Tea Act – Boston Tea Party

> "There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea." (Henry James)

According to legend, in 2737 BC, the Chinese emperor Shen Nung was sitting beneath a tree while his servant boiled drinking water, when some leaves from the tree blew into the water. Shen Nung, a renowned herbalist, decided to try the infusion that his servant had accidentally created. The tree was a Camellia sinensis, and the resulting drink was what we now call tea.

Containers for tea have been found in tombs dating from the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) but it was under the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), that tea became firmly established as the national drink of China.

It became such a favorite that during the late-eighth century a writer called Lu Yu wrote the first book entirely about tea, the Ch'a Ching, or Tea Classic. It was shortly after this that tea was first introduced to Japan, by Japanese Buddhist monks who had travelled to China to study.

Likewise, tea drinking has become a vital part of Japanese culture, as seen in the development of the Tea Ceremony, which may be rooted in the rituals described in the Ch'a Ching. (UK Tea)

The Western world began to learn of China's tea secret in the early 1600s, when Dutch traders started bringing it to Europe in large quantities.

With regular shipment to parts of Europe by 1610, tea first arrived in Britain in the 1650s, when it was served as a novelty in London's coffee houses.

Back then, tea was a rare drink that very few consumed. The famous diarist Samuel Pepys wrote about his first tea experience, and the first written reference to tea drinking in England.

On September 25, 1660, Pepys was called to the meeting to discuss peace with Spain; he noted,

> "And afterwards I did send for a cup of tee (a China drink) of which I had never drank before, and went away". (BBC)

Initially, tea was slow to catch on in England.

However, it may have been the wife of King Charles II, two years later, who popularized tea in the UK.

In 1662, Charles II, the newly restored monarch, married Catherine of Braganza, the daughter of Portugal's King John IV.

She became Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Upon arriving in Portsmouth on May 14, 1662 ahead of her marriage to the king, Catherine asked for a cup of tea.

Tea had arrived by this point, but it was rare for anyone to drink it, so none was available.

Instead, she was offered a small ale. She was already a regular tea drinker, as the drink was already a popular beverage among the aristocracy of Portugal.

The king and queen got married on May 14, and Portugal provided several ships of luxury items as it had been agreed. One of those items included a chest of tea, the favorite drink of the Portuguese Court.

Catherine popularized the drink among British nobility, and subsequently to the wealthier members of society. The invasion of tea in the country had well and truly started. (BBC)

Tea and Hawai'i Connection

Beginning well before 1600, the North American fur trade was the earliest global economic enterprise. Europeans and, later, Canadians and Americans, hunted and trapped furs; but success mandated that traders cultivate and maintain dense trade and alliance networks with Native nations.

The maritime fur trade focused on acquiring furs of sea otters, seals and other animals from the Pacific Northwest Coast and Alaska. The furs were mostly sold in China in exchange for silks, porcelain, other Chinese goods … and Tea, which were then sold in Europe and the US.

Within ten years after Captain Cook's 1778 contact with Hawai'i, the Islands became a favorite port of call in the trade with China. The fur traders and merchant ships crossing the Pacific needed to replenish food supplies and water.

The East India Company was perhaps the most powerful commercial organization that the world has ever seen. In its heyday it not only had a monopoly on British trade with India and the Far East, but it was also responsible for the government of much of the vast Indian sub-continent.

Both of these factors mean that the East India Company (or, to call it by its proper name, the British East India Company) was crucial to the history of the tea trade. (UK Tea)

Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was a fur trading company that started in Canada in 1670; its first century of operation found HBC firmly focused in a few forts and posts around the shores of James and Hudson Bays, Central Canada.

Fur traders working for the HBC traveled an area of more than 700,000 square miles that stretched from Russian Alaska to Mexican California and from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Ships sailed from London around Cape Horn around South America and then to forts and posts along the Pacific Coast via the Hawaiian Islands. Trappers crossing overland faced a journey of 2,000 miles that took three months.

Traders, in order to obtain the wherewithal to purchase teas and silks at Canton, spent 18-months or more of each China voyage collecting a cargo of sea-otter skins, highly esteemed by the Chinese.

Needing supplies in their journey, the traders soon realized they could economically barter for provisions in Hawai'i; for instance any type of iron, a common nail, chisel or knife, could fetch far more fresh fruit meat and water than a large sum of money would in other ports.

A triangular trade network emerged linking the Pacific Northwest coast, China and the Hawaiian Islands to Britain and the United States (especially New England). Practically every vessel that visited the North Pacific in the closing years of the 18th century stopped at Hawai'i for refreshment and recreation.

Fur trading on the coast remained profitable into the 1820s. (Igler)

Tea in the American Colonies

The practice of tea drinking arrived with colonists from both England and the Netherlands and was already established by the mid-seventeenth century, evidenced by the number of tea wares recorded in household inventories.

The earliest of these were undoubtedly imported from abroad, but American silversmiths began producing teapots by the start of the eighteenth century. In addition to the pots from which these beverages were poured, vessels in the equipage included covered sugar bowls, cream pots, tea kettles and hot-water urns. Canisters for the dried tea leaves, sometimes made in pairs, and dishes or trays for serving were also occasional accompaniments. Matching services did not appear until the 1790s.

When he visited Boston in 1740, Joseph Bennett observed that "the ladies here visit, drink tea and indulge every little piece of gentility to the height of the mode and neglect the affairs of their families with as good grace as the finest ladies in London."

The naturalist Peter Kalm, during his visit to North America in the mid-18th century, noted that tea was a breakfast beverage in both Pennsylvania and New York. From the predominantly Dutch town of Albany in 1749 he wrote that "their breakfast is tea, commonly without milk."

At another time, Kalm stated:

> With the tea was eaten bread and butter or buttered bread toasted over the coals so that the butter penetrated the whole slice of bread. In the afternoon about three o'clock tea was drunk again in the same fashion, except that bread and butter was not served with it.

This tea-drinking schedule was followed throughout the colonies. In Boston the people "take a great deal of tea in the morning," have dinner at two o'clock, and "about five o'clock they take more tea, some wine, madeira [and] punch." (Baron Cromot du Bourg) The Marquis de Chastellux confirms his countryman's statement about teatime, mentioning that the Americans take "tea and punch in the afternoon."

During the first half of the 18th century the limited amount of tea available at prohibitively high prices restricted its use to a proportionately small segment of the total population of the colonies.

About mid-century, however, tea was beginning to be drunk by more and more people, as supplies increased and costs decreased.

According to Peter Kalm, tea, chocolate, and coffee had been "wholly unknown" to the Swedish population of Pennsylvania and the surrounding area before the English arrived, but in 1748 these beverages "at present constitute even the country people's daily breakfast." A similar observation was made a few years later by Israel Acrelius:

> Tea, coffee, and chocolate are so general as to be found in the most remote cabins, if not for daily use, yet for visitors, mixed with Muscovado, or raw sugar. (Boston Tea Party)

Tea drinking and tea parties held a significant role in the society of colonial America. Serving tea to one's guests showed both their politeness and hospitality. In the early 1700s, tea was more expensive due to its scarceness, and social tea drinking was a luxury of upper class colonists. (Oliver Pluff & Co)

Tea Act

America was becoming a country of tea drinkers.

However, due to debt due to the costs associated with the French and Indian Wars, Parliament imposed new taxes. In the 1760s, the British government began to impose a tax on tea, first through the Stamp Act of 1765 and later with the Townshend Acts of 1767.

Dissatisfied colonists took to smuggling tea or drinking herbal infusions. Outraged merchants, shippers, and colonists staged a number of demonstrations.

Merchants and citizens in opposition to the act urged a boycott of the taxed articles. A Virginia woman, in a letter to friends in England, wrote in 1769:

> … I have given up the Article of Tea, but some are not quite so tractable; however if wee can convince the good folks on your side the Water of their Error, wee may hope to see happier times.

Then, the Tea Act of 1773 was imposed.

It was an "act to allow a drawback of the duties of customs on the exportation of tea to any of his Majesty's colonies or plantations in America; to increase the deposit on bohea tea to be sold at the India Company's sales; and to impower the commissioners of the treasury to grant licenses to the East India Company to export tea duty-free." (Tea Act)

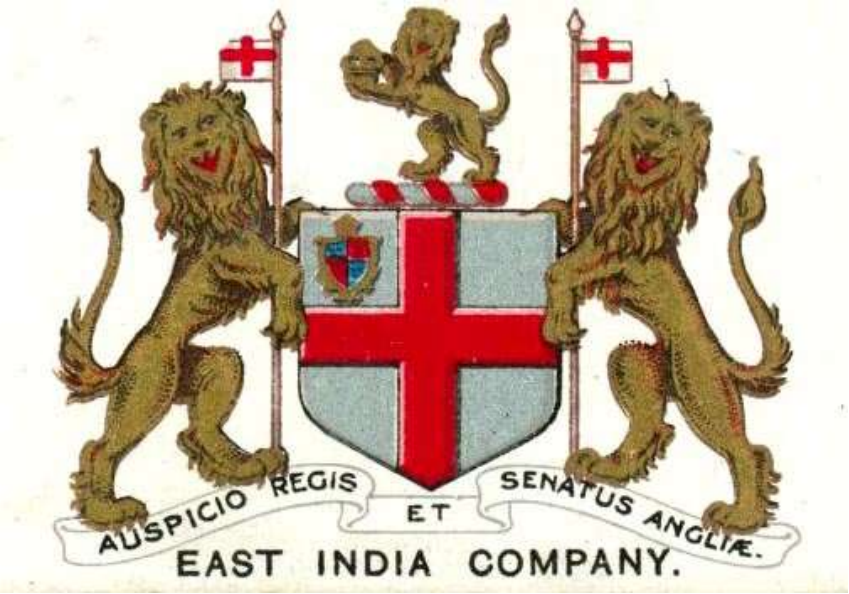
The act contained a number of provisions:

- The East India Company was granted a license to export tea to North America.
- They were no longer required to sell their tea at the London Tea Market.

- The duties on tea shipped to North America and other foreign parts were not imposed nor refunded when the tea was exported.
- Anybody receiving tea from the East India Company was required to pay a deposit upon receipt.

The Tea Act was intended to bail out the struggling East India Company, which was very important for the British economy, and the Tea Act would raise revenue from the 13 colonies.

The Tea Act allowed the East India Company to directly ship tea to the colonies without passing England. This way, duties were reduced and resulted in the cheaper price of English tea in the colonies. The Tea Act received royal assent on May 10, 1773.



By reducing the tax on imported British tea, this act gave British merchants an unfair advantage in selling their tea in America. American colonists condemned the act, and many planned to boycott tea.

Boston Tea Party

The colonists resisted the Tea Act more because it violated the constitutional principle of self-government by consent than because they could not afford the tax, which had existed since the passage of the 1767 Townshend Revenue Act.

As George Washington explained,

> "What is it we are contending against? Is it against paying the duty of [three pence per pound] on tea because [it is] burdensome? No, it is the right only ... that, as Englishmen, we could not be deprived of this essential and valuable part of our constitution."

In the ports of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, citizens prevented British tea from being unloaded, threatened tax collectors into resigning, and protested taxation without representation. In Boston, political organizer Samuel Adams oversaw the adoption of resolutions calling on the tea agents to resign, but they refused.

On November 28, 1773, however, the Dartmouth dropped anchor in Boston Harbor loaded with 114 crates of British tea. Its colonial owner, Francis Rotch of Nantucket Island, had a great deal of money invested in the cargo and wanted it unloaded, but Patriot leaders wanted to use the landing of the tea to galvanize the people against the British. They also feared that if the tea were landed and sold at cheaper prices, people would continue buying it and ruin the boycott.

The following day, a crowd of five or six thousand people warned Rotch that landing the tea would be at his “peril,” posted a guard around the ship, and demanded that it return to England.

But Thomas Hutchinson, a staunch Loyalist who now served as royal governor, refused to allow the Dartmouth‘s departure. With twenty days to either unload the cargo and pay taxes or forfeit both the tea and the ship, Rotch found himself in a terrible position.

Over the next week, two more ships laden with tea berthed beside the Dartmouth at Griffin’s Wharf. Many people predicted imminent violence.

As Abigail Adams wrote, “The flame is kindled ... Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more lenient measures.”

On December 14, thousands again demanded that Rotch seek clearance for a return voyage to England, but Hutchinson again refused the request. Three British warships now stood in the harbor ready to enforce his order. Matters were coming to a head.

On December 16, 1773, one day before the deadline for the landing of the tea, more than seven thousand gathered in the Old South Meeting House, Boston’s largest building.

When Samuel Adams announced that nothing more could be done to save their country, dozens of colonists, dressed like Indians as a symbol of American freedom and to disguise their identities from British authorities, entered the assembly with piercing war whoops.

The crowd went into a frenzy, screaming, “The Mohawks are come!”

John Hancock called on his countrymen to do their patriotic duty: “Let every man do what is right in his own eyes.”

Thousands of citizens spilled into the streets and watched as the band of Mohawk impersonators boarded the three ships and dumped into the harbor 342 chests of tea belonging to the British East India Company. The crowd then slowly dispersed into the night while the disguised participants went home with their identities still concealed.

Although some colonists saw the Boston Tea Party as a destructive mob action, most praised the protest. John Adams rejoiced ,

> “This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire.
>
> The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered - something notable And striking. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I cant but consider it as an Epocha in History.” (Adams, National Archives)

Information here is primarily from Library of Congress; National Archives; Smithsonian American Art Museum; The Met; Bill of Rights Institute; Britannica; BBC; UK Tea; Igler

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