

Colonial Tea Parties

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Grade Level: Upper Elementary

Duration of lesson: 1-2 periods

Overview:

This lesson places the Boston Tea Party in context for students by showing its role within a broader movement of protest against Britain in the 1770s. Through a series of Parliamentary Acts and taxes, Britain attempted to maintain the East India Company's monopoly over colonial trade, shutting American merchants out of world commerce. Parliament was also trying to produce more revenue to pay off debts incurred from fighting the French and Indian War. When thousands of Bostonians, led by Samuel Adams, marched in protest against the British measures, other colonial ports followed, including Chester Town harbor in Maryland.

By comparing protests and points of view, students will recognize the tea parties as both a dividing and unifying event for Americans. On the one hand, those colonists who opposed the destruction of property by the mob became loyalists. But on the other hand, patriots from Massachusetts to South Carolina had united in common cause, making it no longer possible for the crown to play the colonies against each other. Students may also grapple with the question of the use of violence during times of revolution.

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 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- C. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.

- D.** Consider multiple perspectives.
- G.** Compare competing historical narratives.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will interpret primary source documents.
- Students will compare colonial reactions to British taxation in three cities.

Topic Background

Many steps led the American Colonies along the path to Revolution in the 1760s and 1770s. Yet perhaps none is more famous than the Boston Tea Party of 1773, which led to similar 'parties' in Charleston, South Carolina and Chester Town (now Chestertown in Kent County) Maryland. These acts, which saw the destruction of private property in the name of political freedom, tended to divide the colonists into two camps, with one group supporting the actions while the other opposed it. It is these two groups who would become known as patriots and loyalists. To understand why English tea became such a strong symbol to those determined to oppose British control, it is necessary to examine the history of the Townshend Act, which included a small tax on tea.

The Tea Parties have their origins in the Townshend Act, which the British government passed in September 1767. This act placed a tax (duty) on lead, paint, paper, glass, and tea. Previously, the colonies had been allowed to levy their own taxes which were then given to the crown. The goal of the tax was to raise money for Britain to pay off debts incurred while defending the colonies during the French and Indian War fought from 1754-1763. At the same time, it established the precedent that Parliament could levy taxes on the colonies if it saw fit. (*The American Colonial Press*, 77) Although the tax on tea was not high, the colonists were afraid that the tax would eventually be increased or expanded to include other imports. They were also worried because the tax had to be paid in gold and silver, which were in short supply in the colonies, especially after Britain began to enforce the Navigation Acts, which restricted trade and further limited the supply of currency. Many colonists, quickly labeled patriots, wanted to take action to protest these new taxes, and their imposition on the colonies. (*Boston Tea Party*, 27) They decided to boycott not only the taxed items, but other British imports, with the twin goals of preventing the collection of a tax they saw as unfair, and also damaging trade with Britain to show their economic influence. (*Boston Tea Party*, 32) As a result of these boycotts and the fallout from the Boston Massacre, Parliament repealed most of the Townshend Act in 1770, but left the tax on tea as a reminder of Parliamentary control of the colonies. (*The American Colonial Press*, 174)

Although the colonists remained upset by the tax on tea, they did not take serious action against it until Britain passed the Tea Act in 1773. Contrary to popular misconceptions the Tea Act imposed no new taxes on tea, it in fact eliminated some taxes, but rather it let the East India Company have total control of the shipping of tea. The Company was facing financial problems and needed to increase its profits if it was to continue as the British influence in India. The East India Company got permission to send two ships of tea annually from China without duties which would be sold directly to local merchants otherwise known as consignees, or East India Company traders. These factors combined to undercut and drive out of business American merchants who had previously acted as competition to the Company in the colonies. (*Boston Tea Party*, 87) The plan was to lower the price of tea by eliminating competition, which would make the tax acceptable to the colonists because they were now able to buy cheaper

tea. This step would also enrich the East India Company, which was seen as critical for British control of India. New York was the first colony to react by issuing a series of "Alarm Papers," which warned that this was just the first step by the British government to establish a series of monopolies over all colonial trade. (*Boston Tea Party*, 91)

Opposition to the Tea Act was far from universal. Boston's Royal Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, felt he could support the Act, as Boston possessed enough troops to put down any insurrection or mob violence that might follow. Hutchinson represented the other side of colonial opinion, which felt that Parliament was entitled to levy taxes it felt necessary, and deplored the mob mentality that infused opposition to the Tea Act. The choice of Hutchinson's two sons as consignees further angered the patriots, as the two men were unpopular because of their support for previous government acts. (*Boston Tea Party*, 105) Opposition to the East India Company traders continued, until most were forced to resign because of unfair treatment by the patriots. The only exceptions were the East India Company traders in Boston, including the Governor's two sons, who continued to perform their duties. The next shipment of tea would lead to a crisis for the colonies and the crown.

The Boston Tea Party

The Boston Tea Party began on November 28, 1773, when the *Dartmouth* sailed into Boston Harbor, carrying 114 chests of East India Company tea. Most Bostonians agreed that the tea must not be allowed to land, since the unpopular tax would be paid the moment the tea was offloaded onto the wharf at Boston Harbor. (*Boston Tea Party*, 118-119) In response, Boston's East India Company traders insisted that tea, once exported from Britain, could not be returned. Under the law, the merchants had 20 days to pay the customs and the tea tax, or leave the port. If they refused to do so, the ships and their contents could be seized by local customs officials, who would pay the tax and sell the tea. To compound the problem, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver* arrived in Boston Harbor a few days later loaded with tea. (*Boston Tea Party*, 119) Immediately, meetings by the Sons of Liberty, a group of patriots led by Samuel Adams, were organized to discuss the arrival of the ships carrying tea. Notices were posted around Boston urging the colonists to meet and to discuss further actions. Although the East India Company realized they had no good options, they agreed to leave the tea loaded aboard the ships until instructions could arrive from London. (*Boston Tea Party*, 122)

On Thursday, December 16, one day prior to the seizing of the tea, a group of 5000 colonists came to a town meeting to discuss their options. (*Boston Tea Party*, 139) The East India Company traders in Boston were instructed at the meeting to go to Governor Hutchinson and demand a pass for the ships to leave the Port of Boston. The Governor refused to give the orders to allow the ships to leave the harbor without unloading the tea first.

Thousands of Bostonians and farmers from the area gathered to hear Samuel Adams address the crowd, announcing their meeting with cries of "A mob! A mob!" Adams denounced Governor Hutchinson for refusing to allow the

vessels to leave with the tea aboard. The large group then requested that the East India Company traders ask the ship owner the following pair of questions:

1. "Would he order his vessel back to England with the tea on board?"

His reply was, "No!"

2. Did he intend to unload the tea?

His reply was, "He would attempt to unload the tea if properly called upon by authorities and then only to protect himself." (*Boston Tea Party*, 141)

Sam Adams announced to the group that, "He did not see what more the inhabitants could do to save their county." His words were a signal to proceed to the Boston Harbor to dump the tea. Other witnesses at this pivotal town meeting heard cries of others saying "Boston Harbor a tea-pot tonight!" "The Mohawks are come!"

The Boston Tea Party was a well-organized event that included representatives from all the social classes of the city. One common story from the event told of John Hancock, the richest man in Massachusetts marching side by side with a shoemaker. Although likely untrue, the story was based on the reality that the gentry were involved as organizers and leaders, something that had generally been untrue during previous mob actions. At the Tea Party itself, groups of 30 to 60 men boarded the three ships that were now in the Boston Harbor at Griffin's Wharf and each custom officer was escorted off the ship. The only goal of the group was to dump the chests of tea into the water, 114 chests from the *Dartmouth*, 114 from the *Eleanor*, and 112 from the *Beaver*. The Boston Tea Party took less than 3 hours to finish. Government officials watched, but never gave an order to interfere. (*Boston Tea Party*, 144) The Boston Tea Party accomplished much for the patriot cause, as it symbolized just how far they were willing to go in order to oppose laws they felt were unfair. Yet it also disgusted those who supported Parliament's decisions, by proving that the patriots were perfectly willing to destroy private property in the name of their goals.

Great Britain retaliated with the Intolerable Acts, which fatally drove the political and economic conflicts with Britain towards war and eventual independence. These acts closed the Port of Boston until the value of the destroyed teas was paid to the East India Company and banned town meetings. Officials were given new powers to force Massachusetts colonists to quarter and supply royal troops. And, most importantly, the Acts made government in Massachusetts less democratic. The punishment the British imposed on the citizens of Boston, particularly the closing of the port, enraged citizens in the other colonies. This anger led to "tea parties" elsewhere.

The Charlestown Tea Party

Patriots in South Carolina protested Parliament's rules and regulations against the colonists by blocking communication with Britain. When news about the closing of Boston Harbor reached the colonists in South Carolina, they too decided to protest with a "tea party." As a central delivery point for much of the south, large supplies of tea had built up unclaimed in Charlestown. The teenagers in town went door to door asking households to give up their tea and

on November 3, 1774, three merchants who owned the tea entered the ships docked in the harbor and dumped their tea overboard. The crowd that watched the event gave three cheers as each chest of tea was dumped over. Although just as important as the earlier Boston Tea Party, the Charlestown party is much less famous, perhaps because of its peaceful nature. "Violence always gets the headlines," insists one modern historian. Charlestown's Tea Party was very different from its predecessor, "occurring at noon, with no disorder, no disguises, and with owners who had paid for the tea dumping [it] overboard with their own hands." (*Georgia Review*, 246)

The Chester Town Tea Party

News of the Boston Tea Party and the closing of the Boston Harbor quickly spread throughout the colonies. Many colonists in Chester Town, Maryland (now known as Chestertown in Kent County) were outraged by the closing of the Port of Boston. Their first form of protest was to pass a series of resolutions. The resolution stated that "if any person sells, buys, or consumes tea or assists in any way in importing tea [they] are considered enemies to the liberties of America." (*History of MD* 143) The excitement generated by the passing of these resolutions led to further protests. On May 23, 1774, patriots gathered at the town center and marched to the brigantine ship, the *Geddes*, which was anchored in the Chester River. The ship held a small lot of tea for some neighboring towns, which the patriots tossed overboard.

Conclusion

The tea parties in Boston, Charlestown, and Chester Town gave a strong message that the patriots were deeply committed to opposing taxes they viewed as unfair. The destruction of British tea was a defiant act leveled against Parliament and King George. The fact that Boston's Tea Party was reenacted in other colonies was an ominous sign that patriots throughout the colonies were growing united in their opposition to the crown, which could not count on playing them off against each other in the future.

It is important to look at the tea parties in another perspective. Many of the colonists were loyalists and strong supporters of Britain and Parliament's right to taxation. Many were dependent economically on the British and politically aligned to the king. For them the violence and destruction of property by what amounted to mob action was further proof that governmental force would be necessary to maintain order. This reinforced the view of those who saw the patriots as lawless hooligans, and furthered the divide between patriot and loyalist throughout the colonies. Other colonists remained neutral, neither supporting nor opposing the various Tea Parties. Future events would determine which political position they would support.

The tea parties helped to unite the three regions of the colonies, even as they divided the citizens within each between loyalists and patriots. They were among the first events that the colonists took to fight British domination and they helped plant the seeds of revolution against the British.

Annotated Bibliography:

Labaree, Benjamin Woods. *The Boston Tea Party*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1964.

This book provides the background information for teachers about the Boston Tea Party. It is a comprehensive account of the events that led to the final dumping of the English tea.

Knight, Carol Lynn. *The American Colonial Press and the Townshend Crisis*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.

This book gives background information about the Townshend Act. It examines the political temperament of colonial America regarding taxation.

Scharf, John. *The History of Maryland from the Earliest Period to the Present*. Pennsylvania: Tradition Press, 1967.

This book explains the events that led to the dumping of English tea in Chester Town, Maryland.

Seabrooke, Brenda. *The Chester Town Tea Party*. Centreville, Maryland: Tidewater Publishers. 1991.

This is a 30 page children's picture book account of the events of the Chester Town Tea Party. It is used as a read-aloud book during the motivation portion of the lesson.

Steedman, Marguerite. "Charlestown's Forgotten Tea-Party." *Georgia Review* 1967. 21 (2): 244-259.

This journal explains the events that lead to the dumping of English tea in Charlestown, South Carolina. It also includes numerous primary source documents to enhance the lesson.

Vocabulary

Resolved:

to make a firm decision about.

British Parliament:

one part of British government.

Duty:

tax

Teaching Procedures

1. Begin by displaying Resource Sheet #1, "The Boston Tea Party." Have the students identify people's activities in the picture. List their responses. Ask them if they know of any other colony that hosted a tea party. Elicit responses. Read *The Chester Town Tea Party* by Brenda Seabrooke to the class. (If the book is unavailable, then eliminate the read-aloud and move to the next procedure.)
2. Post the vocabulary terms and definitions on the board for student reference.
3. Place the picture on the Boston Tea Party back on the overhead and pass out both accounts of the Boston Tea Party, Resource Sheet #2, "Another Account of the Tea Party BY JOHN ANDREWS (1773)," and Resource Sheet #3, "The Boston Tea Party FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS GAZETTE (1773)," to the students. Place copies of the resource sheets on the overhead. Have the students quickly skim the two documents to identify what is similar. (They are both about the Boston Tea Party)
4. Have the students identify the authors of both of documents. Ask:

Which source is more reliable and why? If they do not come up with John Andrews, explain that he was there and was an eyewitness to the Boston Tea Party.

5. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet #4, "Tea Party Comparison," to the class. Have the students read both articles to identify similarities and differences between the two accounts of the Boston Tea Party and record these similarities and differences on their graphic organizers.

Display a transparency or a large chart paper copy of the graphic organizer. Call on students to come to the board or overhead to fill in the chart of similarities and differences in these two accounts of the Boston Tea Party. Allow students time to add information to their desk copies.

6. Divide students into groups of three. Give half of the groups Resource Sheet #5, "Charlestown Tea Party." Give the other half of the groups Resource Sheet #6, "Chester Town Resolutions." Explain to the students that they will read to become an expert on their document in order to teach another group what they have learned.

Distribute Resource Sheet 7, "Primary Source Analysis Worksheet," to each group and review the directions. Give the groups about 15-20 minutes to work with their document.

7. Have the groups meet and share their findings with a group who examined the other document.

After sharing their findings with another group, have the students return to their original seat for a class discussion of the three tea parties. As the students relate differences and similarities between events, make note of relevant ideas on the board or overhead.

8. To Assess student understanding, have the students respond to the following prompt:

Pretend you are a colonist in Boston, Chester Town, or Charlestown. Create a flyer inviting other colonist to participate in the dumping of the tea. Be sure to use details or examples from the primary source documents to help you.

9. Potential extension activities include having the students:
 - Create a final copy of the flyer and post it in the classroom.
 - Create a flyer telling other colonists not to participate in the dumping of the tea.
 - Write a speech or letter to convince another colonist to participate/not participate in the dumping of the tea.
 - Write a newspaper article about the Boston Tea Party from either the Patriot or Loyalist point of view.

Primary Source Annotation:

Another Account of the Tea Party by John Andrews

This account of the Tea Party can be viewed at http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=397. Scroll down until you see the title of the primary source and click on it. Students will examine this document to see what occurred in John Andrews's perspective of the Tea Party. This website was accessed on July 16, 2005.

The Boston Tea Party: from the *Massachusetts Gazette*

This newspaper account of the Tea Party can be viewed at http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=397. Scroll down until you see the title of the primary source and click on it. This is a newspaper account of what occurred at the Boston Tea Party. Students will examine this document to see the newspaper perspective of the same event. This website was accessed on July 16, 2005.

Picture of the Boston Tea Party by Nathaniel Currier

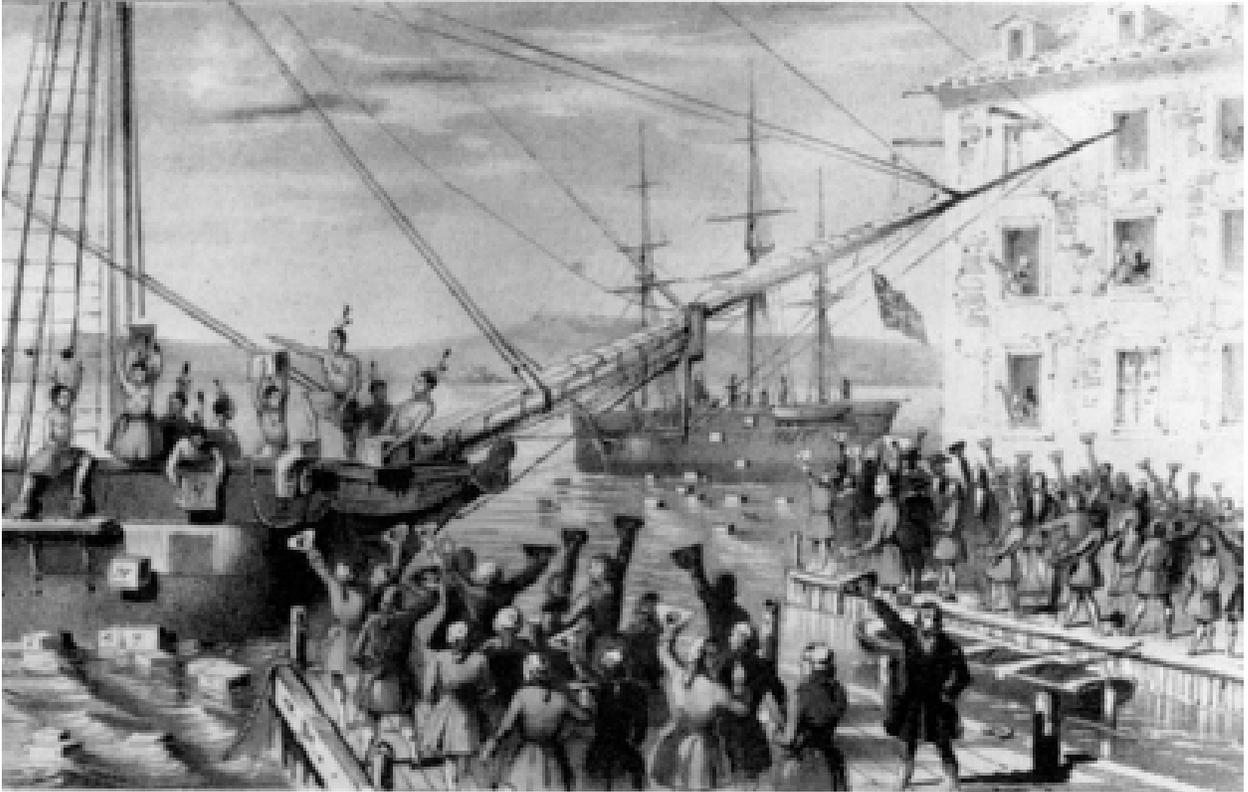
This picture can be viewed at The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA: 148-GW-439WAR & CONFLICT #: 3). The students will examine this picture to identify the topic of the lesson. They will also explain what the people in the picture are doing. This website was accessed on July 18, 2005.

Chester Town Resolutions: From the Gazette, May 21, 1774

The Chester Town Resolution can be viewed at <http://www.intandem.com/NewPrideSite/MD/Lesson18/Resolves.html>. The students will interpret this primary source document to determine what the citizens of Chester Town did in response to the Boston Tea Party. This website was accessed on July 18, 2004.

Resource Sheet #1

[The Boston Tea Party](#)



NARA: 148-GW-439WAR & CONFLICT #: 3

Another Account of the Tea Party BY JOHN ANDREWS (1773)

THE house was so crowded that I could get no further than the porch. I found the moderator was just declaring the meeting to be dissolved. This caused another general shout out-doors and inside, and three cheers.

What with that and the consequent noise of breaking up the meeting, you'd have thought the inhabitants of the infernal regions had broken loose. For my part I went contentedly home and finished my tea, but was soon informed what was going forward.

As I could not believe it without seeing for myself, I went out and was satisfied. The Indians mustered, I'm told, upon Fort Hill, to the number of about two hundred, and proceeded, two by two, to Griffin's wharf, where Hall, Bruce, and Coffin's vessels lay.

Coffin's ship had arrived at the wharf only the day before, and was freighted with a large quantity of other goods, which they took the greatest care not to injure in the least.

Before nine o'clock in the evening every chest on board the three vessels was knocked to pieces and flung over the sides. They say the actors were Indians from Narragansett. Whether they were or not, to a transient observer they appeared such.

They were clothed in blankets, with their heads muffled and copper colored faces. Each was armed with a hatchet or axe or pair of pistols. Nor was their dialect different from what I imagine the real Indians to speak, as their jargon was nonsense to all but themselves.

Not the least insult was offered to any person, except to Captain Connor, a livery-stable keeper in this place, who came across the ocean not many years since. He ripped up the lining of his coat and waistcoat under the arms, and, watching his opportunity, he nearly filled them with tea.

When detected he was handled pretty roughly. The people not only stripped him of his clothes, but gave him a coat of mud, with a severe bruising into the bargain. Nothing but their utter aversion to making any disturbance prevented his being tarred and feathered.

The Boston Tea Party FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS GAZETTE (1773)

WHILE a public meeting was being held, to protest against the tea ships, a number of brave and resolute men, dressed in the Indian manner, approached near the door of the assembly. They gave a war whoop, which rang through the house and was answered by some in the galleries; but silence was commanded and a peaceable behaviour until the end of the meeting.

The Indians, as they were then called, repaired to the wharf, where the ships lay that had the tea on board. They were followed by hundreds of people to see the event of the transactions of those who made so grotesque an appearance.

The Indians immediately repaired on board Captain Hall's ship, where they hoisted out the chests of tea. When on deck they stove them and emptied the tea overboard.

Having cleared this ship they proceeded to Captain Bruce's, and then to Captain Coffin's brig. They applied themselves so dexterously to the destruction of this commodity, that in the space of three hours they broke up three hundred and forty-two chests, which was the whole number of these vessels, and poured their contents into the harbor.

When the tide rose it floated the broken chests and the tea. The surface of the water was filled therewith a considerable way from the south part of the town to Dorchester Neck and lodged on the shores.

The greatest care was taken to prevent the tea from being purloined by the populace. One or two who were detected trying to pocket a small quantity were stripped of their plunder and very roughly handled.

It is worthy of remark that although a considerable quantity of other goods were still remaining on board the vessel, no injury was sustained.

Such attention to private property was observed that when a small padlock belonging to the captain of one of the ships was broken, another was procured and sent to him.

The town was very quiet during the whole evening and the night following. Those who were from the country went home with a merry heart, and the next day joy appeared in almost every countenance, some on account of the destruction of the tea, others on account of the quietness with which it was done. One of the Monday's papers says that the masters and owners are well pleased that their ships are thus cleared, without their being responsible.

Great Britain had laid a tax on tea, which the colonists thought unjust. When ships loaded with tea attempted to land their cargoes in Boston, the tea was used as described in this story

Tea Party Comparison

John Andrews	Both	Massachusetts Gazette

Charlestown Tea Party

On Thursday at Noon, (November 3, 1774) an Oblation was made to NEPTUNE, of said seven Chests of Tea, by *Messrs Lindsay, Kinsley and Mackenzie* Themselves; who going on board the Ship in the Stream, with their own Hands respectively stove the Chests belonging to each, and emptied their Contents into the River, in the Presence of the *Committee of Observation*, who likewise went on board, and in View of the whole General Concourse of People, who gave three hearty Cheers after the emptying of each Chest, and immediately separated as if nothing had happened.

Steedman, Marguerite, "Charlestown's Forgotten Tea-Party". *Georgia Review* 1967 21 (2): 244-259.

Reprinted with courtesy of the Georgia Review: <http://www.uga.edu/garev/>

Chester Town Resolutions From the Gazette, May 21, 1774

These resolutions were passed by a group of gentlemen after meeting in a public house in Chester Town. A shipment of English tea had been discovered in a British ship, *Geddes*. After discussing what they should do about the tea, they passed the following resolutions.

1st. RESOLVED, that we acknowledge his majesty George III. King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, to be our rightful, and lawful sovereign to whom we owe and promise all dutiful allegiance and submission.

2nd. RESOLVED, that no duty or taxes can constitutionally be opposed on us, but by our own consent given personally, or by our own representatives.

3rd. RESOLVED, that the act of the British parliament of the 7th of George III, chapter 46, subjecting the colonies to a duty on tea, for the purpose of raising revenue in America, is unconstitutional, oppressive, and calculated to enslave the Americas.

4th. RESOLVED, therefore, that whoever shall import, or in any way aid or assist in importing, or introducing from any part of Great Britain, or any other place whatsoever, into this town or country, any tea subject to the payment of a duty imposed by the aforesaid act of Parliament; or whoever shall willingly and knowingly sell, buy, or consume, in any way assist in the sale, purchase, or consumption of any tea imported as aforesaid subject to a duty, he, or they, shall be stigmatized as enemies to the liberties of America.

5th. RESOLVED, that we will not only steadily adhere to the foregoing resolves, but will endeavor to excite our worthy neighbors to a like patriotic conduct, and to whoever, amongst, shall refuse his concurrence, or after complying, shall desert the cause, and knowingly deviate from the true spirit and meaning of these our resolutions, we will mark him out as an inimical to the liberties of America, an unworthy member of the community, and a person not deserving our notice or regard.

6th. RESOLVED, that the foregoing resolves be printed, that our brothers in this and other colonies may know our sentiments as therein contained.

*Signed by order of the Committee,
W. Wright, Clerk*

Resource Sheet #7

Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

Carefully read the primary source document before answering the questions below.

1. What type of document is this? (newspaper, letter, advertisement, other)
2. What is the date of this document? Who created it?
3. Why was this document written? Use examples from the text to help you.
4. List three things that you think are important.
5. What can you know about life during colonial tea parties from reading this document?