

# Was the Stamp Act Fair?

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**Grade Level:** Elementary (3-4-5) Note: This lesson can be taught in any of the intermediate grades. The documents used have been excerpted, glossaries have been added to them, and guide questions have been included to aid student comprehension.

**Duration of lesson:** 1-2 periods

**Overview:**

**Related [National History Standards:](#)**

**Content Standards:**

**Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)**

**Standard 1:** The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory

**Historical Thinking Standards:**

**Standard 1: Chronological Thinking**

- A. Distinguish between past, present, and future time.
- B. Identify in historical narratives the temporal structure of a historical narrative or story.

**Standard 2: Historical Comprehension**

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- G. Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

**Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Students will examine British and Colonial perspectives on the Stamp Act
- Students will determine whether or not the act was fair.

## Topic Background

America in the 1760s was a divided place, struggling with the aftermath of war and a stagnant economy. Because colonists thought of themselves as members of their colony first and foremost, as Virginians or Pennsylvanians, they tended to view the problems and concerns of other colonies as outside of their lives, someone else's problem. Class differences, especially between the gentry who controlled large tracts of land and farmers who were always in need of more land to farm, also tended to divide the colonials between themselves. Britain was very much in control of the American economy and was looking for ways to raise money to pay for the recently won French and Indian War. In addition to outfitting its soldiers, Britain had accumulated huge debts trying to convince local Indian tribes to fight alongside the British for control of the North American fur trade by presenting them with lavish gifts. In many instances the British gained the alliance of nearby tribes and enlisted them in the fight against the French. However, once the French and Indian War ended, the generous gift giving would not continue as it had. Gifts were still given, but they were fewer and less frequent. This was a change that greatly insulted the Indians who had grown used to Britain's largesse. The need to fund the debt accumulated during the French and Indian War would have far reaching consequences for the other inhabitants of North America, the citizens of the Thirteen British Colonies.

Parliament needed to raise money to pay for war efforts around the globe, not just in North America. The British government believed that since they had protected the lives and rights of the colonists in America, the Americans should pitch in and help pay for the war. The ways in which the colonists were asked to pay for the war was the cause of many problems. A series of subsequent revenue acts forced colonists to ask themselves, "Who is in control of the colony, and who should be in control? What should the roles and functions of government be?" Where the colonists had previously been divided between themselves, based on regional and class differences, the efforts of Britain to raise funds without the consent of the colonists would unite them in ways that Parliament would not foresee or desire.

At this time in America, the economy was fueled by paper money, which was backed by land and taxes. The British economic system operated only with gold and silver, which were very scarce in America. In 1764 British Parliament passed the Currency Act which made it illegal to print new paper money anywhere in the colonies. Paper money already in circulation was to be retired through taxes. The subsequent currency contraction was a harsh blow to the American economy. Merchants were unable to collect debts from farmers and tradesmen, farms were foreclosed, and properties were auctioned. The average citizen had no gold or silver to pay debts or taxes and debts. A vicious cycle of debt, which had existed in the colonies for decades, was made even worse by the contraction of the money supply.

At the same time Britain eliminated paper money, it also made it difficult for the colonies to obtain other forms of currency, adding to the problem. After the French and Indian War, Britain began enforcing the older Navigation Acts

which restricted the ability of the colonies to acquire gold and silver through trade. While some merchants and seamen were eager to trade in places where gold and silver were available, such as in the West Indies, the Navigation Acts prohibited British colonies from trading with any country other than Britain, creating a closed system of trade for America and a monopoly on world trade for Britain. Trade with the West Indies was illegal, making it impossible for Americans to obtain gold and silver.

As a final blow to the colonial economy, Britain passed the Stamp Act in 1765 to help pay off its debts. The Stamp Act called for an official seal or stamp to be placed on any official or legal documents such as marriage licenses, newspapers, deeds to property, court documents, etc. The tax on stamps was rather low and considered quite reasonable by the British. The difficulty was that the duty had to be paid in gold or silver. Most importantly, the Stamp Act applied to everyone. While other taxes and duties on land or imports would directly affect only a portion of the citizens, anyone who planned to marry, own land, or even buy a newspaper or some playing cards was affected by the act.

The colonists responded to this new law in two different ways. First, the gentry relentlessly petitioned the British Parliament to no avail. Benjamin Franklin, well respected by both colonists and the English alike, was sent to England as a representative of the American colonists. He shared with Parliament the feelings of the American people and explained their belief that taxation without proper representation in Parliament was unjust. Parliament heard the arguments Franklin made for his people, but did not listen. The second effort at protest was more effective, as the actions of the colonists spoke louder than Franklin, and caused Parliament to listen to its American subjects. Angry citizens of the American colonies resorted to violent crowd action. In towns across all Thirteen Colonies, stamp collectors, who affixed stamps and collected taxes, were threatened, attacked, or even tarred and feathered. Some of their homes and offices were destroyed. The accounts of political leaders' homes being ransacked by angry mobs and officials being hung in effigy from liberty trees filled local taverns and were covered in area newspapers. Officials feared for their lives and those of their families and many fled back to England. For fear of more violence, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act only to replace it with the Townshend Acts in 1767.

At the end of the French and Indian War, the colonists were divided over regional differences and class interests. When the mob sought to affect government policy, the gentry were as likely to support the crown or at least remain neutral as they were to side with their fellow colonials. Regional identity led many to believe that the problems which afflicted some other colony were no concern of theirs. But, as common experiences and troubles were shared across the nation, colonists began to unite. The gentry placed blame on Britain for having caused a revolt of poor versus rich. Yet throughout all the mob action, the gentry had taken note of the crowds' tactics. Soon after, Sons of Liberty groups began to spring up throughout the colonies often promoting crowd action, for no other form of protest had gotten Parliament to take notice. The Sons of Liberty would become an important proponent in future crowd actions in what was the

beginning of the American Revolution. This unity of both purpose and method came out of the colonists shared experience of the Stamp Act. It was this act which first led many in the colonies to realize that their interests and goals had far more in common with each other than they had previously believed. This would be the first crucial step leading down the path towards war and eventual independence.

## Secondary Source Bibliography:

Bouton, Terry. *Catalysts for the Revolution*, lecture presented as part of the Summer Institute "Teaching History in Maryland" at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD, 9 July 2002.

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Copeland, David A. *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers; Primary Documents on Events of the Period*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Countryman, Edward. *The American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.  
pp. 42-52, 87-89, 101-104.

Lenman, Bruce. *Britain's Colonial Wars 1688-1783*. New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.

Nash, Gary B. *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1979.

## **Vocabulary**

**Excerpt:** A short piece taken from a text.

**Parliament:** The national legislative assembly in Great Britain.

**Tax:** An involuntary fee paid by individuals or businesses to a government.

**Oath:** A solemn, formal declaration or promise to fulfill a pledge.

## Teaching Procedures

### Materials Needed:

- stamps to “sell” to students (for convenience stickers could be used)
  - cans in which to collect the “taxes” (these cans should be decorated to demonstrate their purpose)
  - poster sized copy of Resource Sheet #13, “Oath of Support” (this should be placed on one side of the classroom so that students will be able to sign this oath during the lesson)
  - poster sized copy of Resource Sheet #14, “Oath of Opposition” (this should be placed on one side of the classroom so that students will be able to sign this oath during the lesson)
  - 2 “quill” pens (one of these should be placed next to each poster sized oath)
1. Prior to this lesson, select several students from another class to assist with the motivation. Have these students from another class join you for the beginning of this lesson. These visitors should position themselves standing throughout the room. Start the lesson by saying, “Here ye, Here ye, Attention, Attention!”
  2. After gaining the students’ attention, explain that there is some news you need to tell them. Explain to the class that the school needs to raise money in order to continue to provide materials such as copy paper. From now on students will need to buy a stamp to place on certain papers. Display the stamps that are “for sale.” Explain on which papers students will need to place stamps. Some suggestions are: on homework, on Uno or Yugio cards, on daily agendas, or on the computer sign-in sheet.
  3. Explain that the stamps are only 5 cents and that these visiting students are stamp collectors. Show the “tax collection” cans. Explain to students that the money collected will go to support the school with new supplies.
  4. Allow students to share their feelings about this new policy. Record student responses on the board. Allow the visiting students to leave and explain that they will return soon to collect money in exchange for stamps.  
  
After their exit explain that this was just a “joke”, and will not really happen. Then explain how this really did happen in the past.
  5. Display transparency of Resource Sheet #1, “The Stamp Act.” Explain that this is an excerpt from a law. Ensure that students understand what an excerpt is.

Model for students, using a think-aloud strategy, how to interpret an 18<sup>th</sup> century document. Read each section of the document aloud and ask students to interpret the meaning of that section. Be sure students understand what the document is (a law), who passed it (parliament), and why it was written (to raise revenue for the protection of the colonies through duties, or taxes). As students identify items being taxed make a list on the board.

6. Discuss the concept of taxes, what they are used for, how taxes are collected today, and how they were collected in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ask students whether they believe the Stamp Act is fair. Tally the class results to refer back to later in the lesson.
7. Explain that we are now going to examine the way those living in 1765 felt about the Stamp Act.

Divide the class into groups of four. Explain that each group will receive four documents. Each student is to examine one of the documents to determine whether the author supports or opposes the Stamp Act and why.

8. Compile and distribute a resource sheet packet for each group that includes:

Resource Sheet #2, "The Maryland Gazette: October 10, 1765"

Resource Sheet #3, "Analyzing the Maryland Gazette: October 10, 1765"

Resource Sheet #4, "George Grenville's Speech in the House of Commons"

Resource Sheet #5, "Analyzing George Grenville's Speech in the House of Commons"

Resource Sheet #6, "A Furious Mob"

Resource Sheet #7, "Analyzing A Furious Mob"

Resource Sheet #8, "Do Not Tax the Colonies"

Resource Sheet #9, "Analyzing Do Not Tax the Colonies"

Have each student take one of the documents and complete that document's analysis worksheet.

9. Distribute one copy of Resource Sheet #10, "Stamp Act: Support or Oppose," to each group. Have each student share his or her findings with the group. Each group should complete Resource Sheet #10 as students share their results.

As a whole class discuss whether or not the Stamp Act was fair. Allow students to share their opinions. Make sure that students provide evidence from documents examined during class to support their position.

10. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #11, "Stamp Act Stamps." Discuss the pictures on the stamps (what the crown stands for, that GR means King George, etc).

To assess student understanding explain to students that they will now be deciding individually whether or not they would have supported the Stamp Act. Distribute a copy of Resource Sheet #12, "Design a Stamp/Plan a Protest" to each student. Students should complete Parts 1 and 2 independently.

As students complete Resource Sheet 12 they should sign one of the posters showing their opinion on the Stamp Act. Students who designed a stamp should sign the poster in support of the Stamp Act, and those who planned a protest should sign the poster opposing the Stamp Act. After this lesson, the posters can then be made into a bulletin board or displayed in the hallway.

11. Extension activities can be enacted by providing students the opportunity to research controversial ideas concerning schools and decide whether or not they support or oppose the ideas. Some topics that might be researched are:

- mandatory school uniforms
- schools sponsored by soft drink or snack companies
- using surveillance to combat cheating in schools
- using tests to track student achievement

;or by Provide students the opportunity to research taxes and how they are used now.

## Primary Source Annotation:

The Stamp Act, 1765. *The Avalon Project*. Retrieved (August 7, 2005) from [http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerrev/parliament/stamp\\_act\\_1765.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerrev/parliament/stamp_act_1765.htm).

The Stamp Act is British legislation passed March 22, 1765 that required stamps to be purchased and affixed to many types of official documents, newspapers, almanacs, and even playing cards and dice. Students will examine this document to determine its meaning.

*Maryland Gazette* on October 10, 1765. *Teaching American History in Maryland: Documents for the Classroom*. Retrieved (August 7, 2005) from <http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/stagser/s1259/121/5912/pdf/p5912002.pdf>.

This article explains that this will be the last issue for some time due to the Stamp Act becoming law on November 1<sup>st</sup>. Students will analyze this document to determine its author's position on the Stamp Act.

Bullion, John L. *A Great and Necessary Measure: George Grenville and the Genesis of the Stamp Act, 1763-1765*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982.

Within this text contains George Grenville's Speech in the House of Commons, January 14, 1766. Grenville, who had been Prime Minister when the Stamp Act was passed (although George III dismissed him from that post in July, 1765) spoke to the House of Commons on Parliament's right to tax the British colonies. Students will analyze this document to determine its author's position on the Stamp Act.

A Furious Mob. *Etext Library at the University of Virginia*. Retrieved (August 7, 2005) from <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccernew2?id=HarCamp.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=45&division=div2>.

This is Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts' account of being the victim of a Stamp Act riot in Boston. Students will analyze this document to determine its author's position on the Stamp Act.

Do Not Tax the Colonies. *Etext Library at the University of Virginia*. Retrieved (August 7, 2005) from <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccernew2?id=HarCamp.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=47&division=div2#n121>.

When the British government found that the Stamp Tax was very much resented in America, a committee asked Benjamin Franklin to tell what he thought about the circumstance. His comments, made in 1766, are shown here. Students will analyze this document to determine its author's position on the Stamp Act.

Stamps Used During the Stamp Act. *Library of Congress*. Retrieved (August 8, 2005) from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/british/images/34uc.jpg> and [http://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/RevAmerica/2-What/Tax\\_stamp.html](http://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/RevAmerica/2-What/Tax_stamp.html).

Students will examine these artifacts as inspiration for creating stamps of their own.