently published them and sent copies to the king with a petition asking that Hutchinson and Oliver be removed from office.

In September 1773 the *Boston Gazette* reprinted a series of inflammatory articles against the Tea Act that had appeared in Philadelphia and New York newspapers. The articles argued that the government-backed East India Co. monopoly on tea sales would drive small merchants out of business, encourage the establishment of other government monopolies, and eventually destroy free enterprise. Sam Adams dusted off plans to send his mob to frighten East India Co. agents into resigning and to prevent ships from landing and offloading their tea.

In London, meanwhile, a few ship captains, including James Scott, who commanded John Hancock’s ship *Hayley*, refused to load their vessels with tea bound for America, but the East India Co. quickly bribed its way onto other vessels. By the



Sam Adams dusted off plans to send his mob to prevent ships from landing and **OFFLOADING THEIR TEA** in Boston Harbor.

The Bostonian John Hancock, a merchant king and one of America’s wealthiest men, had strong ties to the small merchants and shopkeepers whom he supplied as a wholesaler, but his wealth, his international merchant-banking enterprise, and his fleet of ships made him an intimate member of the plutocracy of large merchants like Hutchinson, Oliver, and others with deep loyalties to Mother England. Still, with no way of reconciling the Hutchinson-Clarke interests with those of Boston’s many wholesalers and small merchants, Hancock had no choice but to ally himself with the larger group. To solidify his leadership among the patri-

end of October, 1,700 chests, with one hundred pounds of tea in each, sailed off to America. On Saturday, November 27, the Dartmouth, the first of four ships bound for Boston, anchored outside the harbor, and the next day, as it glided to the wharf, Sam Adams and a group of his men prevented it from tying up.

On Monday, bells across the city pealed at 9. What began as a crowd of several hundred swelled to nearly 5,000, and organizers moved the meeting from Faneuil Hall to the more spacious Old South Meeting House. Adams called the meeting to order and moved that the tea be shipped back to England, duties unpaid. He ordered a watch on the wharf to prevent the Dartmouth from tying up and unloading its tea. Hancock jumped onto his horse and led the Corps of Cadets, a gentlemen's militia of 80 men, to pierside to help Adams's group.

The uproar climaxed on Thursday, Dec. 16, 1773, after the other ships had arrived. Thousands had pushed into the Old South Meeting House. According to Chief Justice Peter Oliver, "Thus assembled, they whiled away the time hissing and clapping, cursing and swearing until it grew near darkness and then the signal was given to act their deeds of darkness." A burst of blood-curdling war whoops from without silenced the huge congregation for a moment. "Rally, Mohawks!" came a cry from the rear—and again the terrifying whoops from beyond. From the pulpit, Sam Adams called out, "This meeting can do no more to save the country."

The doors of the church burst open, spilling congregants onto the stony parvis in the icy moonlit air. "Boston Harbor a teapot tonight!" someone shouted. "Hurrah for Griffin's Wharf!" answered another. "The Mohawks are come!" a third voice called.

Fifty or more men stood huddled in the shadows of the buildings opposite the church—blankets draped over their heads and shoulders, their faces smeared with lampblack. Posing as Indians, they wore tomahawks, knives, or pistols in their belts and carried an axe or hatchet in their hands. Together, they represented the first—the original—Tea Party patriots who would redound through

NOTHING WAS THOUGHT OF BUT THIS TAXATION,
AND THE EASIEST METHOD OF LIQUIDATION.

T-A-X

'T WAS ENOUGH TO VEX
THE SOULS OF THE MEN OF BOSTON TOWN,
TO READ THIS UNDER THE SEAL OF THE CROWN.



THEY WERE LOYAL SUBJECTS OF GEORGE THE THIRD;
SO THEY BELIEVED AND SO THEY AVERRED,
BUT THIS BRISTLING, OFFENSIVE PLACARD SET
ON THE WALLS, WAS WORSE THAN A BAYONET,

history as a collective symbol against government taxation without the consent of the taxed.

As the throng burst from the church, the Mohawks signaled to them to follow in silence toward the waterfront, until they reached Fort Hill. Other "Indians" stepped unobtrusively into the line of march along the way.

Three ships lay tied to the pier as the procession neared Griffin's Wharf. Armed guards protected the entrance, but stood away as the Indians approached. The crowd of followers halted on a rise above the wharf to watch the Indians as they boarded the ships. Like a swarm of locusts, the men

A Bostonian reads the royal proclamation announcing a new tea tax in the American colonies.



TURNING POINTS

Tea leaves collected after the protest by a resident of Dorchester Neck, now South Boston



spread out, with some attaching blocks and tackles to lift chests from the holds. Chest after chest rose from the darkness of the ship's bowels onto the decks, where axes and hatchets split their seams so expertly that spectators barely heard a sound.

"We resembled devils from the bottomless pit rather than men," recalled Joshua Wyeth, a 16-year-old blacksmith at the Tea Party. "Many of [us] were apprentices and journeymen, not a few, as was the case with myself, living with Tory masters."

We boarded the ship ... and our leader in a very stern and resolute manner, ordered the captain and crew to open the hatchways and hand us the hoisting tackle and ropes, assuring them that no harm was intended them. ... Some of our number



The Tea Party left government officials irate, with Chief Justice Peter Oliver calling it a "VILLAINOUS ACT."

jumped into the hold and passed the chests to the tackle. As they were hauled on deck, others knocked them open with axes, and others raised them to the railing and discharged their contents overboard. ... We were merry ... at the idea of making so large a cup of tea for the fishes.

A reporter from the *Massachusetts Gazette* was also on the scene:

In the space of three hours, they broke up three hundred and forty-two chests, which was the whole number in these vessels, and discharged their contents. ... When the tide rose, it floated the broken chests and the tea insomuch that the

surface of the water was filled there with a considerable way from the south part of the town to Dorchester Neck and lodged on the shores. ... The town was very quiet during the whole evening and the night following. Those who were from the country went home with a merry heart, and the next day joy appeared in almost every countenance, some on account of the destruction of the tea, others on account of the quietness with which it was effected.

The Tea Party left government officials irate, with Chief Justice Oliver condemning it as a "villainous act." Oliver pointed out that few, if any, of the men who dumped the tea into Boston Harbor that night could even explain their irrational behavior. None consumed as much tea as he did ale, rum, or whiskey; few had any objections to others consuming tea; and most bore no malice toward the East India Co., which owned the tea. On the surface, the Tea Party seemed a senseless act of vandalism.

It would also provoke a reign of terror in Boston and other American cities. Mobs dumped tea and burned tea ships in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and elsewhere—and Boston staged a second tea party a few months after the first one. Even so, John Adams called the Boston Tea Party nothing short of "magnificent" and insisted "it must have so important consequences, and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an epocha [sic] in History."

The "important consequences" of the Tea Party—social, political, and economic (including helping transform Americans into a nation of coffee drinkers)—would affect the minds, hearts, souls, and lives of almost every American then and now. These included, among others, a declaration of independence, a bloody revolution, and the modern world's first experiment in self-government. ●

Excerpted from *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* by Harlow Giles Unger (Da Capo Press, 2011).