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THE NEW YORK *Tea Party*

BY JOSEPH CUMMINS

Like their brethren in Boston and other colonial cities, New Yorkers
held their own tea party in 1774—with a surprise ending.

While all Americans know about the Boston Tea Party in 1773, most don't realize that there were numerous tea parties in towns up and down the eastern seaboard during 1773–1774. Patriots in Philadelphia, Annapolis, Charleston, and other towns drowned, burned, and boycotted the formerly beloved drink they now called “the vile herb” and “the detestable weed.” One party took place in New York City in April 1774—and, being New York, secret wheeling and dealing conspired to make it an event that was not quite what it appeared to be.

Taxes and Violence

The French and Indian War, which ended in 1763, had been good to the people of

Manhattan, who benefited by the British presence more than any other town in the colonies. During the war, the burghers of New York provided thousands of pounds of bread to the British army quartered there. British officers and enlisted men also needed housing, so hundreds of homes were built, providing work for bricklayers, stonemasons, plasterers, and carpenters.

Yet in the mid- to late 1760s, when Parliament imposed a series of taxes to help pay for the cost of the war in North America—the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts—mobs of New Yorkers protested. On the day the Stamp Act took effect in November 1765, a crowd of more than 2,000 raged down to Fort George at

the southern end of Manhattan carrying an effigy of Acting Governor Cadwallader Colden, who was himself in the fort hiding behind 100 cannons loaded with grapeshot. In subsequent years, New York mobs battled British soldiers in the streets on a regular basis.

The British were surprised by the vehemence of these protests. New York was filled with wealthy Loyalists who firmly supported the Crown—or at least, if they disagreed with Parliament's actions, delivered protest petitions rather than street action. The mobs made even the New York chapter of the Sons of Liberty uneasy. Led by successful artisans like Isaac Sears, John Lamb, and Alexander McDougall, the Sons of Liberty had not yet harnessed the power of the mob, as Sam

Adams had done in Boston, because leaders like Sears were concerned that violence might careen out of control.

When the Townshend Acts were repealed in 1770, New Yorkers decided to go back to buying British goods—except for tea, which was, significantly, the last import still taxed. The more radical of the Sons of Liberty would have preferred a continuing boycott of all British goods, but in what is considered the first house-to-house poll ever taken in America, merchants sent employees armed with feather quills and paper to the doorsteps of New Yorkers, who answered by a large majority that they wanted to resume trade and more cordial relations with Great Britain. After this, the Sons of Liberty became quiescent for almost three years.



NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

On the day the Stamp Act took effect in November 1765, a crowd of more than 2,000 raged down to Fort George at the southern end of Manhattan carrying an effigy of Acting Governor Cadwallader Colden.

Above: Cadwallader Colden

Ignited by Tea

That is, until the Tea Act of 1773 was passed. The mammoth British East India Company (EIC), suffering because 90% of Americans now bought their tea from smugglers (many American patriot businessmen, John Hancock among them, were making fortunes selling smuggled tea), appealed to Parliament for a bailout. Left with little choice—taxes collected on tea from the EIC were 6% of England's national budget—Parliament responded by passing the Tea Act in the summer of 1773. This allowed the EIC to export tea directly to America without paying any of the export duties it customarily delivered to the British government. This new tea would be cheaper than the smuggled tea by seven pence per pound, so it was simply assumed that colonists would swallow the tax along with the tea.

In September and October 1773, the EIC loaded a total of 544,000 pounds of tea aboard seven sturdy trading ships and sent them to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. In blanketing America's four major ports with its new low-priced product, the EIC was in effect declaring mercantile war on those American businessmen/tea smugglers, as well as thumbing their noses at patriots who protested the tea tax.

With the impending arrival in New York of over 600 chests of tea, the Sons of Liberty were re-energized. They sent advance messages to their allies in other colonies and worked to unite merchants, housewives, and tea smugglers in common cause against the EIC. They discovered which New York merchants were acting as tea consignees—Henry White, Benjamin Booth, and Abraham Lott—and pilloried them in handbills, calling each an "Enemy to His Country." Bowing under this pressure, all three issued a statement saying that they would "decline receiving and selling" the tea. With this news, New York Governor William Tryon was left to wonder just what he would do with the tea when it finally arrived.

On December 21, Paul Revere rode into Manhattan with electrifying news: the Boston Tea Party had occurred five days before. "Indians" had boarded tea ships and thrown 340 chests of tea into Boston Harbor, defying the EIC and the colonial authorities.

Tryon's advisor, William Smith, Jr. (a relatively moderate Loyalist), wrote in his diary that "a new Flame is apparently kindling in America."

A Secret Deal

While the Sons of Liberty awaited the arrival of the New York-bound tea ship *Nancy*, they debated their course of action. Smith was sought out by Isaac Sears and other patriots for advice on how to keep the tea from landing, and even though Smith heard Alexander McDougall say, "What if we prevent the landing and kill the Governor and all the Council?" he had the sense that the patriots sought compromise.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

New York Governor William Tryon

When Smith conferred with Governor Tryon, however, he found that the governor had already made up his mind. He told Smith he would allow the tea to land, but that he would use the army only as a last resort. "I will use no Arms until after they have abused & disgraced their Govt. & themselves," Tryon said. "I

A L E T T E R,

From Tom Bowline, to his worthy Messmates, the renowned Sons of Neptune, belonging to the Port of New York.

My dear Boys,

AS the Time is approaching, in which the Ship, with the East India Company's Tea may be expected to arrive, and be moored in our Harbour, to put the finishing Stroke to our Liberties, and ruin the Trade of our Country, by establishing a Monopoly; which will in Time (should it be effected) deprive Numbers of our worthy Merchants of their Sheet Anchor, and oblige them to quit their Moorings, and steer into the Country, to take a Trick at the Plough; and will (as sure as the Devil's in London) drive many of us to the cruel Alternative of seeking Employment in a foreign Country, to prevent starving in our own: And, as much depends upon our Steadiness, and Activity, in Regard to weathering this Storm; I must therefore, strongly recommend the Necessity of keeping a good Look-out; and that we do, one and all, hold ourselves in Readiness, and heartily join our Merchants, and other worthy Citizens, in preventing this pestilential Commodity from being parbuckled on Shore.

I am, my Hearts of Oak,
your Friend, and Messmate,
TOM BOWLINE.

From my Moorings, in Ratline Lane, Dec. 20, 1773.

will run the risk of Brick Batts and Dirt and I trust that you & others will stand by me."

Fortunately for Tryon, the winter of 1774 dragged on without an appearance from the *Nancy*, which had been delayed by storms at sea. In the meantime, a deal was being worked out behind the scenes between the governor, the tea consignees, and the Sons of Liberty. Fearful of violence, Tryon arranged for Henry White, one of the merchant tea consignees, to approach the Sons of Liberty and tell them that Tryon would not try to land the tea if the Sons of Liberty would pay to have the *Nancy* re-provisioned before she headed back to England. The Sons of Liberty, anxious to avoid a mob action they might not be able to control, readily agreed.

On April 18, the *Nancy* finally showed up and anchored off Sandy Hook, and the secret agreement was put into action. Pilots refused to escort the ship any further; Captain Benjamin Lockyer was told that tea could not be landed. Fifteen husky Sons of Liberty chained and

padlocked her small boats in order to keep the crew from escaping into New York. On April 20, the patriots passed out a "To the Public" handbill that summoned citizens to bid farewell to Captain Lockyer on April 23 as he departed New York for Sandy Hook and then Great Britain: "It is the desire of a number of citizens that he shall see with his own eyes their detestation of the measures pursued by the Ministry and the India Company to enslave this country."

This gathering was designed to be a spectacular bit of propaganda for the Sons of Liberty, a way to demonstrate their influence without risk of violence. And it was a win-win situation for both Loyalists and patriots until something completely unexpected happened: another tea ship, the *London*, showed up.

Impromptu Tea Party— with a Twist

The *London* was one of the original EIC tea ships sent from England in the early fall of 1773. After unloading her tea in Charleston in December (where the tea was impounded,

placed under lock and key, and later sold by patriots to finance the purchase of arms for the Revolution), the *London* had made her way up the coast under a different captain, James Chambers, who had a decidedly mixed history with New York patriots. He was skipper of the ship that had brought the hated official stamps of the Stamp Act to the city in 1765, yet he had refused to pilot a ship carrying tea to New York the previous summer. Probably through contacts in Philadelphia, the Sons of Liberty learned that Chambers was transporting eighteen chests of tea in the *London* that he intended to sell for his own personal profit.

When the *London* appeared at Sandy Hook, Chambers denied that he had any tea with him and thus was allowed to dock at Murray's

To the Public.

THE long expected TEA SHIP arrived last night at Sandy-Hook, but the pilot would not bring up the Captain till the sense of the city was known. The committee were immediately informed of her arrival, and that the Captain solicits for liberty to come up to provide necessaries for his return. The ship to remain at Sandy-Hook. The committee conceiving it to be the sense of the city that he should have such liberty, signified it to the Gentleman who is to supply him with provisions, and other necessaries. Advice of this was immediately dispatched to the Captain; and whenever he comes up, care will be taken that he does not enter at the custom-house, and that no time be lost in dispatching him.

New-York, April 19, 1774.

Left: This pseudonymous broadside calls for unity among sailors in protesting the expected arrival of a tea ship from the British East India Company.

Right: A broadside announcing the arrival of the *Nancy* at Sandy Hook.

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Crowds gathered in front of the Tontine Coffee House (center) on Wall Street to see Captain Lockyer of the *Nancy* leave town. Twenty-three years after the event, Francis Guy captured the energy of early New York in this painting.

Certain members of the Sons of Liberty retired to their homes to put on war paint—if Bostonians could don Mohawk guise, they could too—but the crowd refused to wait for anyone to play dress-up.

Wharf (at the foot of present-day Wall Street) at about 4 p.m. on April 22. Once again, he was queried by citizens as to whether he had tea, and he answered vehemently that he did not. But the crowd was too angry and persistent to be put off. Summoned by shouts and cries, hundreds of people boarded the *London* and began tearing apart the cargo, which forced Chambers to admit that he did indeed have crates of tea on board. Upon hearing this, certain members of the Sons of Liberty retired to their homes to put on war paint—if Bostonians could don Mohawk guise, they could too—but the crowd refused to wait for anyone to play dress-up. Dragging the chests of tea up from the hold with ropes and sheer muscle power (a full chest of tea weighed about

400 pounds), they cracked them open and dumped them overboard.

In the confusion, Chambers decided to make himself scarce.

The next morning, Saturday, April 23, was the day designated for New Yorkers to see off Captain Lockyer and the *Nancy*. A huge crowd of people—according to one newspaper, “the greatest number ever known in this city”—gathered at around 8 a.m. in front of the Coffee House on Wall Street, where Lockyer was lodging. The atmosphere was festive as the Sons of Liberty escorted Lockyer down to the wharf, where a pilot’s boat awaited to take him back to the *Nancy*. A band played “God Save the King”—not necessarily ironically, since many patriots at this pre-war stage blamed Parliament for their troubles,

not King George himself—and church bells rang all over the city. As Lockyer stepped onto the boat, a cannon fired a salute in honor of his departure.

The only thing that marred the circus atmosphere was the shouts of the mob as they tried and failed to find James Chambers, who was nowhere in sight. It would only come out much later that he had made a secret deal—yet another one—with Captain Lockyer to allow him to stow away aboard the *Nancy* on its trip back to England. Thus the unwitting Sons of Liberty escorted Lockyer back to Sandy Hook and sailed alongside the *Nancy* until she was six miles off the coast before they turned back toward the city in triumph. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

In researching the New York chapter of my book, *Ten Tea Parties: Patriotic Protests That History Forgot*, on which this article is based, I used material in the New-York Historical Society, particularly the letters and papers of Alexander McDougall and Cadwallader Colden. I also consulted issues of eighteenth-century New York newspapers available at the Library of Congress and in online newspaper collections, especially the *New-York Gazette* and *New-York Journal*.