

SONS OF LIBERTY: PATRIOTS OR TERRORISTS?

How a Secret Society of Rebel Americans Made Its Mark on Early America

By Todd Alan Kreamer

SONS OF LIBERTY, or Sons of something altogether different? I suppose it all depends on a particular individual's point of view.

For the American "armchair historian," this American Revolutionary organization conjures up a myriad of confusing images. But, what of this "secret" organization that played such an integral part in advancing the idea of American independence from Great Britain? What were the Sons of Liberty? Who were its members and how widespread was its support among the thirteen colonies comprising British America? What was the ideology and degree of political affiliation within the organization?

Shrouded in secrecy, the origins of the Sons of Liberty are in dispute. Some historical sources claim that the movement began in New York City in January 1765. A more popular claim is that the movement began in Boston, Massachusetts through the leadership of one Samuel Adams (a well known American Revolutionary firebrand) in early 1765. It is quite likely that the Boston and New York City chapters of the Sons of Liberty were organized and developed simultaneously.

Tradition has it that the Boston chapter gathered beneath the Liberty Tree for meetings while the New York City chapter met beneath the Liberty Pole for its meetings. For reasons of safety and secrecy, Sons of Liberty groups tended to meet late at night so as not to attract attention and detection of British officials and the American Loyalist supporters of the British Crown.

This secret patriotic society had its roots in the Committees of Correspondence. The "Committees" were colonial groups organized prior to the outbreak of the American War for Independence and were established for the purpose of formally organizing public opinion and coordinating patriotic actions against Great Britain. These original committees were loosely organized groups of private citizens formed in the New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island colonies from 1763-1764.

It was the Boston Committee of Correspondence that directed the Boston Tea Party action of December 16, 1773. Upset with the lack of redress concerning the new tax on tea established by the British government for importation of tea to Boston, a small band of the Boston Committee of Correspondence members (approximately fifty in number) led by Samuel Adams, proceeded to empty three ships worth and 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor in protest.

Was this an early terrorist action or a patriotic action. Surely, the answer lies with perspective. If you were a British official, this action was treasonous and punishable by death. If you were an American colonial citizen, this event would be seen as a glorious action of the freedom fighters worthy of praise, pride, and acclaim.

During a series of protests linked to the Sons of Liberty, colonists burn and sack the house of the Massachusetts lieutenant governor, Thomas Hutchinson.

Essentially, the Sons of Liberty organized into patriotic chapters as a result of the Stamp Tax imposed by the British government on the American colonists in 1765. As a result of the heavy debt incurred from the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and the resulting burden of increased British possessions in the Americas gained as a result of victory in the war (Canada, Louisiana land area known as "New France," and several former French islands of the West Indies), British Parliament decided to station British "regular" troops in the American colonies to keep the French from attempting to recapture Canada and to defend the colonies against the Native American Indians. It should be noted that the vast majority of Native Americans sided with the French in the North American Theater of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) and had a notorious record of carrying out terrifying raids against British colonists in the frontier regions of the New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, Maryland, and Carolina colonies dating back to the middle seventeenth century.

The Stamp Act of March 1765 was instituted to help defray the costs of maintaining British troops in the American colonies by issuing tax stamps for a wide range of public documents including: customs documents, newspapers, legal papers, and licenses. The British government believed that this stamp tax passed specifically for the American colonies was quite fair and just as a means to help pay their share of the huge national debt incurred from the Seven Years War. After all, reasoned Parliament, had not the colonies directly benefited from the war and the expulsion of the French threat from Canada? While Parliament felt that the American colonies should pay their fair portion of the war debt, the colonists responded with outrage and indignation.

The Stamp Act, like the Sugar Act before it, reasoned the colonists, was yet another example of Parliament trampling on the colonial legislature's right to tax their own people. Actions and attitudes of colonists regarding perceived British monetary atrocities against their well being formed the foundation for the rallying cry of American patriots across the land namely, "no taxation without representation." The American colonists had no physical representation or voice in London Parliament, nor did they ever wish to, assert many historians. With actual American representation in Parliament, there would be no need for seeking independence.

The Sons of Liberty organizations responded to the Stamp Act of 1765 in various ways. The New York Sons of Liberty declared in December 1765 that they would "go to the last extremity" with their lives and fortunes to prevent the enforcement of the Stamp Act. This declaration included the use of violence if necessary. Acts of rebellion against the Stamp Tax in New York City included an incident from January 9, 1766 in which ten boxes of parchment and stamped paper were delivered to City Hall and immediately confiscated, unpacked, and burned by secret leaders of the New York Sons group. Some merchants simply refused to pay the stamp excises. Printers, lawyers, laborers and small shopkeepers simply ignored paying the duty and carried on business as usual.

Sometimes, the actions and reactions of the Sons of Liberty to the Stamp Act took a violent turn as recorded in a local New York City merchant's diary in April, 1765. Violence broke out with the arrival of a shipment of stamped paper to the Royal Governor's residence. Cadwallder Colden, the acting Royal Governor of the New York colony and scholarly correspondent of Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Samuel Johnson, was extremely frightened of the patriotic group and so locked himself up securely inside Fort George immediately after he received the stamped paper from British officials. A few hours after receiving the official papers, a raucous mob captured the governor's gilded and spectacular coach and reduced it to a pile of ashes. From here the mob (consisting largely of extremist elements of the New York Sons of Liberty) raced uptown to the home of Fort George's commander, smashing numerous windows and breaking into the wine cellar to sustain their "patriotism" before descending on the rest of the house in a convulsion of vandalism. Tarring and feathering Loyalists — those individuals who sympathized and were supportive of the British Crown, royal tax collectors, and other officials — was a common practice carried out by the more radical elements of the organizations.

Ironically, the Sons of Liberty ultimately took their name from a debate on the Stamp Act in Parliament in 1765. Charles Townshend, speaking in support of the act, spoke contemptuously of the American colonists as being "children planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence...and protected by our arms." Isaac Barre, member of Parliament and friend of the American colonists, jumped to his feet in outrage in this same session to counter with severe reprimand in which he spoke favorably of the Americans as "these Sons of Liberty." American colonists had several friends supportive of their views on the tax situation including: William Pitt (the Elder), Charles James Fox, Edmund Burk, and others.

The two original Sons of Liberty organizations (New York City and Boston) quickly established correspondence and communications with ever emerging Sons of Liberty groups in New England, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Georgia. Typically, members of this organization were men from the middle and upper classes of American colonial society. Although the movement began as a secret society, for reasons of safety and anonymity, the organization quickly sought to build a broad, public base of political support among the colonists. Frequently, cooperation with undisciplined and extralegal groups (city gangs) set off violent actions. Even though the Sons seldom looked for violent solutions and eruptions, they did continue to elicit and promote political upheaval that tended to favor crowd action.

While British officials accused the Sons organizations of scheming to overthrow the true and legitimate government of the American colonies, the Sons of Liberty viewed their official aims in more narrow terms, organizing and asserting resistance to the Stamp Act. Outwardly, the Sons of Liberty proclaimed their unfaltering loyalty and allegiance to King George III of Great Britain and emphasized their support of the English Constitution against the usurpation of royal officials. For eleven years, 1765 to 1776, American colonists saw British Parliament as the collective "bad guy," not the king!

The Sons of Liberty as a viable movement first broke up with the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766. However, the organizational network was revived in 1768 in response to the Townshend Acts (a series of excise duties on glass, lead, paints, paper, and tea imported into the colonies.) From 1768 until the end of the American Revolution, Sons of Liberty groups remained in active correspondence with one another throughout the thirteen American colonies and each group took charge of organizing and effecting resistance movements against what they perceived as unfair British taxation and financial strangulation within their respective colonies. The Sons of Liberty as an active movement disbanded in late 1783.

In the end, no universal conclusions, judgments or definitive statements can be made about the Sons of Liberty. Were they a terrorist organization? The British certainly believed they were. After all, the Sons were advocating overthrow of the status quo government and independence for the thirteen colonies. Were they a patriotic organization? Many American colonists certainly believed they were. The Sons represented to them the American freedom fighter personified, fighting for their rights and ultimate independence. It should be noted that the Loyalists also had their version of Committees of Correspondence and Sons of Liberty namely: the United Empire Loyalists.

One thing is certain about the Sons of Liberty organization: it gave American colonists a voice and vital chance to actively participate in the independence movement.

Finally, the decision on the Sons of Liberty comes down to a variation on an old saying, "one man's terrorist is another man's patriot." The ultimate conclusion must be left to the individual.

TO THE FREEMEN OF AMERICA, 1773

My dear Countrymen,

THE art used by the Ministerial advocates to persuade you, that the duty imposed by Act of Parliament, on tea imported here, will be paid in London, contrary to the express design and meaning of that act; and that the duty thus paid, can prove in no shape detrimental to your rights, is the occasion of this address to you.

Every American believes, that Parliament have no right to tax America; and of course, that they cannot, of right, impose any duty on any article of her trade, to be paid on its arrival here: But some have doubted, whether the payment of the American duty in London, before the tea is shipped, although the same duty must be charged on the tea, and be afterwards collected from the Americans, can be considered as a Parliamentary tax on America.

It cannot be denied, that G. B. has a right to tax at any rates she thinks proper, her exports to every clime which is blessed with a free trade, and which is not forced to obey her naval mandates; such taxes would notwithstanding be impolitic and useless. But to admit that she can of right oblige the Americans, whose importation of many articles of life is confined to her alone, to pay any duties she may impose on such necessaries, is to give her a right to strip you of every thing you possess.

At this rate, Great-Britain need be at no loss to raise on you, all that her luxury and corruption can dictate--she may lay a tax on such articles as your climate and infant situation have made necessary to you, and which she can prevent your purchasing at a foreign market; and her American revenue scheme will be compleated. For the sale in America being secured, the tax is also secured: And unless you have resolution to disdain the purchase of whatever may be thus burthened, let its importance to you be what it may, you will soon be reduced to a situation more miserable than that of the Athenians under their thirty tyrants.

To this it may be said, "that G. B. has for many years, exercised this claim by the duties she has imposed on cambricks, lawns, lead, woolcards, &c. &c. and that it is now too late to object to the payment of such duties, the precedent being already established."

When many of those duties were laid, America considered them as regulations of trade, some how or other beneficial to the parent state, and in no high degree injurious to herself.--As such she submitted to them, without considering the dangerous precedent they were designed to establish. In the same light she considered the act of 4 Geo. 3 [the fourth year of George III's reign], imposing duties on wine, &c. and might have admitted this act as constitutional and necessary, had not the memorable Stamp Act, of 1765, brought on the day of political knowledge in America.

Whatever taxes may have been imposed on America, while she lay dozing in the lap of maternal security, they cannot now be brought in proof of Parliament's right to tax you. If they were unconstitutional in the beginning, which they undoubtedly were, they are unconstitutional at this day, and as such ought to be strenuously opposed--and, if through ignorance or inattention, you have paid such unjust impositions, it cannot, from thence be inferred, that you ought to pay them forever; and patiently submit to every burthen which Parliament in future may think proper to lay upon you. . . .

The Ministerial manoeuvre of sending tea to America, you are told, was designed to assist the India Company in the sale of their tea, an immense quantity of which they have on hand; and to enable them to pay their debts.

If this was the case, and fair play was meant to America, why was not the act of Parliament imposing the duty of 3d. sterling on tea, imported into America, repealed? an act which was the principal cause of the India Company's distress; and which will prevent an effectual remedy, so long as it continues in force--For if the duty is continued, and America is not forced to pay it, it is evident that the India Company, whom the Ministry are so desirous to oblige, are made dupes to a pretended favour.

The truth is, that Company were to be gratified at the expence of America, who from the first dawning of this manoeuvre, has been marked as the beast of burthen. But I trust, that the same public spirit, and virtuous self denial, which influenced your conduct under former impositions, will manifest itself on the present occasion--That you will not suffer the glorious title of American to be sullied, by a servile obedience to an act of parliament, which, executed as it may be, by the payment of a duty here or in Britain, will, in either case, establish, irrevocably establish, the dangerous claim of parliament to tax you without mercy.

All Europe, nay the whole world, are now attentive to your cause, and have, with wonder, seen and heard of the decent, manly and determined conduct of the Freemen of America, in a situation the most delicate and interesting; and they still expect at your hands a manifestation of the like glorious behaviour on the present alarming occasion. The payment of the duty in London, will not make it less a tax on you, than if it were paid here; and of course, not less an object of your detestation and opposition. Americans must refuse to purchase the noxious weed; and such refusal will make it infamous and dangerous for any man, or any set of men, to aid or abet its introduction and sale. This is the measure Americans ought to pursue--this the only means to save your country from destruction.

MUCIUS.

BOSTON GAZETTE

Announcement of the Boston Tea Party, December 20, 1773

On Tuesday last the body of the people of this and all the adjacent towns, and others from the distance of twenty miles, assembled at the old south meeting-house, to inquire the reason of the delay in sending the ship Dartmouth, with the East-India Tea back to London; and having found that the owner had not taken the necessary steps for that purpose, they enjoin'd him at his peril to demand of the collector of the customs a clearance for the ship, and appointed a committee of ten to see it perform'd; after which they adjourn'd to the Thursday following ten o'clock. They then met and being inform'd by Mr. Rotch, that a clearance was refus'd him, they enjoye'd him immediately to enter a protest and apply to the governor for a pass port by the castle, and adjourn'd again till three o'clock for the same day. At which time they again met and after waiting till near sunset Mr. Rotch came in and inform'd them that he had accordingly enter'd his protest and waited on the governor for a pass, but his excellency told him he could not consistent with his duty grant it until his vessel was qualified. The people finding all their efforts to preserve the property of the East India company and return it safely to London, frustrated by the sea consignees, the collector of the customs and the governor of the province, DISSOLVED their meeting.-- But, BEHOLD what followed! A number of brave & resolute men, determined to do all in their power to save their country from the ruin which their enemies had plotted, in less than four hours, emptied every chest of tea on board the three ships commanded by the captains Hall, Bruce, and Coffin, amounting to 342 chests, into the sea!! without the least damage done to the ships or any other property. The matters and owners are well pleas'd that their ships are thus clear'd; and the people are almost universally congratulating each other on this happy event.

[The particular Account of the Proceedings of the People at their Meeting on Tuesday and Thursday last, are omitted this Week for want of Room.]

Capt. Loring in a Brig from London for his Place, having 58 Chests of the detested Tea on board, was cast ashore on the Back of Cape-Cod last Friday se'nnight: 'Tis expected the Cape Indians will give us a good Account of the Tea against our next.

Extract of a Letter from Philadelphia, dated December 11, 1773.

--"Your Resolutions of 29th ult. were publickly read at our Coffee-House last Thursday, to a large Company of our first Merchants, who gave three Cheers by Way of Approbation."

We hear from Philadelphia, that Capt. Ayres, in a Ship chartered by the East India Company, to bring their Teas to that Place, had arrived at the Cape of Delaware (Mr. Gilbert Barclay, one of the Consignees, being Passenger on board) but that the Pilots had refused to bring her up the River; and Letters being sent to the Captain & Consignee, inclosing their Resolves respecting each of them, that if they presumed to come thither, it would be at their Peril, and the inevitable Destruction of both Vessel and Cargo; in Consequence of which intelligence, it was said they had gone off, but whether to the Place from whence they cause, or some other Port, was uncertain; though this might be depended on, that they would not be permitted to land the Tea in any Part of that Province.

We are positively informed that the patriotic inhabitants of Lexington, at a late meeting, unanimously resolved against the use of Bohea Tea of all sorts, Dutch or English importation; and to manifest the sincerity of their resolution, they bro't together every ounce contained in the town, and committed it to one common bonfire.

We are also informed, Charlestown is in motion to follow their illustrious example.

Quere. Would it not materially affect the bringing this detestable herb into disuse, if every town would enjoin their Selectmen to deny licences to all houses of entertainment who were known to afford tea to their guests?

Our reason for suggesting this, is the difficulty these people are under to avoid dishing out this poison, without such a provision in their favour.