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Boston Tea Party

On December 16, 1773, 340 tea chests were hurled into Boston Harbour by a protesting crowd. It was a rebellion that came to be known as the Boston Tea Party. A protest that ignited the flames of revolution and forever changed the course of American history.

Now, 250 years later, we reveal some fascinating documents held by The National Archives. Join us as we explore the context of the Boston Tea Party and what documents from the British side reveal. Guests include Daniel Gosling and Ralph Thompson from The National Archives.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [CO 5/160](#), [CO 5/763](#), [CO 5/663](#), [SP 37](#)

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guide to the [American Revolution](#). Read our blog, [Dockyard incendiary: The tale of 'John the Painter'](#). For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top-level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcript

Reader: “My Lord, I did myself the honour to write your Lordship last Saturday. Since then, the Sons of Liberty have destroyed 340 Chests of Tea on board three ships, that lay all together at one of the Wharfs. The fourth vessel that brought the Tea is stranded near to Cape Cod, but the Tea was got safe on Shore, and it’s expected by this time it has fared the same fate as the rest...”

Chloe Lee: This might be the earliest account of the Boston Tea Party, a protest that lit the fire of independence sentiment before the American Revolution. It is a letter dated December 17th, 1773. The letter writer is the British Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Leslie, and he is writing to Lord Viscount Barrington, the British secretary at war, from his nearby station at Castle William. Leslie would have been able to see the protest and its aftermath: the protestors were angry—and they were resisting British rule.

Reader: “The Gentlemen that took refuge here still continue, and likely to remain, for the mob threatens them much if they go to town. In short, they rule everything at present.”

Chloe: This is On The Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

I’m Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives. In this episode of On the Record, I’m learning about a legendary protest. The Boston Tea Party, as it is known, is a foundation story for what became the independent United States of America. Exactly 250 years ago, a mob of colonists in Boston threw crates of imported tea into the Boston Harbour. They did this to protest against their British rulers who, from London, and without the say of the colonists, set the taxes that the colonists had to pay to import the tea.

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Sitting here in The National Archives in Kew, London, my colleagues, and I can look at some unique documents about the British side of this story. So I'm joined by Daniel Gosling, hi!

Daniel Gosling: Hiya

Chloe: And Ralph Thompson, hi Ralph!

Ralph Thomson: Hi there Chloe.

Chloe: Who are going to help me understand what happened and how the British responded, by looking through letters to government, witness statements and the words of the law that was rushed in to stop a revolution.

So Daniel, we'll get to why the tea is important but first, how much tea are we talking?

Daniel: I mean, it was a lot when we know the exact amount because of records held here at the National Archives. So there's one letter in particular, which includes a detailed breakdown of all the tea that was destroyed, and it's written by the directors of the East India Company, they're the ones that own the tea. And so they're being really specific in particular, because it basically asking for the money to be paid back, for the losses to be paid back. So from that account, we know that there are three ships involved, the Beaver, the Dartmouth and the Eleanor. And the total value of the destroyed tea was 9,659 pounds, six shillings and four pence. That's over 1.2 million pounds in today's money.

Chloe: We're talking about a lot of money!

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Daniel: It's a lot of money! The Beaver alone held 112 chests, which included five different types of tea.

Chloe: So what were they protesting about?

Daniel: They are protesting quite a few different things that all conflates in this perfect storm. But sort of the most recent thing before that was the British government had passed something called the Tea Act in May 1773. If you asked one of the Bostonians they'd say, primarily, they're protesting this Tea Act. The Tea Act allowed the East India Company to sell tea from China in American colonies, if they paid certain taxes. And it basically gave them a monopoly on selling tea in America, merchants in the commons resisted a system of taxation, because firstly, it was set by men in the British Parliament, across the sea in London. And the colonists had no representation in that Parliament. So they didn't have any ability to debate and set the taxes that applied to them. But also is because before this act, what would happen is East India Tea Company would have to sell their tea in London, or be purchased by merchants that would then take it to America. And they would make a cut of the sales. This Act basically got rid of the middleman and it meant that the merchants were losing a lot of business, and they can no longer sell this tea. So they're also protesting loss of earnings and loss of income as well.

Chloe: Right, I see. It's quite difficult for us to understand this now, what might be the modern-day equivalent of this protest?

Daniel: I mean, it's a really good question, and it's probably not an exact one that is an equivalent, as I said, it's this perfect storm of lack of political representations, sovereignty and free market principles all sort of appearing at this one time in December 1773. But we do see similar

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equivalence across history, taxation has never been popular, either domestically or abroad. So in Britain, quite a common thing that the government would do is they would tax to sort of raise money for wars or to pay off wars. So we see wars in France and the Tudor period, people protesting those wars of Henry VIII in France. And there's some really interesting Cornish support for the rebellion of Perkin Warbeck in Henry VII's reign. He'd been involved in wars in Scotland, and then he went down to Cornwall and said, I can't believe we're paying taxes to support this war in Scotland, it's so far away, and the Cornish will support him even though he was involved in it. So it's, it's always been an unpopular thing, especially if people can't see where those taxes are going or can't see how it benefits them. So that's very much the case in America. They're saying they're paying these taxes, but they don't see how it benefits them and they're protesting the fact that they don't get a say, in whether or not they want to pay it.

I suppose we could look at things like the poll tax riots in the 1990s, of protesting taxes, that people didn't think were fair. Or even we could see, the system of devolution that we have in the UK today is sort of a way to get around the sort of arguments against representation, where Parliament's and governments in Wales and Scotland get some say in how they tax those regions. That's a modern day equivalent of them getting around these complaints that were happening in America in the 18th century.

Chloe: Great. It reminds me a little bit of Gandhi's Salt March in the 1930s, that taking over normal everyday items that we might not put a lot of value in that actually holds a lot of symbolic and, in this case, monetary value.

So can we hear a bit more about the cause of the protests? What's the broader context?

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Daniel: Yeah, so these protests didn't happen overnight. It took resentment and tensions that had been building over years of British overreach, colonial overreach and colonist resentment of this. We can probably go back decades, but we're only going to go back 10 years to 1763 Treaty of Paris, because that's a really important treaty that removed France from North America, essentially giving Britain a colonial monopoly in that area. What that meant is Britain then sort of started shoring up that region by taxing the colonies there for defence and to pay off this costly war. So this is when they start introducing acts and legislation to tax the colonists in a way that they hadn't done before. So the sort of first few of these happen in 1764 1765, in the years immediately after Treaty of Paris, and the one that caused the most sort of resentment early on is the Stamp Act.

The Stamp Act was an act that meant that Americans had to pay duties on every kind of paper that was produced. So Legal Record stamps, newspapers, everything like that had, they had to purchase a special stamp, which had been purchased from Britain, and then published, so things like newspapers have a little stamp in the corner. Americans protested this, they said, why do we have to pay extra to produce all of this paperwork? This was a huge protest, not just for the money paid but it's the idea that the British government can just decide that they're going to tax the colonies, any colonies, without any kind of representation in Parliament. It's from 1765 onwards, where we really see this idea of no taxation without representation applying to America. The slogan and the cause originated in a generation earlier in Ireland, but America really takes it up post-Stamp Act in 1765, to protest this act. The British Parliament realised they might have sort of a fight on their hands for the Stamp Act, seeing the protests. Boston quite quickly becomes a sort of centre point of protest in the North American colonies, so they're already recognising Boston as a sort of a troublemaker in terms of protest. But in the mid-1760s, groups like the Sons of Liberty are being set up. The Sons of Liberty are the ones that claimed the Boston Tea Party and said they were the ones responsible for it, but they sort of develop and originate in the mid-1760s, in these

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protests to the Stamp Act. And this such was the sort of rebellion against the Stamp Act and the protests against the Stamp Act that Parliament did eventually repeal it in March 1766. But not before they questioned Benjamin Franklin, who was in London at the time, and they put hundreds of questions to him basically asking him why don't Americans want to pay this? And this is where you see an argument laid out really eloquently and succinctly saying, we don't want to pay these taxes because we don't have any representation in Parliament. It did get repealed, but not without the British Parliament, enacting what's called a Declaratory Act, which basically gave them permission to enact legislation in future that allowed them to tax the colonists. And that's exactly what they did so they enacted the Townshend duties, which were duties on all sorts of things, including tea in the late 1760s, and they eventually get repealed in 1770 except for the duty on tea. So that's sort of where we are by 1770. The American colonies have been taxed, they've protested these taxes. Going into the early 1770s the tea duty still stands, and it's still very unpopular.

Chloe: So it seems like a lot of back and forth between America, the colonies and the government in the UK that are putting these taxes on the colonists, kind of like a two-steps forward one-step-back scenario.

Daniel: Absolutely and neither side is budging at all. The Americans say why they think that it's unconstitutional for them to pay those taxes to the British Parliament. Who do this very much throughout history where they're trying to sort of treat the colonies like they would a domestic county or states, and it obviously operates very differently thousands of miles away. So the British Parliament saying that we've always done this, you know, the majority of the population living in Britain don't have the vote but we pass laws that they have to abide by, because they're represented by MPs in Parliament, and they argue that the same is true for the colonies in America. They are represented by MPs in Parliament, even if they don't have a specific sort of

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geographical representation.

Chloe: Thanks, Daniel, so Ralph, how did tea become the flashpoint?

Ralph: Well, essentially, tea was a popular drink, as it was seen as a symbol of gentility. Both tea and porcelain became more affordable to the entrepreneurial middle classes by the middle of the 18th century. The commercial middling sort were keen to emulate the upper classes with the fashionable ritual of tea drinking itself.

Chloe: I see - something that has continued through today. Okay, so we've heard about why tea was culturally important, why was it economically important, Ralph?

Ralph: While cheaper East Indian Dutch tea was carried and smuggled in, European trade and economic conditions, very much affected commerce throughout the American colonies. The Mercantile entrepreneurial classes in Britain were sympathetic to colonial grievances, as members of the aristocracy were. So, as found in the archives, for instance, in CO5/663 it's estimated that the annual revenue duty lost in Georgia to the illicit Tea Trade amounted to 150 pounds, 14 shillings, sixpence a tonne. Supposedly from smuggled tea and this is from 1773, October.

Chloe: Thanks Ralph, that reminds me that we have so many records in our collection that we can use to explore the Boston Tea Party and you've mentioned CO5 and CO6, they're from our Colonial Office records.

There's kind of this build-up over the few months before the Boston Tea Party, and our records actually show that the British colonists knew exactly what was going on. So, so maybe let's run

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through it all so far: we've got a popular drink, a valuable commodity, you've got different powers muscling in on the trade, unfair market competition, and a parliament that, of course, doesn't represent the people, or maybe specifically, the people in a colony who was subject to the laws passed by the parliament over the ocean.

It's interesting to wonder whether a pro-independence sentiment emerged from this context or whether that sentiment already existed and it just kind of blew up when the British government pushed the colonists one tax too far. What do you guys think?

Ralph: I think so. I mean, you've even got colonial governors, who are worried here, you know, as early as 1766.

Daniel: I think ideas of independence may be sort of percolating in small groups at that time but the idea of sort of this popular independence movement, it doesn't happen for years later. In fact, the British responses to the Boston Tea Party do sort of spur that on, but groups such as the Sons of Liberty do have, if not independence aim at this point, they want greater independence in taxation and things like that. They're actually protesting the Tea Act by encouraging people not to purchase tea encouraging that smuggling that Ralph was talking about, don't purchase tea through these means purchase Dutch tea illegally, well, that's what the British would say. They're just saying, we're just purchasing tea, and avoiding tax and avoiding paying duties to the Crown against this act, which they think is unconstitutional.

Chloe: I see. Now, let's move on to how Britain responded, both the people and the government. Protesters chucked into the harbour, the British Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Leslie wrote home to say the mob was taking over - what happened next?

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Daniel: Well, the thing to remember is that things didn't happen immediately, it takes quite a few months for the news to arrive in London. The Boston Tea Party happened December 16, but it's not until January 20, or late January, that the news is actually arriving in London. So immediately, not much is happening, the British in America are writing letters reporting it, but it's going to take a couple of weeks to actually arrive. In America, the Sons of Liberty are saying, what a wonderful, great success. This is for their cause and they're publishing in American newspapers a week after the events, so the Americans are getting this news far earlier, they're getting a jump on the British in terms of responding. But eventually news does reach Britain, does reach London in late January, and the British need to respond. They can't be seen to do nothing, a British government needs to respond and can't be seen to do nothing. So it's sort of twofold – they want to first sort of pay for any damages and losses, the East India Company are a private company, even though they have close ties to the British government, and they've lost a lot of money. It doesn't look good for the British government if they don't find some way to compensate them. They need to find some way to compensate the East India Company and they also need to punish the ringleaders of the Boston Tea Party or failing that, punish the whole of Boston to sort of send the message that this sort of act will not be tolerated.

Chloe: So there's no kind of immediate response on the ground, there's no violence, per se, the punishment is through legislation, right?

Daniel: There's no immediate violence or response. I mean, one of the reasons for that is because of the people that were involved and did the protest. We've got letters that say they all left Boston sharpish, and didn't say 'we were involved in this' until sometimes, generations later. Then they'll actually say, oh, yeah, my grandfather was involved in this, so they leave Boston sharpish to avoid

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that immediate punishment and the rounding up of the ringleaders. There's also the fact that the British authorities in America, were frightened to be in Boston, and we have letters from the months leading up to it saying, we don't think it's safe to import tea or to try and collect duties of tea here, we think we can only do it a bayonet point. So there's a sort of real fear of violence of, you know, enacting justice. So there's no immediate rounding up, because they're not able to, because they're not on the ground. By the time they get there, they're trying to assemble the sort of councils and investigations, the main perpetrators have already left the building.

So once the letter started arriving in London, that's when we start to get a response and see what the British response is going to be. In our archive, we have a letter from Thomas Hutchinson, who's governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, to the Colonial Secretary in England as Lord Dartmouth, calling for

Reader: “every means that could be exerted in the present moment to vindicate the insulted authority of this Kingdom, and to protect its Commerce, which has been so openly & so daringly obstructed”

Daniel: So that's very much the line the government is saying. It's not just us that have been wronged. It's these private parties, the private individuals that have lost out as well. So Hutchinson also argues that the British response to the Boston Tea Party should come from Parliament and not just the King on his own, it shouldn't be the King punishing his subjects, it should come from the King and Parliament or the estates in Parliament, and that this response should be an extremely disruptive sanction.

Reader: “The measures that appeared under all the circumstances of the case to be the best

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adopted to this purpose, were a suspension, during the King's pleasure, of all the privileges at present enjoyed by the Town of Boston, as the Seat of Government and a Place of Trade, and an effectual & immediate punishment of those who had been the ringleaders in the very criminal transactions there."

Chloe: So did any powerful people in America agree with this kind of punishment?

Daniel: Well, no, the punishments were seen as very sort of very, very harsh. And in fact, Benjamin Franklin had already been sort of brought before Parliament in 1765.

Chloe: Oh, yeah, we've already met him already.

Daniel: He's brought back that seems to be what the British government do when they see problems in America, they bring their man in London, Benjamin Franklin before them. So when they learned at the Boston Tea Party they summoned Benjamin Franklin to, well not to answer for the actions, but to just sort of investigate. So late January, they bring Benjamin Franklin to them, and they blame him for leaking letters and plans to the Americans who then publish it in newspapers and sort of causing unrest. But then they also try and get the names of ringleaders out of him. He writes a letter immediately after the 2nd February 1774, to sort these leaders in Boston, not necessarily ringleaders of Boston Tea Party, but just to sort of the Sons of Liberty and other groups in Boston, basically saying that the actions of the Boston Tea Party have actually done a lot to harm the American cause. You've destroyed private property. So it's not necessarily a protest against the British government. And a lot of people in Britain who might have been sitting on the fence have actually galvanised them one way against the Americans. So Benjamin Franklin is all for the cause in general, but against the methods they used to do this.

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Chloe: So has he kind of given them a slap on the wrist from afar?

Daniel: A little bit, and we've actually got copies of the letters, so we know what he wrote. They're not held at The National Archives, but these letters have been published in Benjamin Franklin's writings. So, what he wrote was this,

Reader: "I am truly concerned, as I believe all considerate Men are with you, that there should seem to any a Necessity for carrying Matters to such Extremity, as, in a Dispute about Public Rights, to destroy private Property; This (notwithstanding the Blame justly due to those who obstructed the Return of the Tea) it is impossible to justify with People so prejudiced in favour of the Power of Parliament to tax America, as most are in this Country."

Daniel: So you can see Franklin there, he really doesn't want to upset the people in Boston. He's saying, you know, I sympathize with a cause I'm obviously I'm for the cause. But he's just been brought before the Privy Council and basically shouted up for being blamed, well not being blamed for, but being shouted out for the events in Boston, Boston Tea Party. So he's saying maybe this wasn't the best way to go about it.

Chloe: Being very tactful there with his letter.

Daniel: Absolutely, trying to please both sides.

Chloe: Wow, were there any British politicians who supported the colonists' cause?

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Ralph: Yes, probably the most iconic figure in political terms was the radical MP for Middlesex, John Wilkes. He's widely admired in the colonies as a political journalist, a radical politician and a fighter for liberty. He greatly influenced the American revolutionaries in their struggle for independence, and ultimately played a role in establishing the right to freedom of the press in the United States.

Chloe: Okay, great. So we've heard about parliamentary support, Ralph, what about areas in Britain that were more likely to lend their support to the Boston Tea Party or supporters of that movement?

Ralph: Oh, absolutely there was popular support for the American cause, within the merchant classes, for example, in the West Country. So using the record class, SP 37, which is State Papers Domestic, George III, The earliest document I've come across, which definitely identifies pro-American sympathizers is from June 1776, to quote from the Inspector of Customs at Falmouth, "Falmouth abounds with the American interests so much, especially amongst the trading people, that is with great difficulty, I can scarce do my duty."

Chloe: So is that because they are involved in the tea smuggling?

Ralph: They're being difficult basically, they're just not cooperating with the authorities. Yeah, I mean, there's definitely proof of smuggling.

Chloe: They were benefiting from the kind of illegal tea trade going on at the time?

Ralph: Yes absolutely. They are boycotting British imports for a start. I've got another document

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from January 1777. A Treasury Report, I think it is interesting that “one Thomas Atwood Diggs of Maryland, has been active in Bristol for the American rebels and will soon appear as an agent of Congress in Spain” (who will shortly come in on the side of the colonists, declaring war on Britain in 1779). He has recruited pilots at Bristol familiar with the North American coastline and sent them to Bordeaux and Dunkirk.” However, France herself will come in on the side of the American colonists in 1778. Here's another letter which will relate to one called John the Painter, quite a shadowy figure.

Chloe: You've got lots of different agents, all lending their support, but John the Painter sounds interesting Ralph. I know you've actually written a blog about him on our website. We'll make sure to put that in the notes for our listeners. But could you maybe share some of that story with us now?

Ralph: Yes, there was none more notorious or infamous, should I say than John the Painter, the Revolutionary War Dockyard incendiary born in Edinburgh, 1752. James Aitken aka John Boswell served his apprenticeship as a house painter in that city and thereby secured the familiar title of John the Painter but who ran through countless aliases in his adult life, which was mostly as a petty thief. In 1773, having evidently failed to obtain an Army commission came to London and worked for a while as an honest journeyman, before running into debt, and finding the murky criminal underworld offered more opportunities would embark on a varied career as a highwayman, burglar, and robber.

Chloe: So can I just track back there? We've got a painter maybe someone who's struggling with life and got into crime, is that where we're at?

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Ralph: Yeah, he's only in his early 20s. The situation rapidly deteriorates. Meanwhile, posters describing him and advertising for his capture lead him to emigrate to the American colonies. Lacking funds and fearing that his crimes would be detected, Aitken negotiated an indenture in exchange for a voyage to Jamestown. Having no intention to work out his term, he escaped from Virginia and eventually went northward through Maryland and the Mid-Atlantic colonies to settle in New York.

It was during this period that he became exposed to revolutionary rhetoric and claimed that he had been harassed by British troops for having been suspected as a Whig patriot and had been present during the Boston Tea Party itself. To quote from the life of James Aitken, which was published by a certain J. Wilkes in 1777 "Upon hearing of riots at Boston, the restlessness of my disposition would not suffer for me to remain any longer in New York, on meeting with a companion whose curiosity was equally excited as my own, we agreed to set out together for that place, and I cannot deny being very active in these riots, particularly in sinking the tea, and insulting the Friends of the government, in which I did not escape the notice of many principle persons among the Americans."

On returning to London in 1775 and conceiving a growing sympathy for the Patriot Cause of the colonies he recently fled, he developed his scheme of political sabotage. Aitken had left America as a result of the British military build-up in New England. Moreover, the Scots were not popular in the northern colonies, as they were perceived as being loyal adherents of the Crown. Many Scots in the Carolinas and Georgia for example, would remain firm Loyalists. It has been suggested that Aitken was motivated by a desire to escape his life of insignificance and poverty, and that is striking a blow on behalf of American liberties, would he reasoned, be recognized, and handsomely rewarded with a commission in the American Continental Army. However, after

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meeting the American envoy Silas Dean in Paris, he came away with the deluded notion that he had actually secured the full diplomatic backing of Dean and the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, for his plans for state terrorism.

John the Painter was finally apprehended in the north of Hampshire after a huge reward of 200 guineas almost 20,000 pounds today, was offered by the Admiralty at the urging of the magistrate John Fielding. Being found guilty after a single day's hearing and sentenced to death at Winchester Assizes for acts of sabotage on behalf of the American colonial cause. Whilst his actions were indeed treasonous, the only charge laid against him by the Navy Board was for burning down the Royal Palace at Portsmouth Harbour, contrary to the provisions of the Dockyard's Protection Act of 1772, an offence, which carried the death penalty.

The cost of his malicious attack would eventually be estimated to have been around 20,000 pounds worth almost 12 million pounds today. John the Painter quote "an enemy of the Navy", was hanged at Portsmouth on the 10th March 1777. From the main mast of HMS Arethusa. His was the only execution in Royal Dockyard history.

Chloe: Wow! So we've got all these different responses from a range of people. And this curious figure, John the Painter who unfortunately is hanged in the end, who is also somewhat connected to what happened in Boston.

So we've heard these different responses from a range of people and that curious story about John the Painter from Ralph. But Daniel, what about those legislative responses to the protests you mentioned? Did any laws actually come about in the wake of this protest?

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Daniel: Well, yes, they did. They came out really quickly, actually, relatively speaking in terms of legislation. So when we're thinking about sort of general responses from the government, they had sort of two aims. They wanted to punish the ringleaders and then they will need to sort of enact laws to make it a sort of thing didn't happen. Turns out they couldn't punish the ringleaders. They found a few people that were named as being present in meetings in Boston. But the Attorney and Solicitor General said, those acts do constitute high treason, but you don't have enough evidence to prosecute anyone for treason. They found that probably by February 1774, they weren't going to be able to punish individuals for the Boston Tea Party. They either couldn't identify them or they couldn't pin it on the people they did know were involved in some way. So that led them to Okay, how are we going to punish Boston, Massachusetts

Chloe: Collectively?

Daniel: Collectively yeah, and how are we going to get the money back because they're under pressure now from the East India Company, but also from the British public that they say, you know, you've got to be doing something you can't you've got to be seen to do a response or to be responding to this sort of protest. That's what they do in Parliament. They enact acts designed to punish the entire town of Boston. And then also generally Massachusetts as well. So Lord North, who's the prime minister, he admits that the bill for the Boston Port Act, which is the first acts of a set of acts that become known as the Intolerable Acts, because of how much they were disliked, and how intolerable they were, to the American people. So the Boston Port Act was the Trade Act of 1774, was the first of these acts and Lord North, who's the prime minister, admits that the Bill would punish an entire town, not just people responsible for the tea party. He argued that Boston had been the ringleader of all violence and opposition to the execution of the laws of this country. New York and Philadelphia grew unruly on receiving the news that a triumph for the people of

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Boston. So Boston, had not only to answer for its own violence, but for having incited other places to tumults.

Chloe: They're the ringleader.

Daniel: Yeah, so Lord North is like we are going to set an example so that the whole of North America doesn't, follow suit, so that he realizes that this is sort of punishing the many for you know, the sins of the few.

Chloe: But it's a way to contain this kind of protest.

Daniel: Exactly. It's a way to contain this kind of protest. So the first act, the Boston Port Act, closed the port of Boston, it basically said that nothing could go through the port of Boston, no customs could be paid there and no ships could unload. They basically moved the centre of trade in Massachusetts to Salem. There are letters saying, the Boston Port Act when it comes into force, you have to move all of your customers, offices, anyone involved in that trade, to Salem. Trade will go through there until such time as Boston pays compensation to the East India Company, but also to the Crown. The Crown is arguing that they haven't been paid duties on this last tea. So they've lost money as well. That's

Chloe: A huge amount of upheaval because if we consider the fact that the tea was worth millions alone, all the other trades who would have made that kind of trade so, so valuable going through Boston?

Daniel: Absolutely and yes, it's not just merchants, everyone in Boston is going to suffer from this

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act of stopping trade money, everything going through Boston. So they're specifically saying it's not a permanent act it's until you pay back the money.

Chloe: It sounds a bit like the naughty step!

Daniel: It sort of is yeah, absolutely is. So that's sort of the main act the first main act, there's actually three other acts that they enact at the same time to sort of punish Massachusetts more generally, and to make sure that sort of thing doesn't happen again. So the Boston Port Act is specifically to get them to pay back the money for the Boston Tea Party, but they also enacted the Massachusetts Government Act. That sort of goes further than the Boston Port Act because it removes the Massachusetts charter, and brings the region under the control of the British. So basically, no one no governor/officer in Massachusetts can be appointed without the British governor say so or British Parliament's say so or the Crown's say so. So they are removing any kind of independence they had with the Massachusetts Government Act.

There are a couple of other acts as well that are part of these Intolerable Acts. There's the Administration of Justice Act, that's popularly called the Monkey Act, or the Murder Act. That made British officials immune to criminal prosecution in Massachusetts, if the governor thought that they couldn't get a fair trial.

Chloe: So it feels like the tightening of control and the enhancing of powers of the British in Boston.

Daniel Gosling: And administration of justice add in particular means that theoretically, British officials and military could commit crimes and commit murders against people in Massachusetts,

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and then not be punished there. They could, well not go free, but they would be sent to England, where they would have a much more sympathetic trial.

Chloe: I mean, it doesn't sound like such a great situation now. What were the effects of these laws, what what did it build into?

Daniel: Well, these laws, they reacted really negatively in America, but not immediately. So immediately, the rest of the North American colonies outside of Massachusetts were sort of waiting to see what the response was. Boston and Massachusetts were sort of appealing to the other colonies to sort of impose sanctions on imports from the British. But initially, letters coming out of America to the British government are saying the other colonies at the moment aren't supporting them. We don't think they will. Everyone's holding their breath to see what's going to happen. But by July 1774, the Intolerable Acts have now been enforced, or the Boston Port Act has been enforced for a couple of months now, the British government and everyone else starts to realize that the North American colonies are going to support Boston and Massachusetts. So they start imposing sanctions on trade in their own colonies. They start sending things to Boston to support this sort of, while they can't receive their own trade to support them then during that.

Then what happens at the end of 1774 is there's a Congress that all of the colonies meet together to do discuss the Intolerable Acts, discuss what they're going to do about them, and basically to impose sanctions on the British government and impose sanctions on the British government, until those acts are appealed. What the entire Intolerable Acts really do is galvanize the American colonies to this sort of independence cause, you have to give us our own rights to tax. And they sort of rally behind Boston and these Intolerable Acts, in particular, to say, you need to repeal these, and we need to open the conversation. And that's the idea of this Congress. They don't

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want it to escalate to warfare which it obviously does a year later. This is their attempt to discuss with the British government and the Crown, how we can get past this, you need to repeal these Intolerable Acts and we need to have more of a discussion about how you tax the American colonies.

Chloe: I see, and then what happens here later?

Daniel: So this Congress is unsuccessful, the Crown and Parliament refuse to budge. They say no, we still haven't seen the money for the Boston Tea Party and that eventually leads to warfare. So the British military is sent out into the American colonies. They're already there, to sort of keep the peace and have been since the 1760s, so that erupts into offense, the American Revolutionary War in 1775. And then ultimately, in 1776, in July 1776, the US Declaration of Independence is passed. And that's the 13 North American colonies declaring independence from the British government. And that's really interesting, you can see that as a direct continuation from the Boston Tea Party, because the Declaration of Independence is basically a list of reasons for why the American people no longer want Georgie III, as their king. They call him a tyrant and then they do a long list of the things that he's done wrong. Included in that list are a number of things relating to the Intolerable Acts – you stopped our ports, you brought soldiers into America, you stopped them from being prosecuted in America. So you see this long list in the Declaration of Independence that goes back to the Intolerable Acts.

Chloe: So we can certainly see the through line of independence from the Boston Tea Party. And I think that's where we're going to leave this episode.

Chloe: You can find out more about The National Archives collections that help to tell the story of

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the Boston Tea Party: they include the American Revolution Research Guide, Ralph’s blog on John the Painter, and other blogs on HMS Gaspee and Treason Against the State: America Declares Independence

Thank you to Ralph Thompson and Daniel Gosling for leading me through this fascinating history.

And thank you for listening to On The Record from The National Archives. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app. Visit nationalarchives.gov.uk to subscribe to On the Record at The National Archives so you don’t miss new episodes, which are released throughout the year.

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Finally, thank you to all our experts who contributed to this episode. Our reader in this episode was Tash Walker. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith from Aunt Nell.

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You’ll hear from us soon!

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TRAILER TRANSCRIPT

Reader: “The Sons of Liberty have destroyed 340 Chests of Tea on board three ships, that lay all together at one of the Wharfs. The fourth vessel that brought the Tea is stranded near to Cape Cod, but the Tea was got safe on Shore, and it’s expected by this time it has fared the same fate as the rest...”

Chloe: This might be the earliest account of the Boston Tea Party, a protest that lit the fire of independence sentiment before the American Revolution. It is a letter dated December 17th, 1773.

Reader: “The Gentlemen that took refuge here still continue, and likely to remain, for the mob threatens them much if they go to town. In short they rule everything at present.”

Chloe: This is On The Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

I’m Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives. In this episode of On the Record, I’m learning about a legendary protest, the Boston Tea Party, as it is known, is a foundation story for what became the independent United States of America.

Sitting here in The National Archives in Kew, London, my colleagues and I can look at some unique documents about the British side of this story.

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Ralph Thompson: It was during this period that he became exposed to revolutionary rhetoric and claimed that he had been harassed by British troops for being a suspected repatriate and had been present during the Boston Tea Party itself.

Chloe Lee: From letters to government and witness statements to the words of the law that was rushed in to stop a revolution — join me in looking through these fascinating historical documents.

Daniel Gosling: So Hutchinson also argues that the British response to the Boston Tea Party should come from parliament, so not just the King on his own, and that this response should be an extremely disruptive sanction.

Chloe Lee: Marking 250 years since the Boston Tea Party, the episode is coming soon, so hit follow

