

Fear & Force: New York City's Sons of Liberty

Imagine yourself as a four-year-old toddler living in England in 1740. You watch your parents pack up your home, say goodbye to the family pet and board a ship bound for New York City in the British American colonies. There, your father establishes himself as a well-respected merchant. You grow up learning the family business, go to college, and become a merchant.

As English subjects, your family has always been dedicated to King and Country. While working hard as a twenty-five-year-old merchant in 1765, the thirteen colonies buzz with the news that Parliament has passed the Duties in American Colonies Act, commonly known as the Stamp Act. From now on, a great deal of printed materials such as legal documents, magazines, playing cards, and newspapers will be printed on special English-produced stamped paper. This paper can only be purchased with British currency, which is scarce in the colonies. The money earned from this tax is allocated to pay for the British military stationed throughout the colonies in order to protect British interests from the French, an unreal threat in your mind.

Your family owns land so you assume you would have been entitled to vote on this act or, at the very least, your local colonial legislature would have had the ability to grant permission to tax you. But neither you nor your local government had any say. How could Parliament tax you without your consent? For shame!

You are not alone in feeling unjustly governed by Parliament. Many of your peers throughout the thirteen colonies feel the same way. Groups start to organize formal protests against the Stamp Act. The premier organization is the Sons of Liberty, so you join your local group. Over the next eleven years, you risk everything to resist the unfair laws of your government. You also learn a great deal about what it takes to start a formal revolution against a world power.

Sons of Liberty

What divided the colonists into Loyalists and Patriots? How did a peaceful people become belligerent? The passing of The Stamp Act by Parliament in 1765 imposed a tax on many paper goods in the American colonies. It was felt by many to be an unjust tax since the colonists did not have representation in Parliament. The frustrated colonists formed a resistance movement organized by an inter-colony group, the Sons of Liberty.

Originally founded in Boston, Massachusetts, in August of 1765, the Sons of Liberty quickly formed groups throughout the thirteen colonies with one organizing in New York City before the end of the year. Sometimes, there were multiple groups within a colony.

The organization was composed of merchants, lawyers, tradesmen and more. These different groups vowed to support each other in their efforts to protest the British Parliament. Much of the resistance from the Sons of Liberty took the form of boycotts, destruction of private property, harassment of government officials, and a great many public writings.

This brash, often violent group of men risked everything in order to set in motion the changes that would lead to the American Revolution. Their formal organization and style of resistance made change possible.

In 1767, the Sons of Liberty adopted a flag called the Rebellious Stripes. It displayed nine vertical stripes, four white, and five red. The nine stripes represented the number of colonies that were to attend the Stamp Act Congress. Also associated with the Sons of Liberty was a similar flag with thirteen horizontal striped used by American merchant ships.

Rebellious Stripes

Reproduction

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Alexander McDougall

Alexander McDougall was born in Scotland in 1732. His family emigrated to New York City in 1738. As a young boy he delivered milk for the dairy farm where his father worked. At age fourteen he signed on as a merchant seaman and eventually became part-owner and operator of several small cargo sloops. In 1756 the British government commissioned him as a privateer in the French and Indian War, and he made a healthy profit from the ships he captured.

By 1767 he had given up a life at sea and become a successful merchant with large land holdings. It is likely that through his business he connected with other Patriot merchants such as Hercules Mulligan, Isaac Sears, and Haym Salomon. Despite his professional success, the members of New York's high society looked down on him because he lacked their hereditary pedigree. Around 1765 he became a member of the Sons of Liberty where he would rise to a leadership position.

Marinus Willett

Marinus Willett was born to a Quaker family on Long Island, New York, in 1740. As a young child his family moved to New York City and when he was eighteen he raised a militia group to join the French and Indian War. He was commissioned as a lieutenant and participated in the failed campaign at Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York. He became ill and returned to New York City in late 1759. While his family was known to have Loyalist leanings, he sympathized with the Patriots and joined the Sons of Liberty.

John Lamb

John Lamb was born in New York City in 1735. His father was a convicted burglar who had been transported to the colonies where he became a successful optician. John Lamb learned the family trade but eventually made his professional success as a wine merchant. It is likely that, through his business, he connected with other Patriot merchants such as Hercules Mulligan, Isaac Sears, and Alexander McDougall. He joined the Sons of Liberty soon after its New York group formed in late 1765.

Isaac Sears

Isaac Sears was born in Brewster, Massachusetts in 1730. When he was a child his family moved to the coastal town of Norwalk, Connecticut. As a teenager he apprenticed aboard merchant vessels and by twenty-two he managed some of the maritime trading between New York City and Canada. Between 1758 and 1761, he served as a privateer in the French and Indian War. During this time New York City became his home base.

After the war, he established himself as a trading merchant with the West Indies. through his business he likely connected with other merchants such as Hercules Mulligan, Haym Salomon, and Alexander McDougall.

Hercules Mulligan

Hercules Mulligan was born in Ireland in 1740. When Mulligan was about four years old, his family emigrated to New York City. He later attended King's College (now Columbia University). Through family connections in the merchant industry, he met newly-arrived eighteen-year-old Alexander Hamilton and the two became friends. It is likely that through his business he connected with other Patriot merchants such as

Isaac Sears, Haym Salomon and Alexander McDougall. He was among the first to join the Sons of Liberty.

Haym Salomon

Haym Salomon was born in Poland in 1740 to a Sephardic Jewish family. In 1767 the Jewish quarter of his home town of Lissa was burnt down, prompting Salomon to set out for more tolerant cities in Europe. During the next eight years he learned French, Italian, and English. He also gained knowledge of the financial operations of the mercantile industry.

In 1775, he emigrated to New York City. He was able to establish himself as a successful financial broker for merchants engaged in trade overseas. It is likely that he connected through his business with other merchants such as Hercules Mulligan, Isaac Sears, and Alexander McDougall. A Patriot, he joined the Sons of Liberty.

The Demonstration at Fort George

On October 22, 1765, the British ship *Edward* anchored in New York harbor carrying the official stamped paper to be used as per the Stamp Act of March earlier that year. It was greeted at Manhattan's docks by 2,000 people shouting at the captain to turn around. The ship stayed safely off shore, but on October 24 the stamps were secreted into Fort George.

In reaction to this event, on October 31, the Sons of Liberty issued a funeral announcement for the concept of "Liberty" and had about 200 merchants meet at Burn's City Arms Tavern (Broadway and Thames Streets) to decide on how they would resist. First they would refuse the import. Second they would sell no merchandise to England. Thirdly, starting on January 1, 1766, they would sell no British goods. That day the tradesmen organized a parade from the Common (now City Hall Park) down Broadway to Ft. George at the tip of Manhattan. The marchers shouted "Liberty!" along the route.

Despite having witnessed the Patriots' peaceful resistance and public display of discontent, the acting Governor of New York, 77-year-old Cadwallader Colden, appeared before his council to publicly uphold the Stamp Act.

On November 1, fortification of Ft. George began. The canons were turned from the harbor to face the City. In response, the Sons of Liberty organized a group to drop off a letter to Colden threatening his career, personal property, and life:

We have heard of your Design or Menace to fire upon the Town, in Case of Disturbance, but assure yourself, that, if you dare to Perpetuate any Such murderous Act, you'll bring your grey Hairs with Sorrow to the Grave, You'll die a Martyr to your own Villainy, and be Hang'd...upon a Sign-Post, as a Memento to all wicked Governors, and that every Man, that assists you Shall be, surely, put to Death.

That night, two groups totaling nearly 2,000 people, gathered to protest Colden's support of the Stamp Act. One group paraded an effigy of Colden hanging from a portable gallows, and the other stole Colden's coach and set upon it another effigy of the acting Governor. The groups marched along Broadway shouting "For Shame!" they pounded on the gates of Ft. George, but no shots were fired.

The rioters then took the effigies to Bowling Green, which stood in front of Ft. George, and lit an enormous bonfire where the effigies, gallows and coach were all burned to many "Huzzahs!" Some 300 participants of the mob broke off the main riot and ransacked the house of the Major in charge of Ft. George. Luckily, the Major had moved his family safely to a ship in the harbor.

Fearing the power of the mob, Colden publicly announced he would take no further action regarding the enforcement of the Stamp Act. He would instead defer to the incoming Governor, Sir Henry Moore, who was due to arrive at the end of the month.

Fort George once stood on the site of the present-day Customs House next to Bowling Green Park. Constructed by the Dutch in 1626, it was renamed Fort George in 1714 by the British Army. One of the Crown's most secure forts in the American colonies, Fort George withstood many violent events, including the angry protests of the Patriots on November 1, 1765. It was demolished by the Americans in 1790.

South West View of Fort George with the City of New York
Engraving
1778
Gift of Elizabeth and Stanley DeForest Scott
1986.08.006
Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Tar and Feathering

Throughout the thirteen colonies, the Sons of Liberty, whose organization was linked from town to town, were known to physically harm Loyalists as a way to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with Parliament. This type of resistance took several different forms, one of which had been an aggressive scare tactic practiced in medieval times: tar and feathering.

The colonists' adaptation included applying hot or cold pine tar to the skin or clothing of a person with a brush, then covering them in feathers from pillows and cushions. Once fully tarred and feathered the victim would be paraded around the town's major streets while onlookers jeered and shouted. This public shaming was effective in deterring others from repeating the same transgression.

The Sons of Liberty were known to have been the leaders of this castigating resistance method. There are four known instances of tar and feathering in New York City between September of 1769 and August of 1775. In one instance, a shoemaker, Tweedy by name, was tarred and feathered on August 22, 1775, because he had spoken out against Congress. Tar and feathering had its most prolific years between 1768-1770.

This engraving depicts two Boston Patriots forcing a tarred-and-feathered customs officer to drink tea under the gallows. The rosette, or bow, in the hat of the Patriot on the right signifies that he is a Son of Liberty. The "45" on the hat of the other Patriot is a reference to the famous 1763 case of John Wilkes, a political agitator, member of Parliament, and idol of the resistance movement in the American colonies. On April 23, 1763, Wilkes published a highly antimonarchical article titled "No. 45" in the newspaper *The North Briton*. King George III was furious and ordered Wilkes arrested but, as a member of the House of Commons, the radical author was exempt from prosecution.

A New Method of Macarony Making, as practiced at Boston in North America

Engraving

1774

Gift of Elizabeth and Stanley DeForest Scott

1986.08.003

Collection of Frances Tavern® Museum

The Battle of Golden Hill

The Sons of Liberty drew inspiration from the pike of the ancient Roman Goddess of Freedom, Libertas, to develop their own symbol of freedom: the Liberty Pole. In New

York City, the Sons of Liberty fought to maintain their Liberty Pole for four years, during the first bloodshed of the American Revolution.

On June 4, 1766, the Sons of Liberty gathered at the Commons, now known as City Hall Park and erected the first Liberty Pole. It was a wooden mast inscribed with "King, Pitt, and Liberty." On August 10, British soldiers cut it down. A few days later the Sons erected another pole. This time the British soldiers were ordered not to cut it down. On March 18, 1767, the Sons gathered again at the Commons to celebrate the first anniversary of the Stamp Act repeal but, later that day, British soldiers cut down the Liberty Pole. A third pole went up the next day secured by iron bands. Despite four attempts to remove it, the newly secured pole could not be cut down.

Two and a half years passed. On December 15, 1769, New York complied with the Quartering Act by contributing a meager 1,800 British pounds. Insulted by the amount offered by the local government for housing the British military, British soldiers gathered on January 13 to attempt to cut down the Liberty Pole, but the egos of the soldiers were further wounded as their attempt failed once again. They returned to the Commons two days later and were able to split the pole by the use of gunpowder. They then worked all night to cut it down and chop it into small pieces, which they laid at the doorstep of the Sons of Liberty headquarters, Montayne's Tavern. A few days later, soldiers posted handbills mocking the Sons of Liberty. Resistance leaders Isaac Sears and Walter Quackenbos, seized two of the British soldiers and took them to the Mayor to file a complaint. The other soldiers returned to barracks for reinforcements. Dozens of colonists showed up outside the Mayor's office along with some twenty armed soldiers of their own. Realizing they were outnumbered by the colonists the British soldiers departed.

The colonists followed them closely up the narrow streets toward Golden Hill, which rose along John Street between Gold and Pearl streets. The colonists did not know that another group of British soldiers were arriving at the scene and soon they would be surrounded. The commander of the rebels ordered "Soldiers, draw your bayonets and cut your way through them." The unarmed colonists grabbed what they could to defend themselves, but several were cut and bloodied by the charging British. This is the first known bloodshed of the American Revolution.

On January 30, the Sons of Liberty unsuccessfully petitioned the Mayor to erect another Liberty Pole. When the Mayor denied the petition, leaders John Lamb and William Cunningham purchased land adjacent to the Commons. On February 6, 1770, the last Liberty Pole was raised.

This twentieth-century map depicts Manhattan in 1776. Note the locations of the Commons, Fort George, Bowling Green, and Golden Hill.

Map of New York City and Manhattan Island

Colored Print

1895

Gift of T.E.V. Smith

1896.03.001

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

These fragments were found during an excavation at City Hall Park of the site believed to be the location of the Liberty Poles erected by the Sons of Liberty. The objects are thought to be ground filler to help support one of the Liberty Poles.

Fragments

Stone, Clay, Shell

18th Century

Gift of Reginald Pelham Bolton, Esq.

1920.03.001-012

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

This halberd is crafted in the British fashion. It would have likely belonged to a sergeant in the American Revolution. At the Battle of Golden Hill, a Patriot named Mr. Targee was being pursued and attacked by two British soldiers with drawn swords. Someone passed him a halberd such as this to defend himself, but rumor has it that he did not attempt to kill the soldiers.

Halberd

Wood and Metal

18th Century

Gift of Rodney Hilton Brown, Esq.

1974.01.008

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

This is a British flintlock musket. Engraved on it are the royal crown and the initials "G.B." Also featured is the Tower of London mark. This kind of musket would have been

carried by British soldiers during the aggressive and bloody confrontation with the Sons of Liberty and fellow Patriots on Golden Hill.

Musket

Wood and Metal

18th Century

Gift of Reginald Pelham Bolton, Esq.

1921.02.001

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

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New York Tea Party

With the passing of the Stamp Act in 1765 and the subsequent colonial boycotts, the East India Company began to struggle financially. There ensued an overstock of tea in the British warehouses. In May of 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Act in order to bolster the company's business. The Act undercut tea smugglers by attempting to encourage colonists to buy a cheaper tea. Yet this new tea price still included the tax from the controversial Townshend Acts, which added additional taxes on commonly used goods like glass and paper. The colonists were not fooled by the newly discounted tea and resented the Tea Act.

On December 16, 1773, the Boston Sons of Liberty organized a protest of the Tea Act through the destruction of private property. These men, some dressed as Native Americans, boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and within the next three hours dumped 342 chests of tea overboard.

The New York City Sons of Liberty heard the news of their brethren's protest from famed Son of Liberty messenger, Paul Revere. Although Parliament severely punished Boston for the Tea Party by closing the port and instituting punitive laws that included taking away Massachusetts' right to self-government, New York City's Sons planned their own protest. They formed their own Tea Act resistance group referred to as "the Mohawks" and led by Alexander McDougall.

On April 18, 1774, the *Nancy*, carrying 698 chests of tea, was anchored off Long Island. The Sons of Liberty sent the ship's captain a letter threatening the destruction of his cargo if he docked. The ship sailed away, but four days later another ship, the *London* docked at New York Harbor. While the ship was did not have a cargo of tea, the captain did maintain his own private stash of tea kept in eighteen chests. The Sons of Liberty stormed the ship and dumped the tea into the harbor.

On December 16, 1773, the Boston Sons of Liberty organized the Boston Tea Party. Within three hours, the Patriot vandals dumped 342 chests of tea—worth about two million in current US dollars—into Boston harbor. This engraving depicts the men throwing the chests of tea overboard.

Destruction of the Tea in Boston Harbour

Engraving

Circa Early 19th Century

Gift of Louis Bach

1988.08.107

Collection of Frances Tavern[®] Museum

The Massachusetts Spy was published in Boston in the 1700s by Isaiah Thomas (1749–1831). Known to be a political weekly paper highly sympathetic to the Patriots, it included notices and declarations from groups of the Sons of Liberty throughout the colonies. The publication was instrumental in unifying the resistance movement.

On December 16, 1773, on the same day as the Boston Tea Party, Thomas, aged twenty four, published an issue with an article that threatened Parliament by toasting the effectiveness of the Patriots' tea boycotts:

Tea, the idol of America, is now on trial, and maugre all efforts of administration, I dare assert, the sums of the indulged company [East India Company] will realize by it, in the coming seven years, will hardly incite them to petition the ministers to duty any more of their articles of commerce.

The Massachusetts Spy

Ink on Paper

December 16, 1773

Gift of Elizabeth and Stanley DeForest Scott

1986.08.009

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Alexander McDougall was born in Scotland in 1732. His family emigrated to New York City in 1738. As a boy he delivered dairy products and at the age fourteen he signed on as a merchant seaman. He eventually became part-owner and operator of several small cargo sloops. In 1756 the British government commissioned him as a privateer in the French and Indian War, during which he made a healthy profit from the ships he captured.

By 1767 he had large land holdings and gave up the life at sea to become a successful merchant. Despite his professional success, he was looked down upon by the members of New York's high society. When political unrest started, McDougall was quick to act. He became a leading member of the New York City Sons of Liberty and was jailed several times for speaking out against the British government. McDougall was the leader of the New York Tea Party.

During the American Revolution he was the colonel of the 1st New York Regiment and eventually a Major General (only tenth in command below George Washington). McDougall was a New York delegate to the 1780s Continental Congress and the first president of the Bank of New York. In 1781 he was elected to Minister of Marine to the Continental Navy. In 1784 he was elected to the State Senate, a position he held until his death in 1786.

Major General Alexander McDougall

Edgar Brown Smith

Oil on Canvas

Early 20th Century

Gift of Hon. McDougall Hawkes

1988.08.107

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Bohea Tea

What kind of tea did the American colonists drink? It was known then as Bohea tea, now referred to as Wuyi tea. It is recognized for its robust flavor and smooth, light body. Once brewed, it produces the aroma of smoky caramel and earth.

Wuyi tea can be a black or oolong tea grown in the Wuyi Mountains of northern Fujian, China. Tea is one of the major industries of this southeast coastal province of mainland China.

Lift the lid and smell the aroma of the 1774 New York Tea Party.

Tearing Down the Statue of King George III

Bowling Green is the oldest public park in New York City. In the mid-1600s it served as a cattle market and in 1733 it was developed into a leisure park. It was just across the street from Fort George, which occupied the southern tip of Manhattan for almost all of the 18th century.

On March 21, 1770, the British government, supported by the colonists, honored King George III by erecting a larger than life, gilded equestrian statue of him. The King and his strong steed stood atop a marble pedestal at the park's center.

After the Declaration of Independence had been read publicly at the Commons on July 9, 1776, the Sons of Liberty, led by group leader Isaac Sears and joined by fellow Patriots, celebrated by parading through the streets of New York City. The crowd turned into a mob as they made their way down Broadway, breaking windows in the homes of known Loyalists. They eventually arrived at the statue of King George III in Bowling Green.

The vandalizing mob toppled the 4,000 pound statue and destroyed the fence around it. Rumor has it that the statue was broken apart and taken to Connecticut where it was melted down into musket balls to be used in the American Revolutionary War.

Tearing down the statue of the King was a violent symbol of the break with British rule. The Declaration of Independence formalized this separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This wooden fragment is part of a tree removed by the Department of Public Parks on October 21, 1919, from Bowling Green Park. The tree's trunk rings showed over 200 years of growth revealing its place in the park since the early 1700s. This tree was a witness to many protests by the Sons of Liberty.

Tree Fragment from Bowling Green

Wood

Early 18th Century

Gift of Edwin Irvine Haines

X25

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

This image was engraved on the eve of the Civil War, seventy-seven years after the reading of Declaration of Independence at New York City's Commons on July 9, 1776. The result of this momentous reading was that a vandalizing mob of Sons of Liberty and fellow patriots toppled the 4,000-pound gilded equestrian statue of King George III at Bowling Green Park.

Pulling Down the Statue of George III

Engraving

1853

Gift of Mrs. Charles P. Wilbour

1915.04.001

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

In 1771, when relations between King George III and American colonists became tumultuous, the city built a protective wrought-iron fence around the gilded statue of King George III in Bowling Green Park. During the July 9, 1776 riot that resulted in the toppling of the statue, the surrounding fence became collateral damage. This fragment comes from that fence.

Relic from the Colonial Bowling Green Fence

Wrought Iron

1771

Gift of Ralph A. Sturges

1937.01.001

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum