

Episode 2 – Taxes & Tea: Tensions Mount

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** Welcome to Revolution Revisited, your crash course in the American Revolution. As the 250th anniversary of America's independence approaches, dive into the stories of Virginia's rebels, rule breakers, and rabble rousers who shaped a nation. This podcast is brought to you by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture and made possible by William and Karen Fralin.

[00:00:34] **Maggie Creech:** Welcome to Revolution Revisited. I'm your host, Maggie Creech. Today, we're focusing on a pivotal decade, 1763 to 1773. This was a time of simmering tension, shifting allegiances, and most of all, a growing realization among many colonists that their relationship with Britain was changing forever. Today, we're zeroing in on the taxes and policies that drove a wedge between Britain and its American colonies.

A story of escalating tensions, fiery debates, and yes, a whole lot of tea. Joining us is historian Rick Bell, an author and professor at the University of Maryland.

[00:01:12] **Dr. Richard Bell:** I'm Rick Bell. I'm a professor of history at the University of Maryland in College Park. I'm originally British by birth and perhaps by sense of humor as well, and I've written several books, and my next book is going to be a global history of the American Revolution.

[00:01:36] **Maggie Creech:** Let's start with the backdrop, Britain's financial state after the French and Indian War. After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Britain was in financial crisis. The war had drained their treasury, leaving them with unprecedented debt. Fighting on multiple continents is not cheap, and Britain had thrown everything it had at defeating France.

To put it bluntly, Britain was broke. And when you're broke, you start looking for new sources of income, and fast. The British government started to scramble to figure out how to pay off that debt.

[00:02:07] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Leaders in London have two reactions to the end of the global war against France and France's native allies. One is relief and a sense of triumph that they've overcome a global threat to the future of their rapidly expanding empire, especially in North America and in India, too. So, there is a sense of triumph that victory is sweet, especially when the victory is against France—Britain's oldest enemy. But that sense of triumph is certainly tempered by the extraordinary cost of victory.

Britain has thrown everything at winning that global war against France. It's thrown soldiers, it's thrown ships at that wartime fight, and it's thrown more money than Britain's ever spent on any overseas war that it's won before—which is another way of saying Britain's racked up a massive debt in fighting and winning that war against France. The British Treasury—His Majesty's treasury—is basically barren. Britain is on the verge of bankruptcy. Its own economy, domestic economy, is really suffering from years of being on a wartime footing.

And so that means that the British Finance Ministry, the Treasury, has to look for very significant new sources of revenue if it's ever going to rebuild the British public finances. One source of revenue is the British people back in Britain. And of course, there will be significant efforts to raise taxes on people back in Britain, something that Americans may not know much about, but it's certainly true.

And then it will also be an effort by leaders in London to look beyond the British people as sources of taxation revenue and to look to British subjects in the expanding empire as a source of taxation revenue. And where better to look than North America where British colonists have, according to leaders in London, just been protected by British soldiers, British sailors, British ships. Isn't it only fair that some of those colonists should pay their share to dig Britain out of its deficits and pay the costs of the war that Britain's just fought to protect those North American colonies from French and Native invasion?

[00:04:35] **Maggie Creech:** So, we can see that Britain's leaders decided to raise money in two ways. They'd increase taxes at home, and they'd start taxing their American colonies. The colonists, in Britain's eyes, had benefitted from the war with a more secure frontier. But from the American perspective, things looked a bit different.

[00:04:53] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Virginian colonists are also in two minds about how to respond to the end of the French and Indian War.

There are colonial soldiers like Washington who've stood shoulder to shoulder with British military officers to see off a common enemy, and those colonists take tremendous pride in having done their part in Britain's global war. And so that sense of pride translates, first of all, into a sense of strong affinity for Britain—that we've been on the same side, we've been shoulder to shoulder in the most recent war.

In other colonies you can see the colonists putting up statues to their wartime heroes: King George, King George III, and his Prime Minister, William Pitt, the guy who'd masterminded the victory strategy. So, a lot of sense of relief and gratitude towards Britain. But also, I think, a sense that Britain owes the colonists a debt of gratitude for having stood up at the right time to defend the interests of the larger empire.

So, the colonists are expecting to be rewarded for their participation in the French and Indian War. And so, to learn suddenly, as they will in the early 1760s, that they're to be subject to wave after wave of tax increases, tax hikes, and taxation enforcement strikes them like a giant slap in the face.

[00:06:25] **Maggie Creech:** The colonies, who saw themselves as loyal British subjects, were still adjusting to life after the French and Indian War. What they weren't prepared for was a government that would treat them like piggy banks to solve Britain's financial problems. That disconnect between Britain's expectations and the colonies perspective set the stage for a series of conflicts over taxation and representation that would define the next decade.

As we'll see, these small acts of taxation created big acts of defiance. The colonies argued that taxes could be levied on freemen only through their legislatures, by which they meant their local assemblies. The government in London argued that Parliament was the legislature of the whole empire. A pamphlet war ensued in which the respective powers of these bodies was argued.

The political consensus broke down irrevocably, however, when the colonies maintained that their provincial assemblies were their only legislatures, not Parliament in London at all. They would

remain nominal British subjects only if Great Britain relinquished power over them. This was unacceptable to the British. If colonies do not benefit the mother country, why have them at all?

The first major step Britain took to raise revenue was the Sugar Act of 1764. While it actually lowered taxes on certain goods, it enforced stricter collection policies. The crackdown on smuggling, which hit colonial merchants hard, made it clear to colonists that Britain was serious about squeezing more revenue from them.

[00:08:01] **Dr. Richard Bell:** We in America often assume that all of these taxation policy changes were tax hikes, increases in taxes, and some of them were, but sometimes the tweaks to taxation policies were different. The Sugar Act's a good example. The Sugar Act of 1764, one of the first pieces of taxation policy reform, actually reduces taxes to be paid by the colonists on products derived from sugar like molasses, which were very popular among the colonists.

Colonists would import sugar-related products from Jamaica and other British Caribbean colonies and then consume them in the form of molasses. Taxation on imports of sugar products from the Caribbean into the North American colonies had been going on for decades. There was a Molasses Act in 1733. But that taxation had not been robustly enforced or collected.

And so, in 1764, Parliament revises the previous Molasses Act and its revision, known as the Sugar Act, actually reduces colonists' taxes on molasses imported from the Caribbean, but it toughens up enforcement and collection policies. So, we're going to reduce your tax on sugar products, but we're going to make sure tax collectors actually collect the taxes they previously failed to collect.

So, it represents a tightening up of taxation enforcement, even though technically it lowers taxes. And it's that tightening up of taxation enforcement which causes, of course, a backlash in the North American colonies. They see this as a way to squeeze them for new taxation revenues and it quickly causes a backlash.

[00:10:02] **Maggie Creech:** It wasn't just the Sugar Act that caused a backlash. In 1765, Britain introduced the Stamp Act, and this one was different. It wasn't about imports or trade; it was a direct tax on goods used in everyday life. The Stamp Act was a tax applied to paper. We're talking legal documents, newspapers, pamphlets, and even playing cards and dice.

The law mandated that documents be printed on taxed paper that was affixed with an ornate stamp, like the one in the collection here at the VMHC. This served as proof that the tax had been paid, hence the name, the Stamp Act. This taxed paper, pre-stamped in Britain, was shipped to the colonies and distributed by government-appointed officials.

To add insult to injury, the colonists couldn't use their paper money for the tax. It was only payable in hard-to-obtain British Sterling, making it even more costly. As a result, this tax that targeted the day-to-day lives of colonists sparked widespread outrage.

[00:11:01] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Yes, so if the previous act, the Sugar Act, is a tinkering with a previous piece of taxation policy, then the Stamp Act of 1765 is a brand-new tax on colonial consumer behavior designed to raise revenue to pay for the recent war. It's a tax on the commercial use of

paper by colonists in North America and the Caribbean, by the way, as well. And so anytime you buy something made of paper in North America after the Stamp Act goes into effect, you find that the cost of that paper-based item has risen because there's a new tax duty placed upon it by the British government seeking to raise revenue.

Now think about all the things made of paper that colonists buy. Look around whatever room you're sitting in now, folks back home, right? You might see newspapers lying around your room. I certainly do where I'm sitting right now. The cost of a newspaper just increased because it's made of paper and paper goods are being taxed at new levels. Books and pamphlets are going to be subject to those new taxes. So, anyone who reads, right, is going to be facing higher taxes on the stuff they buy to digest.

Think about other stuff made of paper. Think about packs of cards, right? If you enjoy gambling and you need to buy a new pack of cards, it's made of paper. Price has just gone up. What about lawyers? Lawyers are swimming in legal documents and paper. So, the cost of their raw materials just went up. Think about liquor licenses for tavern owners.

The point is, the list of things on which we rely, which we purchase, which are made of paper, is quite considerable. What was both smart and stupid about the Stamp Act from the British perspective is that it's a broad-based tax which almost everyone is going to be subject to in some way. If you're a colonial consumer, there's a good chance you buy stuff made from paper fairly regularly, so it has the potential to raise a lot of money from a broad base of taxpayers.

That's what's smart about it. What's stupid about it is, if colonists resent paying this new tax, it's going to be a broad spectrum of colonists who will resent paying this particular tax because it hurts everyone. So, the Stamp Act is a new tax designed to raise revenue, it taxes the commercial use of paper products, and as we all know from our US history textbooks, it produces a lot of backlash as well.

[00:13:37] **Maggie Creech:** The Stamp Act was invasive, and it hit everyone, rich and poor, rural and urban. It marked a sharp departure from the decades-long British policy of salutary neglect, which had largely allowed colonists to govern themselves with minimal interference. So, colonial leaders rallied against it. In May 1765, newly elected Patrick Henry spoke before Virginia's House of Burgesses and introduced the Stamp Act Resolves.

In these resolutions, also known as the Virginia Resolves, Henry argued that only elected representatives had the right to tax the colonists. He framed the issue as a violation of basic liberties. If you've heard the idea, no taxation without representation, Patrick Henry is one of the guys really articulating this sentiment in the 1760s.

He wrote seven resolutions, five of which passed. The other two were said to be too close to treason. These resolutions, with his bold assertions that only Virginia's Assembly had the right to tax its people, not Parliament, was a bit much for those who still saw themselves as loyal British citizens.

[00:14:45] **Dr. Richard Bell:** The Virginia Resolves are, I think, important, and it's a good reminder that Virginians are exercised about some of these milestones in taxation policy in ways broadly similar to people in Boston or Pennsylvania, right?

So, Boston often hogs all the spotlight in these early chapters on the road to the Revolution. But if we just broaden our purview a little bit, we can see that there's concern about British taxation policy in many other colonies as well, and Virginia's a prime example. So, the Virginia Resolves come out of the Virginia House of Burgesses in, I think, May of 1765 in response to news of the passage of the Stamp Act.

And the Virginia Resolves are basically a protest vote by Virginia politicians to express their sense of grievance against the Stamp Act. Remember, Parliament is the ultimate political authority in the British Empire, so these Resolves don't have force of law, necessarily. Parliament always trumps colonial legislature's decisions, but they mark an important manifestation of colonists' protests against the Stamp Act.

There are a bunch of Resolves—five, six, or seven, depending on how you count. I'll just quote a couple of little chunks of them so you can get a sense of how Patrick Henry and other leaders in the House of Burgesses are manifesting their grievance. They resolve that the colonists in Virginia have, quote, “all the liberties, privileges, franchises, and immunities that have at any time been held, enjoyed, and possessed by the people of Britain”; they resolve that the taxation of colonists in Virginia should only be imposed, quote, “by persons chosen by themselves” to represent them. They resolve, quote, “that the General Assembly of this colony have the only and exclusive right and power to lay taxes and impositions upon the inhabitants of this colony, and every attempt to vest such power in any person or persons whatsoever other than the General Assembly, has a manifest tendency to destroy British as well as American freedom.”

So, what we see in those resolutions is a set of claims, which may or may not rest on firm ground, but a set of claims that say that Parliament has no right to tax these colonists because these colonists did not get a chance to consent to this taxation, and these colonists are not directly represented in the body handing down these taxes.

Now, people in Britain would reject every assumption in those resolutions as wrong and false, but the sense of grievance, of being hard done by in those Virginia resolutions, I think is palpable.

[00:17:53] **Maggie Creech:** In arguing for the passage of these Resolves, Patrick Henry delivers a pretty fiery speech, and at one point provides some language that colonists will continue to use in the lead up to the Revolution. He says: If this be treason, make the most of it.

[00:18:10] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Patrick Henry has a gift for language. We will see that in later speeches, you know, “Give me liberty or give me death,” etc. He's one of the great orators in Virginia history, and I think in all of American history as well, which is also to say, and I mean no disrespect when I say this, that he's also a bit of a showboater as well, right?

Every legislature has a showboater, and Virginia's is Patrick Henry. And so, while his language is, I think, particularly extreme, this language of traitor and treason is not language other members of

the House of Burgesses are terribly comfortable with. They're not ready to be identified as traitors against the British Empire in 1765.

It's a reminder that there are people in positions of political power in the House of Burgesses, like Patrick Henry, who see the Stamp Act as a clear and present danger to their rights as British subjects in the Empire. Though I should also just remind listeners that not everyone in the House of Burgesses is as extreme, as committed as, for lack of a better word, radicalized as Patrick Henry is.

There's a fair amount of debate in the House of Burgesses about whether these resolutions are the right resolutions, whether they're too radical, whether they're not radical enough, and some of these resolutions get voted down, actually, by the end of the day. So, there's a vibrant debate among lawmakers in Virginia about how to express their protest against the Stamp Act without putting giant signs on their back saying, please round me up and throw me in prison for being a traitor.

[00:19:53] **Maggie Creech:** At the end of the debate, five of Henry's resolutions were adopted, some by a narrow margin. In fact, there were so many Burgesses who were nervous about how these Resolves would be received and faced with pressure from the Royal Governor and Governor's Council, they rescinded the adoption of the fifth resolution the following day.

If you're curious, this is part of the one they rescinded: "The General Assembly of this colony have the only and sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes and impositions. And every attempt to vest such power in any person or persons whatsoever, other than the General Assembly, aforesaid, has a manifest tendency to destroy British as well as American freedom."

We will note that what's deeply ironic is how these leaders, many of whom were enslavers themselves, used the language of slavery to describe their own grievances. They argued that Britain was treating them like slaves, stripping them of their rights, and forcing them into subservience. This rhetoric resonated, even though it ignored the very real, actual slavery happening in their own society.

If we go back to Henry's Resolves, given the nature of the claims against the authority of the Crown and Parliament, Virginia's Royal Governor prohibited the publication of any of these Resolves in the Virginia Gazette. That doesn't stop word from spreading. These radical Resolves were published in full throughout other colonies and fueled protests and debates in legislatures and in the streets.

Patrick Henry wrote later in his life: the alarm spread throughout America with astonishing quickness, and the great point of resistance to British taxation was universally established in the colonies. This brought on the war, which finally separated the two countries and gave independence to ours.

[00:21:45] **Dr. Richard Bell:** So, what we just talked about in Virginia, in the legislature, you could arguably say it's isolated and doesn't go anywhere, right? That it's a short political debate in one colonial legislature and does not lead to the widespread anti-Stamp Act protests that we see in Boston taking place in Virginia.

However, several historians note that it's coverage of the Virginia Resolves by Massachusetts newspapers that helped to rile up the people of Massachusetts into taking to the streets to protest the Stamp Act there. So, there's a sort of knock-on effect, a domino effect. A legislative protest in Virginia seems to lead to street protests in Massachusetts and the rest of New England. Those street protests are very widely reported. They're quite often violent and certainly cause a great degree of tumult in the streets of Boston.

I'm thinking of protests in the summer of 1765 in Boston when mobs formed to burn in effigy the bodies of stamp tax collectors to show their unwillingness to participate in this new piece of taxation policy.

[00:23:08] **Maggie Creech:** In Virginia, people like George Mercer, a man tasked with distributing stamps, faced these angry crowds.

We have a letter in the collection here at VMHC where he writes to the king about how he arrived in Virginia to start distributing these stamps and a crowd had formed to intimidate him into not taking up that position. There are reports that in other places in Virginia, they were even burning effigies of Mercer as well.

So while maybe not quite as extreme as New England, Virginians were also willing to take their words into the streets and put them into action.

[00:23:43] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Those protests will get, as I said, widespread press coverage, that press coverage will make it back to Britain. And leaders in Parliament will very reluctantly repeal the Stamp Act, undo, abolish the Stamp Act in, I think, the early months of 1766 in response to the Virginia Resolves and in response to the street protests in Boston that have fought, have come as a consequence of those resolutions.

[00:24:08] **Maggie Creech:** This outright resistance had a real impact. In March 1766, Britain repealed the Stamp Act, though not without a catch, which we will talk more about in just a minute. As Rick explains, this repeal was celebrated throughout the colonies.

[00:24:23] **Dr. Richard Bell:** In Virginia, first of all, there is a great deal of celebration and relief when they learn the Stamp Act has been repealed as a result of the legislative and popular protests that we've been talking about, and a good example of that actually is a guy called Landon Carter from Richmond County in Virginia. He'd been vigorously opposed to the Stamp Act and when it was repealed, he was particularly jubilant, let's say.

One thing we know from the research done at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture is that he was in the middle of some consumer purchasing decisions throughout all of this and he was trying to acquire a new set of spoons from England where many silver spoons were manufactured that had to be imported into the colonies.

So when he learned that the Stamp Act had been repealed in March of 1766, he sent word to his agent in London that these spoons he was after should be inscribed with a motto, and the motto was: Repeal of the American Stamp Act. So, he had his brand-new spoons imported from England

engraved with writing reminding him every time he used them back in Virginia that the Stamp Act had been repealed.

So he was certainly pleased and jubilant. I think many other Virginia gentry—you know, landowners, planters—shared his jubilation. Parliament, by contrast, is not happy that it's been forced to kowtow to the grievances of American colonists. And you can see this in the way Parliament repeals the Stamp Act, because with one hand, Parliament repeals the Stamp Act, but in the same legislation, it enacts something else called the Declaratory.

And the Declaratory Act states that the British Parliament has the same authority to tax its colonists as it has to tax people in Britain. It puts in writing its belief that it's always had complete power and total authority to tax the colonists. And that Declaratory Act is passed by Parliament on the same day that Parliament repeals the Stamp Act.

So, they're saying: okay, colonists, we'll take down this tax, but we are reasserting our absolute right to impose any other taxes we want now and in the future. [00:26:51] **Maggie Creech:** So the same day they repealed the Stamp Act, Britain passes the Declaratory Act, asserting its right to tax the colonies in all cases whatsoever. This really is a direct response to things like the Virginia Resolves and similar declarations by colonists. It's really putting on paper the exact opposite of what colonists are claiming as their rights. And to be honest, because there are no new taxes that come with the Declaratory Act, it sort of flies under the radar because there's really no immediate impact on people's daily lives.

But some people are able to see the writing on the wall here.

[00:27:26] **Dr. Richard Bell:** There is no new taxes that come with the Declaratory Act, so nothing tangible to be upset about in terms of how much money you have to pay next time you go to the store. But as a blanket ruling saying that we can do whatever we want, we can tax you guys whenever we want, there's certainly much to be aggrieved about.

And we know that the Declaratory Act was greeted with an outcry of horror in the colonies, not just in Massachusetts by radicals like James Otis and Samuel Adams, but also, of course, in Virginia. Patrick Henry and other Virginian leaders thought that the Declaratory Act were an outrage. Remember, he was one of the authors of the Virginia Resolves, saying Parliament doesn't have this right, so he's not happy to hear Parliament reassert that right. He again screams treason and Magna Carta—Magna Carta being a reference to the rights of British subjects across the empire dating back to an old medieval document. So, they certainly greet this with horror and outcry.

[00:28:32] **Maggie Creech:** So, while some colonial leaders like Patrick Henry were outraged by the Declaratory Act, for the moment, the crisis had passed. But spoiler alert: it doesn't take long for tensions to flare up again.

Parliament's insistence on their right to tax led to their passing of the Townsend Acts in 1767—a series of taxes on imported glass, lead, tea, and other luxury goods. In addition to these new direct taxes, they set up new systems for enforcing tax collection. Parliament believed spreading the taxes across more goods would make them less noticeable.

They were wrong.

[00:29:18] **Dr. Richard Bell:** So, after a change in administration in the British government, a new finance minister comes into office and thinks that he knows best, and thinks that, okay, well, there's been some errors and mistakes made. Last time we tried to get some revenue out of the colonists, but maybe we can do it more cleverly this time. We certainly have the authority to do it. We certainly have the financial needs, so let's try again.

So the Townsend Acts, which are named after this finance minister I'm referring to, are handed down by Parliament in, I think, 1767 and they try to broaden out the tax burden or to disguise the elevated tax burden they represent by diversifying the types of goods that will bear these new taxes.

So I said earlier that the Stamp Act was a tax on the commercial use of paper, and paper in all its forms is fundamentally one commodity. The Townshend Acts say: well, if we're looking to raise revenue, why don't we tax a whole bunch of different commodities? So, there's really no way around contributing to our tax revenue raising scheme.

So the Townshend Act will not only tax paper; they will tax fabrics, textiles, paint and painters' colors. Pretty much you name it, they tax it in the 1767 round known as the Townshend Duties. And, they also appoint new tax collectors to enforce these acts. So this is the Stamp Act, Part Two—thinking that this time things will produce a different outcome. That this time, colonists either won't notice that a new round of taxes are facing them through their consumer choices or that these taxes are so widespread, hitting so many different types of commodities, that they will be inescapable. And of course, those British finance ministers learn to their dismay that the colonists do spot these new taxes, are animated not to pay them, and are willing to change their consumer behavior in order to avoid paying these range of new taxes on commercial goods.

[00:31:34] **Maggie Creech:** You heard him. Once again, the colonies weren't thrilled, and they resisted. In fact, in Virginia, George Washington wrote to George Mason, "Our lordly masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom."

[00:31:49] **Dr. Richard Bell:** So the colonists are faced with a broad range of new taxes on various commercial commodities that they purchase regularly. If they want to make a political protest gesture, if they want to find a way to not pay these new taxes on the consumer goods they regularly purchase, then the only way they can think of to do that is by not buying those goods in the first place. And that means colonists have to embrace what we might call a boycott movement.

They have to mobilize collectively, act together, so that not just they and their family members refuse to buy the goods that bear these taxes, but that every American family—or a majority of American families and consumers—act together to send a message to Parliament that these taxes are not legal and that Americans as consumers should not be treated as an exploitable source of revenue and that Americans as subjects of the British Empire should not be treated as second class citizens.

So, there is a movement to boycott the goods that bear the new Townshend taxes. That movement arguably originates in other colonies but certainly comes to Virginia with a good deal of momentum and enthusiasm and publicity surrounding it.

So we see ordinary Virginia families change what happens when they go to the store or change whether they go to the store at all for certain goods. So some imported manufactured goods might be easy to live without: Do I really need to buy a grandfather clock this year if I can wait till next year if the tax gets repealed? But other goods require more economic sacrifice to do without, and I think fabrics are a good example of that. We may not fully understand this today, but back in the 18th century, Americans imported massive amounts of textiles and fabrics from Britain, which had a very advanced woolen trade.

[00:33:54] **Maggie Creech:** Women in Virginia played a key role in these boycotts, rejecting imported textiles in favor of homespun clothing. Wearing homespun became a badge of honor. In Williamsburg, this resistance was particularly visible. Women abandoned British silks and lace, spinning their own fabric to support the cause.

[00:34:13] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Britain was also the center of fashion in the British Empire as well, so genteel ladies of the sort who might be married to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, etc. often buy their dresses and the fabrics those dresses are made from from importers of London fabrics. And now those fabrics are bearing those taxes and you can't buy those dresses and fabrics anymore without lining the British government's pockets through taxation payments.

So these women agree that they're not going to wear these latest London fashions anymore. In fact, they go one step further. They decide they're going to try to make their own homespun fabrics. They're going to make their own clothes using whatever skills and materials they have to hand. And so suddenly we go from elite women priding themselves on being super fashionable, super up to date with the goings on in London, to rejecting London fashions and making their own clothes out of basically sackcloth or whatever's lying around in their houses and properties.

So, these women start to dress very strangely as a result of their participation in these economic boycotts against the Townshend Duties.

[00:35:27] **Maggie Creech:** Boycotts like this would only work, though, if they were widely supported.

[00:35:31] **Dr. Richard Bell:** The colonists who participate in these boycotts do not believe they'll be permanent. They are not pivoting immediately and definitively towards economic self-sufficiency. They don't think they'll always be making their own clothes out of sacking. It's a temporary choice to make a political argument, but it does raise the specter of the possibility of economic self-sufficiency, right? It's sort of a test balloon for economic self-sufficiency.

But to boycott these broad-based taxes does require a degree of intercolonial cooperation and intercolonial coordination for it to be meaningful. If I stop buying stuff from Amazon.com to protest Jeff Bezos in some way, if it's just me, it means nothing, right? Jeff will never know. But if it's millions of us doing it together, then maybe he'll get some sort of message from our boycotts.

And that's what the organizers of these boycotts in the North American colonies are hoping for, that it won't just be a few families in Boston or a few families in Norfolk, that it'll be intercolonial. And it's really important that listeners realize that there isn't much of a track record of intercolonial cooperation, especially against Britain and its Parliament.

So this boycott effort, where boycott organizers in 12, 13 different colonies start to work together to achieve a common outcome, I think that is new. I think that is important, and of course, it will set the stage for more frequent intercolonial coordination and cooperation, which will eventually manifest in something like the Continental Congress or the Continental Army in 1775. Notice the word continental in both of those, suggesting intercolonial unity. We're seeing the seeds of that in these boycotts in 1767, 1768.

[00:37:36] **Maggie Creech:** The intercolonial resistance to the Townsend Acts was a turning point. For the first time, we see colonies coordinating their resistance on a large scale. These groups that came together to agree to non-importation agreements and widespread refusal of British goods became a powerful tool, not just for the economic protest, but for building a sense of unity and shared purpose amongst the colonies.

The boycotts caused an economic blow in England, and in March 1770, most of the taxes from the Townsend Acts were repealed by Parliament. However, Parliament wasn't backing down completely. They didn't repeal all of it. They held onto the tax on tea to demonstrate to colonists that Parliament held the sovereign authority to tax its colonies. This loosening of taxation had the desired effect, though, and the colonial boycott on British goods was relaxed as well.

Now, we couldn't talk about taxation in this era without talking tea. Tea and taxes are two of the number one things that spring to mind when talking about the American Revolution. So let's dig into that a little bit more. The most well-known of all the Colonial-era taxes went into effect in 1773, the Tea Act.

Interestingly, the Act actually reduced the taxes on tea. Instead, Parliament gave a monopoly on the tea trade to the British East India Trading Company, which many English politicians owned stock in. Rick breaks down why the Tea Act, despite reducing the price of tea, still angered the colonists.

[00:39:11] **Dr. Richard Bell:** The Tea Act is incredibly complicated, so don't worry folks if you don't catch every detail here, because historians are very confused about it as well. Let me just say that for the record.

Because the Tea Act, for instance, is not a tax hike; it's actually a tax reduction, but it angers colonists nonetheless. A bit of background here. Throughout the last hundred or so years, Britain has been developing its economic interests in the Far East. Think of India and China as two spheres where Britain is trying to build up its trading relationships and even set up its first trading outposts in places like Canton in China, Madras in India, places like that.

And for American colonists, what that means is that there have been goods coming from Asia on British ships, often via London, which have dramatically expanded what's available in the colonies. So you can now get Chinese tea—black tea from China—in the American colonies. You can get

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The Road to Revolution

fabrics woven by very skilled artisans in India being sold in Richmond and Norfolk and Williamsburg, for instance.

So, this is changing consumer society measurably. Tea is the great example. Tea used to be a very rare, luxury import to London and to the colonies, but it's now coming so often that there's price competition, prices are falling, and more and more people down the social ladder are participating in tea consumption.

And much of the British tea coming on British ships is coming from a company called the East India Company. I bet many listeners have heard of the East India Company. It's a monopoly. And it's been the sole British supplier of tea throughout the British Empire for quite some time. It's also very, very corrupt; very, very bloated; and very, very mismanaged by the early 1770s.

And despite having a monopoly, it's in giant financial trouble by 1772. And so it goes to Parliament in London begging for a bailout. If you know what happened to the banks in 2008 in the US, you may remember this sort of language of looking for an emergency bailout from the administration. It gets one, and that bailout is called the Tea Act of 1773, which does many, many things—many of them quite complicated.

But one thing it does is it allows this British tea wholesaler, the East India Company, to start selling tea directly to American consumers without using middlemen or retailers to do it. Many American colonists are not actually very thrilled at this prospect that the East India Company may begin direct sales to them because many American colonists have been quite happily drinking smuggled tea coming in on Dutch ships for quite some time because it tastes the same as British East India Company tea and it's often cheaper.

So they see this as the entrance of a giant, bloated, mismanaged monopoly into the American tea consumer marketplace. And for many American merchants who have interests in the smuggling trade, John Hancock in Boston is a famous example. They regard it as a direct threat to their livelihood as well.

[00:42:44] **Maggie Creech:** Again, colonists were upset at what they saw as interference in local affairs.

While this wasn't a new tax, it was seen as another attempt to control the colonies economically, especially by merchants who had been smuggling in tea to avoid taxes. When the British tea arrived in American ports, colonists either refused to accept it or destroyed it. The most famous response to the Tea Act was, of course, the Boston Tea Party, where colonists dumped British tea into the harbor in protest on December 16, 1773.

[00:43:15] **Dr. Richard Bell:** Many colonists are quite aggrieved about the terms of the Tea Act and that will lead to various protests against the Tea Act, which often take the form of trying to seize and destroy East India Company tea coming in from China. On ships into Boston and Philadelphia and New York and Charleston, and then smaller copycat tea parties in other eastern seaboard towns—some of which are in Virginia, like Yorktown, which has its own little tea party after the big famous one.

REVOLUTION REVISITED

The Road to Revolution

[00:43:50] **Maggie Creech:** This act of defiance led to harsh retaliatory measures by the British, known as the Coercive Acts or Intolerable Acts, which targeted Massachusetts, but outraged colonies like Virginia as well.

[00:44:07] **Dr. Richard Bell:** The British Parliament gets wind of all of these anti-Tea Act protests and it's not happy. And it passes a series of very draconian, retaliatory measures directed at the worst offenders—the people of Boston—in a series of measures called the Coercive Acts of 1774, which target the people of Boston like a laser; close the port of Boston; intervene in how the members of the legislature and the Massachusetts judiciary are appointed; and basically put Boston under martial law when all is said and done.

People in other colonies, like Virginia, see those draconian retaliations against the people of Boston by Parliament and they are angry and exercised. And that will set the stage for the next phase on the road to the Revolution.

[00:44:58] **Maggie Creech:** By 1773, the road to revolution was becoming clearer. What had started as economic grievances over taxes was transforming into a larger battle over rights and representation. Colonists were no longer just fighting for lower taxes; they were fighting for their identity as Americans.

[00:45:16] **Dr. Richard Bell:** The period from 1763 all the way up to 1776 does mark intensive efforts to mobilize in one way or other to express a political agenda—to surface a political consciousness, and to look for ways to act together to magnify and multiply an individual's political impact.

And there's something deeply ironic about how the mid-to-late-1760s is the locus of all this innovation in popular politics and anti-Parliament grievance because it wasn't supposed to be like this. Where we began with the end of the French and Indian War, it was supposed to be a time marked by peace, a return to prosperity, close and warm and friendly relations between British colonists and the British people and leaders in parliament who've just fought together to see off a common enemy: France.

This is supposed to be the period of relaxation where tensions are at their lowest, and we finally see the full promise of the British empire come into view. But events take a very different turn and we can see this. In New York, very clearly, in the early 1760s right after this war, people there are putting up statues to their wartime heroes.

They're putting up statues on the Bowling Green to their new young king, George III, as a way to say: thank you, George, for helping protect us against the French and Indian threat in the recent war. And listeners will probably know that that statue of King George III put up in lower Manhattan in the 1760s—that statue will be torn down just a decade later in, I think, 1775 or 1776, by a group of people in New York who by then have become avowed anti-Crown and anti-Parliament protesters.

And they will pull that statue of King George down, and the women in the town will work to melt that statue down to make, I think, about 42,000 cartridges that American soldiers could then use to fire at King George's troops.

REVOLUTION REVISITED

The Road to Revolution

So what was supposed to be a decade of peace and prosperity actually is the road to revolution. There's a certain irony in that, which I hope everyone can appreciate.

[00:47:48] **Maggie Creech:** So, as Rick points out, what was supposed to be a peaceful post-war period had turned into a road to revolution. The colonists were becoming more united, more defiant, and more determined to fight for their rights.

That's it for today's episode of Revolution Revisited. In our next episode, we will see how the colonies respond to the Coercive Acts. A special thank you to Rick Bell for sharing his insights on this critical period of American history.

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[00:48:39] **Announcer:** Subscribe now and catch the next episode for another journey through history. This podcast is made possible by William and Karen Fralin and presented by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

[00:48:51] **Maggie Creech:** Revolution Revisited is a production of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture. Our production staff includes Hailey Fenner, Maggie Creech, Nicole Martorana, and Tracy Schneider.

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