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Jared Peatman  
*Gettysburg College*  
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# Coercion Gone Wrong: Colonial Response to the Boston Port Act

## **Abstract**

On March 25, 1774, the British Parliament passed the Boston Port Act, closing Boston Harbor to commerce. The act was meant to force Boston into paying for tea dumped into the harbor four months earlier during the Boston Tea Party. Parliament believed that the colonies would not support Boston and it would be only a short time before Boston acquiesced and paid for the tea, reestablishing British authority in the colonies.<sup>1</sup> They could not have been more wrong. The thirteen colonies were deeply disturbed by the Boston Port Act, and came together in a way that shocked Parliament. Rather than separating Boston from the rest of the colonies, the Boston Port Act ignited all of the colonies into anti-British actions.

## **Keywords**

Boston Port Act, British Parliament, American colonies

# COERCION GONE WRONG: COLONIAL RESPONSE TO THE BOSTON PORT ACT

JARED PEATMAN

On March 25, 1774, the British Parliament passed the Boston Port Act, closing Boston Harbor to commerce. The act was meant to force Boston into paying for tea dumped into the harbor four months earlier during the Boston Tea Party. Parliament believed that the colonies would not support Boston and it would be only a short time before Boston acquiesced and paid for the tea, reestablishing British authority in the colonies.<sup>1</sup> They could not have been more wrong. The thirteen colonies were deeply disturbed by the Boston Port Act, and came together in a way that shocked Parliament. Rather than separating Boston from the rest of the colonies, the Boston Port Act ignited all of the colonies into anti-British actions.

On March 14, 1774, the Boston Port Act was proposed in Parliament. Before the Boston Tea Party large portions of Parliament had supported the colonial protests against taxes, but when the Bostonians went so far as to willfully destroy the tea they lost any friends they may have had in Parliament.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Franklin observed, "I suppose we never had since we were a people, so few friends in Britain. The violent destruction of the tea seems to have united all parties [in Britain] against our province. . ."<sup>3</sup> According to Lord Frederick North, the prime minister of Britain, the dispute was now over whether or not Great Britain possessed any authority over the colonies, not simply over taxation.<sup>4</sup> After just eleven days, a remarkably short period, the act was passed by parliament, with an implementation date of June 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>5</sup>

Word of the act reached the colonies on May 11, 1774, setting off immediate sparks.<sup>6</sup> The Monday, May 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the Boston Evening Post carried news of the act, with a supplement carrying the text of the act. Practically the whole edition of May 16<sup>th</sup> was dedicated to the impending crisis. Simply put, the townsmen were enraged. A writer calling himself "JUSTICE" wrote,

Without the shadow of evidence, without any direct accusation against the town, with all the circumstances of suspicion that their enemies were the authors of this outrage, the town of Boston is to be punished with a severity of which the worst times of this country cannot furnish

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1 John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 359.

2 *Ibid*, 355.

3 Peter D. G. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence: The Third Phase of the American Revolution 1773-1776* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1991), 56-57.

4 Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution*, 356.

5 *Ibid*, 359.

6 *Ibid*, 360.

a single example.

Multiple articles of that edition blamed Governor Hutchinson (who had been recalled on May 10<sup>th</sup> and replaced by General Thomas Gage) for the Tea Party, believing that he had deliberately provoked them into taking action by refusing to send the tea back to Britain, and that they were being unjustly punished for his faults.

The May 17<sup>th</sup> edition of the Connecticut Courant broke the news of the act to its readership on the second page. The act did not directly affect Connecticut, and as such did not earn a place on the first page. The paper glazed over the act, giving its essentials but not offering too much sympathy for their neighbors to the north. For the time being, it seemed as though Parliament had gauged colonial reactions correctly, the other colonies did not appear to be rallying to the side of the Bostonians.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately after receiving news of the act, Bostonians began calling for a unification of all colonies to meet the British threat. Another editorial in the May 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the Boston Evening Post, this one titled, "AMERICANS," read, "Tyranny without a covering now stares you all in the face. . . You must ALL unite to guard your Rights, or you will ALL be slaves!" This edition also carried the news that Paul Revere had been dispatched to New York and Philadelphia to drum up support for unified opposition to the act. Bostonians called for the other colonies to join them in stopping importation and exportation with Great Britain, hoping to inflict as much damage as they were suffering.

The May 23<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Boston Evening Post opened with an article detailing all the areas in North America that the colonists had helped bring under Great Britain's Empire, showing that they had been good and faithful subjects and did not deserve to have their ports closed. More significantly, this edition of the paper carried several replies to Boston's plea for unification. The New York Committee of Correspondence responded sympathetically, and said they would broach the topic of a trade boycott with community leaders. Providence and Newport officials pledged their support, saying they would end trade with Britain immediately. This initial response was positive on the whole, and was the beginning of a unification of the colonies.

By May 24<sup>th</sup> Connecticut had thrown Boston its support, and in that day's edition of the Connecticut Courant one writer offered as a reason:

the insult and indignity offered to our virtuous countrymen in that metropolitans who have so nobly stood as a barrier against slavery. . . The Generals of despotism are now drawing the lines of circumvallation around our bulwarks of liberty and nothing but unity, resolution, and perseverance, can save our selves and posterity from what is worse

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<sup>7</sup> Connecticut Courant, May 17, 1774.

than death – SLAVERY.

The image of colonists becoming slaves to British taxation had first been suggested in the May 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the Boston Evening Post and was one of the major reasons why Boston was able to unite the colonies against the Port Act. The colonists did not view the Boston Port Act as just Boston's problem. They believed that all the colonies had to unite against taxation or they would lose their rights one by one until they were all gone and they had been reduced to slaves. So while Boston may have been the battleground, the colonies felt that their future was intricately linked to the outcome of that battle. This was what Parliament did not understand when they had passed the act.

June 1<sup>st</sup>, the day the act was to go into effect, saw protests throughout the colonies. In Hartford the church bells rang all day and storekeepers covered their windows with black cloth. Some of the more radical citizens burned a copy of the act in the town square.<sup>8</sup> New York was even more adamant in their opposition, burning Lord North in effigy.<sup>9</sup>

The June 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the Boston Evening Post carried a letter from Philadelphia stating, "By sea they will beat us; by land they will not attempt us; we must try it out in a way of commerce." That edition also carried the ominous news that more punitive acts were being discussed in parliament.

The next day, the Connecticut Courant carried an article urging, "all our merchants [to] unite as one man." Further, the paper stated that, "This horrid Attack upon the Town of Boston we consider not as an Attempt upon that Town singly, but upon the whole Continent." Connecticut had thrown its full weight behind its neighbors to the north, and was willing to do all they could to support Boston. In case anyone would forget why they were so adamantly supporting the Bostonians, the paper carried repeated references to Americans becoming "slaves" if they did not check the British powers. Additionally, the colonies were beginning to actively support Boston by severing trade with Britain. This shift from symbolic support in the form of resolutions and speeches to actual support in the form of economic alliance further strengthened Boston's position.

By the time the June 13, 1774 edition of the Boston Evening Post came out the act had been in effect for nearly two weeks. Several regiments of British troops had marched into the town and encamped on the green, prepared to uphold the act and protect the King's agents. Additionally, several warships patrolled the port, making sure nothing other than food was allowed in or out.<sup>10</sup> Boston was feeling the effects of the act. However, though the British were accomplishing their goal of punishing the Bostonians, they had not forced the Bostonians to stand alone, nor was the spirit of the colonists from

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8 Connecticut Courant, June 7, 1774

9 Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution*, 361-362.  
economically.

10 Boston Evening Post, June 20, 1774.

Massachusetts broken. At this point the citizens of Boston took a new approach, and began discussing their grievances with their new governor, Thomas Gage.

In the June 20, 1774 edition of the Boston Evening Post the paper printed an open letter to Gage from a New Salem resident that stated, "The Inhabitants of this Province claim no more than the Rights of Englishmen." The colonials were arguing that they, as Englishmen, had a right to representation. Without that right, they would refuse to pay taxes. This was more a political ploy than anything else; the Bostonians did not want representation as much as they did not want to pay taxes, but "no taxation without representation" became one of the cries of liberty in Colonial America. It also put Britain in a sticky situation. If Parliament were to admit that the colonists were Englishmen then they must give them representation, if Parliament were to deny they were Englishmen than they were admitting they had no right to tax them.

When Parliament decided to enact the Boston Port Act they believed that it would reestablish British authority in the colonies. Boston had been particularly rebellious, and Parliament felt that it was time to show Bostonians that their actions would no longer be tolerated. Parliament believed that most of the colonists were loyal citizens who disapproved of Boston's rebellious nature, and that they would not oppose punitive actions taken against Boston. They were dead wrong, and instead of bringing Boston back into line, the Boston Port Act united the thirteen colonies into opposition to the Crown. Rather than seeing the Bostonians as agitators who got what they deserved, the other thirteen colonies saw them as a martyr for the cause. This was not, they believed, an issue only involving one port or one state. Using words such as "slaves" to describe the positions held by colonials in the British Empire, contemporary newspapers urged the colonies to unite and come to the aid of Boston. If not, the papers warned, the British would begin imposing more and more of their will on the colonies. Parliament had failed in its goal to punish Boston, and had actually caused the colonists to come together to oppose the crown. The Boston Port Act was another example of Great Britain's misjudgment of colonial attitudes.