American Colonies Oppose The Stamp Act: By James Grahame

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Patrick Henry's Speech - 1765

Although the Stamp Act passed by the English Parliament in 1765 was repealed in the following year, the opposition which led to its repeal became also one of the principal causes of the American Revolution. The passage of this act and the laying of its impositions upon the colonies formed the climax of England's mercantile policy there, where irritating revenue laws had already, as in Massachusetts, for some years been in force.

In 1763 England determined to levy upon the colonies direct taxes, not only for their own military defence, but also as a contribution to the payment of the British war debt. George Grenville, who, says Macaulay, knew of "no national interests except those which are expressed by pounds, shillings, and pence," became prime minister in 1763. His first measure was that known as the "Molasses or [Sugar] Act," reviving an old law for enforcement in the American colonies. The act was meant to "protect" West Indian sugar-planters, and it laid a heavy duty upon all sugar and molasses imported into North America from the French West Indies.

The outbreak of indignation, especially in New England, against this imposition was a prelude to the more general and determined resistance to the Stamp Act, which was Grenville's second obnoxious measure. The history of "Grenville's Stamp Act" is adequately set forth by Grahame and Bancroft, whose respective accounts present its most important features and its fate in the hands of American patriots.

Text

The calamities of the French and Indian War (1755) had scarcely ended when the germ of another war was planted which soon grew up and produced deadly fruit. At that time sundry resolutions passed the British Parliament relative to the imposition of a stamp duty in America, which gave a general alarm. By them the right, the equity, the policy, and even the necessity of taxing the colonies were formally avowed. These resolutions, being considered as the preface of a system of American revenue, were deemed an introduction to evils of much greater magnitude. They opened a prospect of oppression, boundless in extent and endless in duration. They were, nevertheless, not immediately followed by any legislative act. Time and an invitation were
given to the Americans to suggest any other mode of taxation that might be equivalent in its produce to the Stamp Act; but they objected not only to the mode, but the principle; and several of their assemblies, though in vain, petitioned against it.

An American revenue was, in England, a very popular measure. The cry in favor of it was so strong as to silence the voice of petitions to the contrary. The equity of compelling the Americans to contribute to the common expenses of the empire satisfied many who, without inquiring into the policy or justice of taxing their unrepresented fellow-subjects, readily assented to the measures adopted by the Parliament for this purpose. The prospect of easing their own burdens at the expense of the colonists dazzled the eyes of gentlemen of landed interest, so as to keep out of their view the probable consequences of the innovation. The omnipotence of Parliament was so familiar a phrase on both sides of the Atlantic that few in America, and still fewer in Great Britain, were impressed, in the first instance, with any idea of the illegality of taxing the colonists.

Illumination on that subject was gradual. The resolutions in favor of an American stamp act, which passed in March, 1764, met with no opposition. In the course of the year which intervened between these resolutions and the passing of a law grounded upon them, the subject was better understood, and constitutional objections against the measure were urged by several, both in Great Britain and America. This astonished and chagrined the British ministry; but as the principle of taxing America had been for some time determined upon, they were unwilling to give it up. Impelled by partiality for a long-cherished idea, Grenville, in March, 1765, brought into the House of Commons his long-expected bill for laying a stamp duty in America. By this, after passing through the usual forms, it was enacted that the instruments of writing in daily use among a commercial people should be null and void unless they were executed on stamped paper or parchment, charged with a duty imposed by the British Parliament.

When the bill was brought in, Charles Townshend concluded a speech in its favor with words to the following effect: "And now will these Americans, children planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence, till they are grown to a degree of strength and opulence, and protected by our arms - will they grudge to contribute their mite to relieve us from the heavy weight of that burden which we lie under?" To which Colonel Barre replied: "They planted by your care? No, your oppressions planted them in America! They fled from tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country, where they exposed themselves to almost all the hardships to which human nature is liable; and, among others, to the cruelty of a savage foe the most subtle, and I will take upon me to say the most formidable, of any people upon the face of God's earth! And yet, actuated by principles of true English liberty, they met all hardships with pleasure, compared with those they suffered in their own country from the hand of those that should have been their friends.
"They nourished up by your indulgence? They grew by your neglect of them! As soon as you began to care about them, that care was exercised in sending persons to rule them, in one department and another, who were, perhaps, the deputies of deputies to some members in this House, sent to spy out their liberties, to misrepresent their actions, and to prey upon them: men whose behavior on many occasions has caused the blood of those sons of liberty to recoil within them; men promoted to the highest seats of justice - some who to my knowledge were glad, by going to a foreign country, to escape being brought to the bar of a court of justice in their own.

"They protected by your arms? They have nobly taken up arms in your defence, have exerted a valor, amid their constant and laborious industry, for the defence of a country whose frontier was drenched in blood, while its interior parts yielded all its little savings to your emolument. And, believe me, that same spirit of freedom which actuated these people at first will accompany them still: but prudence forbids me to explain myself further. God knows I do not at this time speak from any motives of party heat. I deliver the genuine sentiments of my heart. However superior to me, in general knowledge and experience, the respectable body of this House may be, yet I claim to know more of America than most of you; having seen and been conversant in that country. The people, I believe, are as truly loyal as any subjects the King has; but a people jealous of their liberties, and who will vindicate them if ever they should be violated: but the subject is too delicate. I will say no more."

During the debate on the bill, the supporters of it insisted much on the colonies being virtually represented in the same manner as Leeds, Halifax, and some other towns were. A recurrence to this plea was a virtual acknowledgment that there ought not to be taxation without representation. It was replied that the connection between the electors and non-electors of Parliament, in Great Britain, was so interwoven from both being equally liable to pay the same common tax as to give some security of property to the latter: but with respect to taxes laid by the British Parliament, and paid by the Americans, the situation of the parties was reversed. Instead of both parties bearing a proportional share of the same common burden, what was laid on the one was exactly so much taken off from the other.

The bill met with no opposition in the House of Lords; and, on March 22, 1765, it received the royal assent. The night after it passed, Dr. Franklin wrote the Charles Thomson: "The sun of liberty is set; you must light up the candles of industry and economy." Thomson answered, "I was apprehensive that other lights would be the consequence"; and he foretold the opposition which shortly took place. On its being suggested from authority that the stamp officers would not be sent from Great Britain, but selected from among the Americans, the colony agents were desired to point out proper persons for that purpose. They generally nominated their friends, which affords a presumptive proof that they supposed the act would have gone down. In this opinion they were far from being singular.
That the colonists would be ultimately obliged to submit to the Stamp Act was at first commonly believed, both in England and America. The framers of it, in particular, flattered themselves that the confusion which would arise upon the disuse of writings, and the insecurity of property which would result from using any other than that required by law, would compel the colonies, however reluctant, to use the stamped paper, and consequently to pay the taxes imposed thereon. They therefore boasted that it was a law which would execute itself. By the term of the Stamp Act, it was not to take effect till November 1st - a period of more than seven months after its passing. This gave the colonists an opportunity of leisurely canvassing the new subject and examining fully on every side. In the first part of this interval, struck with astonishment, they lay in silent consternation, and could not determine what course to pursue. By degrees they recovered their recollection. Virginia led the way in opposition to the Stamp Act. Patrick Henry, on May 29, 1765, brought into the House of Burgesses of that colony vigorous resolutions, which were substantially adopted. They were well received by the people and immediately forwarded to the other provinces. They circulated extensively and gave a spring to the discontented. Till they appeared, most were of opinion that the act would be quietly adopted. Murmurs, indeed, were common, but they seemed to be such as would soon die away. The countenance of so respectable a colony as Virginia confirmed the wavering and emboldened the timid. Opposition to the Stamp Act, from that period, assumed a bolder face. The fire of liberty blazed forth from the press. Some well-judged publications set the rights of the colonists in a plain but strong point of view. The tongues and the pens of the well-informed citizens labored in kindling the latent sparks of patriotism. The flame spread from breast to breast till the conflagration became general.

In this business, New England had a principal share. The inhabitants of that part of America, in particular, considered their obligations to the mother-country, for past favors, to be very inconsiderable. They were fully informed that their forefathers were driven by persecution to the woods of America, and had there, without any expense to the parent state, effected a settlement on bare creation. Their resentment, for the invasion of their accustomed right of taxation, was not so much mitigated by the recollection of late favors as it was heightened by the tradition of grievous sufferings to which their ancestors, by the rulers of England, had been subjected.

The heavy burdens which the operation of the Stamp Act would have imposed on the colonists, together with the precedent it would establish of future exactions, furnished the American patriots with arguments calculated as well to move the passions as to convince the judgments of their fellow-colonists. In great warmth they exclaimed: "If the Parliament have a right to levy the stamp duties, they may by the same authority lay on us imposts, excises, and other taxes without end, till their rapacity is satisfied or our abilities are exhausted. We cannot, at future elections, displace these men who so lavishly grant away our property. Their seat and their power are independent of us, and it will rest with their generosity where to stop in transferring the
expenses of government from their own to our shoulders."

It was fortunate for the liberties of America that newspapers were the subject of a heavy stamp duty. Printers, when uninfluenced by government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for their attention to the profits of their profession. A stamp duty, which openly invaded the first and threatened a diminution of the last provoked their united zealous opposition. They daily presented to the public original dissertations tending to prove that if the Stamp Act were suffered to operate, the liberties of Americans were at an end, and their property virtually transferred to their transatlantic fellow-subjects. The writers among the Americans, seriously alarmed for the fate of their country, came forward with essays to prove that, agreeably to the British Constitution, taxation and representation were inseparable; that the only constitutional mode of raising money from the colonists was by acts of their own legislatures; that the crown possessed no further power than that of requisition; and that the Parliamentary right of taxation was confined to the mother-country, where it originated from the natural right of man to do what he pleased with his own, transferred by consent from the electors of Great Britain to those whom they chose to represent them in Parliament.

They also insisted much on the misapplication of public money by the British ministry. Great pains were taken to inform the colonists of the large sums annually bestowed on pensioned favorites and for the various purposes of bribery. Their passions were inflamed by high-colored representations of the hardship of being obliged to pay the earnings of their industry into a British treasury, well known to be a fund for corruption.

While a variety of legal and illegal methods were adopted to oppose the Stamp Act, November 1st, on which it was to commence its operation, approached. At Boston the day was ushered in by a funeral tolling of bells. Many shops and stores were shut. The effigies of the planners and friends of the Stamp Act were carried about the streets in public derision, and then torn in pieces by the enraged populace. It was remarkable that, though a large crowd was assembled, there was not the least violence or disorder.

At Portsmouth, in New Hampshire, the morning was ushered in with tolling all the bells in town. In the course of the day notice was given to the friends of Liberty to attend her funeral. A coffin, neatly ornamented and inscribed with the word "Liberty" in large letters was carried to the grave. The funeral procession began from the State House, attended with two unbraced drums. While the inhabitants who followed the coffin were in motion, minute-guns were fired, and continued till the coffin arrived at the place of interment. Then an oration in favor of the deceased was pronounced. It was scarcely ended before the coffin was taken up; it having been perceived that some remains of life were left, on which the inscription was immediately altered to "Liberty revived." The bells immediately exchanged their melancholy for a more joyful sound; and satisfaction appeared in every countenance. The
whole was conducted with decency and without injury or insult to any man's person or property.

The general aversion to the Stamp Act was, by similar methods, in a variety of places, demonstrated. It is remarkable that the proceedings of the populace on these occasions were carried on with decorum and regularity. They were not ebullitions of a thoughtless mob, but for the most part planned by leading men of character and influence, who were friends to peace and order. These, knowing well that the bulk of mankind are more led by their senses than by their reason, conducted the public exhibitions on that principle, with a view of making the Stamp Act and its friends both ridiculous and odious.

Though the Stamp Act was to have operated from November 1st, yet legal proceedings in the courts were carried on as before. Vessels entered and departed without stamped papers. The printers boldly printed and circulated their newspapers, and found a sufficient number of readers; though they used common paper in defiance of the acts of Parliament. In most departments, by common consent, business was carried on as though no Stamp Act had existed. This was accompanied by spirited resolutions to risk all consequences rather than submit to use the paper required by law. While these matters were in agitation, the colonists entered into associations against importing British manufactures till the Stamp Act should be repealed. In this manner British liberty was made to operate against British tyranny. Agreeably to the free Constitution of Great Britain, the subject was at liberty to buy or not to buy, as he pleased. By suspending their future purchases on the repeal of the Stamp Act, the colonists made it the interest of merchants and manufacturers to solicit for that repeal. They had usually taken so great a proportion of British manufactures that the sudden stoppage of all their orders, amounting, annually, to two or three millions sterling, threw some thousands in the mother-country out of employment, and induced them, from a regard to their own interest, to advocate the measures wished for by America. The petitions from the colonists were seconded by petitions from the merchants and manufacturers of Great Britain. What the former prayed for as a matter of right, and connected with their liberties, the latter also solicited from motives of immediate interest.

In order to remedy the deficiency of British goods, the colonists betook themselves to a variety of necessary domestic manufacturers. In a little time large quantities of common cloths were brought to market; and these, though dearer and of a worse quality, were cheerfully preferred to similar articles imported from Britain. That wool might not be wanting, they entered into resolutions to abstain from eating lambs. Foreign elegancies were laid aside. The women were as exemplary as the men in various instances of self-denial. With great readiness they refused every article of decoration for their persons and luxuries for their tables. These restrictions, which the colonists had voluntarily imposed on themselves, were so well observed that multitudes of artificers in England were reduced to great distress, and some of their most flourishing manufactorys were in a great measure at a stand.
An association was entered into by many of the "Sons of Liberty" - the name given to those who were opposed to the Stamp Act - by which they agreed, "to march with the utmost expedition, at their own proper costs and expense, with their whole force, to the relief of those that should be in danger from the Stamp Act or its promoters and abettors, or anything relative to it, on account of anything that may have been done in opposition to its obtaining." This was subscribed by so many in New York and New England that nothing but a repeal could have prevented the immediate commencement of a civil war.

From the decided opposition to the Stamp Act which had been adopted by the colonies, it became necessary for Great Britain to enforce or to repeal it. Both methods of proceeding had supporters. The opposers of a repeal urged arguments, drawn from the dignity of the nation, the danger of giving way to the clamors of the Americans, and the consequences of weakening Parliamentary authority over the colonies. On the other hand, it was evident, from the determined opposition of the colonies, that it could not be enforced without a civil war, by which event the nation must be a loser. In the course of these discussions Dr. Franklin was examined at the bar of the House of Commons, and gave extensive information on the state of American affairs, and the impolicy of the Stamp Act, which contributed much to remove prejudices and to produce a disposition that was friendly to a repeal.

Some speakers of great weight, in both Houses of Parliament, denied their right of taxing the colonies. The most distinguished supporters of this opinion were Lord Camben, in the House of Lords, and William Pitt, in the House of Commons. The former, in strong language, said: "My position is this; I repeat it; I will maintain it to my last hour: taxation and representation are inseparable. This position is founded on the laws of nature. It is more; it is itself an eternal law of nature. For whatever is a man's own is absolutely his own. No man has a right to take it from him without his consent. Whoever attempts to do it attempts an injury. Whoever does it commits a robbery."

Pitt, with an original boldness of expression, justified the colonists in opposing the Stamp Act. "You have no right," said he, "to tax America. I rejoice that America has resisted. Three millions of our fellow-subjects, so lost to every sense of virtue as tamely to give up their liberties, would be fit instruments to make slaves of the rest." He concluded with giving his advice that the Stamp Act be repealed absolutely, totally, and immediately; that reasons for the repeal be assigned; that it was founded on an erroneous principle. "At the same time," said he, "let the sovereign authority of this country over the colonies be asserted in as strong terms as can be devised, and be made to extend to every point of legislation whatsoever, that we may bind their trade, confine their manufactures, and exercise every power except that of taking their money out of their pockets without their consent."

The approbation of this illustrious statesman, whose distinguished abilities had raised Great Britain to the highest pitch of renown, inspired
the Americans with additional confidence in the rectitude of their claims of exemption from parliamentary taxation, and emboldened them to further opposition, when, at a future day, the project of an American revenue was resumed. After much debating, two protests in the House of Lords, and passing an act, "For securing the dependence of America on Great Britain," the repeal of the Stamp Act was carried, in March, 1766. This event gave great joy in London. Ships in the River Thames displayed their colors, and houses were illuminated all over the city. It was no sooner known in America, than the colonists rescinded their resolutions, and recommenced their mercantile intercourse with the mother-country. They presented their homespun clothes to the poor, and imported more largely than ever. The churches responded with thanksgivings, and public and private rejoicings knew no bounds. By letters, addresses, and other means, almost all the colonies showed unequivocal marks of acknowledgment and gratitude. So sudden a calm after so violent storm is without a parallel in history. By the judicious sacrifice of one law, the Parliament of Great Britain procured an acquiescence in all that remained.

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