
The Sons of Liberty and the Creation of a Movement Model

On Christmas Day 1765, a new era in the history of protest began. On frozen Connecticut fields outside New London, Sons of Liberty from New York City met deputations from the surrounding region. Building from the escalating resistance to the Stamp Act across Britain's American colonies since news of the reviled legislation arrived several months earlier, the groups agreed "to associate, advise, protect and defend each other in the peaceable, full and just enjoyment of their inherent and accustomed rights as British subjects" – pledging to come "with their full force if required" to contest government incursions on their liberties. Even more importantly, all present pledged to spread the alliance to "perfect the like association with all the colonies on the continent" to reinforce their efforts.¹ Within weeks, their pact spread from New Hampshire to Georgia, enabling unprecedented coordination across the thirteen colonies.

The Sons of Liberty-centered opposition to the Stamp Act in 1765–66 created a fundamentally new kind of protest campaign. Utilizing correspondence and newspaper publicity, the colonists combined their efforts into an unprecedented political alliance, openly affiliating and coordinating their actions. In so doing, they created a model of allied corresponding societies with far-flung ramifications for both their standoff with British authorities and subsequent Atlantic movements over the decades to come.

The Rise of the Sons of Liberty

Word of the Stamp Act reached American shores in April 1765, though the legislation's start date and full contents were only published in late May.² Parliament passed the measure to service debts from the recent Seven Years' War, promoting austerity while exploiting the colonies' growing civil society and limiting their self-government. British authorities required various stamps on items from newspapers and pamphlets (though not books) to playing cards

¹ Connecticut Historical Society, American Revolution Collection, Box 11, Folder M; Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 201.

² *Boston Evening-Post*, May 27, 1765.

and dice, to apprenticeship papers, professional licenses, and legal documents, even though “internal” taxes had previously been under the purview of colonial legislatures.³ Colonists contemplated resistance. At an otherwise genteel Maryland planters gathering on a ship in Baltimore harbor that June, a French traveler described locals loudly, “Damning their souls if they would pay and Damn them but they would fight to the last Drop of their blood before they would Consent to any such slavery.”⁴ Elaborating an adequate method of protest, however – short of outright rebellion, which none yet endorsed – required innovations as unprecedented as the legislation itself.

The House of Burgesses, believing their unique right to levy internal taxes challenged by Parliament, galvanized an anti-Stamp Act campaign by passing the Virginia Resolves on May 30. Twenty-nine-year-old firebrand Patrick Henry’s resolutions declared any British attempt to usurp taxation rights within the colony as “illegal, unconstitutional, and unjust,” threatening “to destroy British, as well as American freedom.” The Burgesses declined to pass even more radical resolves declaring their citizens “not bound to yield obedience to any law” violating their rights. Yet after rumors that the legislature would declare anyone enforcing the Stamp Act “an Enemy to his Country,” Virginia’s governor dissolved the assembly.⁵ The resolves, immediately sent northward by courier, circulated broadly before being published in Boston (and then across the colonies), emboldening widespread opposition.⁶ Protests against the unwelcome measures seemed certain: newspapers ran an anonymous July letter declaring “Associations are forming,” with thousands subscribing to oppose the act, without describing how.⁷ With enforcement to begin on November 1, papers printed several would-be stamp officers’ names.⁸

Resistance to new British taxes had already begun two years earlier. In November 1763, reacting to growing British enforcement of long-dormant customs duties (some designed to quash virtually all trading with non-British colonies) during an acute postwar recession, Boston’s merchants organized a “grand committee” to “open a correspondence with the principal merchants in all our sister colonies, endeavoring to promote a union, and a coalition of all

³ Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act*, 96–97.

⁴ “Journal of a French Traveler in the Colonies, 1765,” *American Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (1921), 73.

⁵ Jack P. Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 363; Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston: Larkin, 1805), Vol. 1, 405–6; “Diary of a French Traveler,” 745.

⁶ NA CO 5/891 270; William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America* (London, 1788), Vol. 1, 171.

⁷ *New-York Gazette*, July 11, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, July 22, 1765.

⁸ *New Hampshire Gazette*, June 28, 1765; *South-Carolina Gazette*, July 15, 1765.

their councils.” New York passed a matching petition.⁹ Officials responded by enlisting the British Navy to seize contraband cargo, even allowing crews to keep half the captured goods. Profitable (though illegal) trade with French and Spanish colonies was curtailed. The crackdowns affected most American importers, while favoring British and Caribbean interests over continental concerns.¹⁰ Colonists observed a growing imperial consensus that excluded them. Only a significant show of colonial solidarity and resistance could derail Parliament’s reorganization plans.

Massachusetts’ House of Representatives urged other colonial assemblies to protest together for the restrictions’ repeal – appointing a Committee of Correspondence to lead the campaign. Selected legislators would “acquaint” the other colonies with the instructions Massachusetts sent its London lobbyist, publicizing their “desire the several assemblies on the continent join with them in the same measures.”¹¹ Legislatures from Rhode Island to South Carolina appointed similar committees, and nine petitioned Parliament in 1764 for redress.¹² Two hundred and fifty copies of committee resolutions reached London for the city’s merchants.¹³ Colonists nevertheless hoped to mitigate the worst British restrictions through presenting a powerful, united front. Parliament deciding American taxes seemed anathema. New York petitioned: “Without such a Right” to self-taxation, “there can be no Liberty, no Happiness, no Security.”¹⁴ Although the colonies competed for British favor and finance, and had previously been more concerned with imperial than “American” concerns, now, as dissenting minister William Gordon wrote in his early history of the era, “a new kind of correspondence was opened between the colonies, tending to unite them” against unwanted legislation.¹⁵ The

⁹ Charles Rappelye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 43; Joseph S. Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence, 1763–1776* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 62.

¹⁰ Thomas P. Slaughter, *Independence: The Tangled Roots of the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), 250; O’Shaughnessy, *Empire*, 63–68; Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); 52–53.

¹¹ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 153; C. A. Weslager, *The Stamp Act Congress* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1976), 58.

¹² David Lee Russell, *The American Revolution in the Southern Colonies* (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland, 2000), 26; Les Standiford, *Desperate Sons: Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, and the Secret Bands of Radicals Who Led the Colonies to War* (New York: Harper, 2012), 35; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 68.

¹³ Massachusetts Historical Society, Ezekiel Price Papers, 29.

¹⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764–1766* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 9.

¹⁵ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 153.

British Parliament, however, gave the 1764 petitions no formal consideration.¹⁶

The increasingly dysfunctional relationship between the colonies and Parliament contributed to the Stamp Act's disastrous rollout. Parliamentary authorities sent a preliminary proposal for colonial consultation in June 1764, with Prime Minister George Grenville asking for "the sense of the Colonies themselves upon the matter, and if they could point out any system or plan as effectual," he would entertain it. Colonial legislatures, seething after recent levies, nevertheless wanted more information. Massachusetts drafted an alternative tax plan, asking Parliament for "the particular sum expected from each province" in revenue.¹⁷ Rather than continuing negotiations, Grenville pressed forward, impatient for funds and believing the prosperous colonies better able to shoulder new taxes than Britain itself.¹⁸ London merchants petitioned against the measure due to colonial indebtedness (which new taxes would hinder their ability to collect), while addresses arrived from the West Indies, Virginia, and the Carolinas. They were dismissed unread with the ministry declaring the right to petition did not extend to "money bills."¹⁹ No one during debates in Parliament spoke favorably of a colonial right to self-taxation.

The name "Sons of Liberty", and indeed much of the group's initial inspiration, came from abroad. An Irish Tory polemicist used the phrase in 1756 to rail against County Antrim's Patriot Club, likening such "Sons of Liberty" to "Cromwell's grim ghost" during an Irish Parliamentary financial dispute.²⁰ The term gained positive use during the British Parliament's Stamp Act debates. Colonel Isaac Barré, an Irish Protestant son of French Huguenots and veteran wounded in the recent conquest of Quebec, took a strong pro-American position, declaring the colonists "sons of liberty" and asserting early settlers "fled tyranny" to seek "true English liberties" in a harsh land.²¹ By adopting a term from British and Irish debates, those colonists calling themselves Sons of Liberty sought Atlantic audiences.

More than most subsequent social movements, just who (or what) the Sons of Liberty initially were was only hazily defined. A secret organization to coordinate resistance in Boston known as the Loyal Nine developed by

¹⁶ Bruce A. Ragsdale, *A Planters' Republic: The Search for Economic Independence in Revolutionary Virginia* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1996), 50.

¹⁷ Morgan, *Prologue*, 28.

¹⁸ John L. Bullion, *A Great and Necessary Measure: George Grenville and the Genesis of the Stamp Act, 1763–1765* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 198.

¹⁹ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 161; *Boston Gazette*, May 20, 1765.

²⁰ *Advice to the Patriot Club of the County of Antrim on the Present State of Affairs in Ireland, and Some Late Changes in the Administration of That Kingdom* (Dublin, 1756), 14; Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39.

²¹ Peter Brown, *The Chathamites: A Study in the Relationship between Personalities and Ideas in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 190–97.

August 1765, featuring the outspoken Samuel Adams and *Boston Gazette* printer Benjamin Edes, though the extent of the group's linkage with the later organization is unclear. Keeping the Sons' composition and actions secret seemed prudent for an extralegal campaign. The movement appeared coordinated by well-placed figures, however: as early historian David Ramsay wrote, Stamp Act protests "were not ebullitions of a thoughtless mob, but for the most part, planned by leading men of character and influence" in the colonies. Believing "the bulk of mankind, are more led by their senses, than by their reason," organizers mobilized exemplary displays against stamp supporters.²² Keeping the leadership secret made it easier to speak for the full populace, while crowds' apparent spontaneity made them all the more intimidating.

Boston initiated public protests, bringing the wrath and collective power of the townspeople against Stamp Act enforcers. On the Wednesday, August 14 market day, agitators allegedly organized by the Loyal Nine hung an effigy of prosperous merchant and would-be stamp collector Andrew Oliver from a well-placed tree and publicized an evening demonstration. Upon cutting the figure down, "some thousands" paraded the effigy past government headquarters on King Street, where the town council sat debating whether to repress the protest, giving "three huzzas" audible inside. The group continued to a new building Oliver was constructing, which they labeled a future "stamp office" and destroyed. Protesters proceeded with building beams to Fort Hill, used the tainted wood to build a pyre, and then incinerated the effigy. Hearing Oliver had returned home, protesters proceeded there, forcing the detested official to flee to Castle William.²³ Twelve days later, on August 26 a second mob after a bonfire rally marched on the residences of three prominent alleged Stamp Act supporters: the Admiralty court's Deputy Registrar, Comptroller of the Customs, and Lieutenant Governor. The crowd, "enflam'd with Rum & Wine," devastated their properties, "burnt & scattered the books & files," along with destroying windows, furniture, and personal effects, before promptly dispersing at midnight.²⁴ Though Boston's town meeting the next day would "vote their detestation" of such attacks on private property (offering £300 to "any one who shall discover the Leader, or Leaders of the

²² David Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Aitken, 1789), Vol. 1, 69–70.

²³ *Providence Gazette*, August 24, 1765; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 29, 1765; *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 16, 126–27; Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act*, 123–24; Maier, *Resistance*, 85.

²⁴ *By His Excellency Francis Bernard, Esq. A Proclamation* (Boston, 1765); *New Hampshire Gazette*, September 6, 1765; *Boston Evening Gazette*, September 7, 1765; Harvard Business School Library, William Lloyd Letterbook, 151; MHS James Freeman Letterbook; NA CO 5/217 15; MHS John Tudor Papers.

Mob”), a denunciation assemblies down to Charleston echoed, a new paradigm of intimidating protest spread against Stamp Act supporters.²⁵

The colonial press magnified Bostonians’ actions, inspiring copycat protests and a growing spirit of Stamp Act resistance. Norwich, Connecticut residents, emulating the “noble patriotic fire” having “of late shown so conspicuous in Boston,” marched a stamp officer effigy through town before burning it on a public square, where participants drank “very constitutional Healths” before dispersing.²⁶ Newport, Rhode Island destroyed effigies of three suspect figures, “burnt amid the acclamations of thousands,” on August 27.²⁷ Southward, protests erupted in Baltimore on August 28 and in Annapolis, Elk Ridge, and Frederick Town, Maryland the next day, featuring effigies reading “Tyranny,” “Oppression,” and “Damn my Country I’ll get money.” The Annapolis effigy met an ignominious end as protesters “whipped it at the whipping post, placed it in the Pillory, afterwards hung it on a Gibbet and then burned it.”²⁸ In northern Virginia, Burgess and prominent landowner Richard Henry Lee even enlisted his slaves to march an effigy of the local stamp officer to a nearby courthouse, for having “endeavoured to fasten the chains of slavery on this my native country,” without apparent irony.²⁹ Across regions, the general British attack on colonial privileges encouraged matching protests in response.

The symbolic violence’s vehemence, so widely repeated, broadcast the situation’s seriousness. “Exhibitions of this sort are now very common in this Province,” the *Pennsylvania Gazette* described in mid-September.³⁰ Such widespread agitation created a symphony of opposition, by which, as a Boston letter informed *South-Carolina Gazette* readers, “we shall diffuse among his Majesty’s American subjects a general joy, equal to the resignation of a STAMP-OFFICER, or even the repeal of the STAMP ACT itself.”³¹ Boston Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew found colonists “sanguine in the expectation of a speedy repeal,” with the measure becoming “pernicious to Great Britain, by ruining the colonies.” Though the colonies remained “very far indeed, from desiring to be independent,” he asserted, “this Act will never be carried into execution, without the effusion of much blood.”³² Fellow Boston reverend Samuel Mather asserted the Stamp Act encouraged

²⁵ *New London Gazette*, August 30, 1765; MHS James Freeman Letterbook.

²⁶ *New London Gazette*, August 23, 1765.

²⁷ *South-Carolina Gazette*, September 21, 1765; Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 183.

²⁸ Library of Congress Peter Force Papers, American Stamp Act Papers, Box VIII B: 5–6; Ramsay, Vol. 1, 69–70.

²⁹ J. Kent McGaughey, *Richard Henry Lee of Virginia* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004), 78.

³⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 12 and 19, 1765; *Boston Post-Boy*, September 23, 1765; *South-Carolina Gazette*, September 28, 1765.

³¹ *South-Carolina Gazette*, September 21, 1765.

³² MHS Thomas Hollis Papers.

“alienation from the Mother Country: And any Methods to enforce it will only increase this alienation.”³³ Governor Francis Bernard fretted, “if things do not take another turn before the 1st Novr, the very appearance of Government will cease.”³⁴ British administrators would be unable to function in such a charged atmosphere.

As protests, breathlessly reported by the colonial press, spread across the colonies, soon too did stamp officer resignations. Oliver, three days after Boston’s initial protest, resigned his commission on August 17. Bernard declared the government “utterly unable to oppose or correct an insurrection of this kind,” given how protesters vastly outnumbered loyal forces.³⁵ “We doubt not,” declared a New York letter published in the *Boston Gazette*, “the noble Example of our Brethren in Boston, as it is approved by all, will be unanimously followed by all the Colonies that boast the same Origin.”³⁶ On September 16, rumors surfaced in Boston of a new stamp collector passing en route to New Hampshire, leading alarm bells to toll from local steeples. A large crowd met the ship, forcing the official’s resignation. Celebrations followed around the recently consecrated Liberty Tree south of Boston Common into evening. Cambridge and Charlestown followed with nighttime bonfires.³⁷ By early autumn, every New England and New York stamp officer resigned his office. New Jersey’s preemptively quit before any protests occurred.³⁸

The Stamp Act’s continental nature enabled an aggressive, trans-colonial response. In New Haven, on October 11, protesters forced a would-be replacement into a coffin under threat of being buried alive to renounce his office.³⁹ Eight days later in Charleston, protests erupted after rumors spread of an arriving ship holding “a stamp-officer, stamps, or stamp paper,” while another crowd invaded a prominent merchant’s house the next week searching for the dreaded stores.⁴⁰ Virginia’s stamp officer was “ill-treated in effigy at some places,” being “carted, whipped, caned, pilloried, crop’d, hanged & burnt,” before he resigned on October 30.⁴¹ Had protests died down, royal officials would have pressed ahead: Maryland’s Deputy Governor Horatio Sharpe in September directed the vessel carrying stamped papers “to lye off from

³³ MHS Samuel Mather Papers.

³⁴ British Library, ADD MS 35911, Hardwicke Papers.

³⁵ NA CO 5/891 270.

³⁶ *Boston Gazette*, September 9, 1765.

³⁷ *Boston Gazette*, September 16, 1765; MHS James Freeman Letterbook.

³⁸ *London Evening Post*, November 7, 1765; BL ADD MS 35911.

³⁹ *Massachusetts Gazette*, November 17, 1765.

⁴⁰ LC James Grant of Balindalloch Papers, MSS 89460, Vol. 8; *South Carolina Gazette*, October 31, 1765.

⁴¹ LC Peter Force Papers, Virginia Reports to British Secretary of State, Box VII E: 17–18 and American Stamp Act Papers, Box VII B: 5–6.

shore . . . till the People shew a better Disposition.”⁴² Only the extent and intensity of the anti-Stamp Act protests prevented implementation.

Protesters performed for a British audience as much as for colonial ones. Boston merchant Ezekiel Price wrote to an overseas correspondent in September how New World events “will probably make a great noise on your side of the water,” and fearing their being “very differently represented,” he enclosed “Sundry Newspapers” giving “The Minds of the People” on the Stamp Act.⁴³ Colonial governors regularly wrote to London authorities in tones of exasperation and futility: “it is impossible for me to point out, or even to Conceive,” New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth complained in October, “what is Necessary to be done to cure the Insania, which runs through the Continent.”⁴⁴ American collective performances needed to broadcast their resolve but remained within British rhetorical traditions to appeal to audiences there.

British shows of force failed to deter the colonists. The stamped papers for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland arrived at Philadelphia on October 5 “under the protection of a man of war.” Although the port had been less unified in Stamp Act opposition than others, partisans mobilized. At the first sight of the battleship, “all the Colours in the Harbour were hoisted half Mast high,” while church bells tolled all day. Agitated crowds gathered on the waterfront. But short of shelling North America’s largest city, which would have been an unprecedented atrocity in a British political standoff, the naval show of force remained symbolic. The captain refused to dock, fearing “some violence” to ship or crew. That Saturday night, crowds forced the local stamp officer’s resignation after marching to his home and threatening to destroy his “Person and Property” should he not resign.⁴⁵ No easy solutions existed for the British.

The campaign exhibited unprecedented unity across the social spectrum. Sara Franklin wrote to her famous father in London of how “The Subject is now the Stamp act and nothing else is talked of” regardless of gender, nationality, or race: “the Dutch talk of the stomp tack the Negroes of the tamp, in short every body has something to say.”⁴⁶ North American British Army commander Thomas Gage reported to London in September with perhaps

⁴² NA CO 5/217 23.

⁴³ MHS Ezekiel Price Papers, 58.

⁴⁴ NA CO 5/934 52.

⁴⁵ LC Peter Force Papers, American Stamp Act Papers, Box VIII B: 5–6; American Philosophical Society, Mss. 973.2.M31, Pennsylvania Stamp Act and Nonimportation Resolutions Collection, Vol. 1, 9 and 12.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree et. al., eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–2017), Vol. 12, 317–18; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1850* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1980), 170.

greater surprise that American protesters had succeeded “by Menace or Force to oblige the Stamp Officers to resign” and then pressure authorities to continue business without them. Gage realized, however, that his opponents used altered tactics: protest leaders worked “to prevent Insurrections, of the People, as before to excite them.” Gage did not elaborate a clear plan to counter colonial actions, fearing in November that militants “wou’d immediately fly to Arms,” while “the Clamour has been so general” that government allies would be scarce.⁴⁷ Stamp Act opponents succeeded through developing unanimity and intimidation.

Town meetings, though sometimes denouncing protesters’ most violent and destructive actions, encouraged resistance. Weymouth, Massachusetts, found “distress is heard not only from every part of this Province, but from the continent in general,” as “we behold poverty rushing in on us like an armed man.” Declaring Parliament “mistaken,” the small town asserted their “natural Rights,” particularly “freedom of Speech & of the Press,” to agitate for recompense. Pembroke, Massachusetts, similarly sought to block implementation, intending to “postpone the introduction of said Act until the united cries of the whole continent have reached the ears of our most gracious King and Parliament,” expecting redress.⁴⁸ While presenting themselves as more respectable alternatives to street protests, town meetings nevertheless joined the movement.

Protesters’ success in framing their campaign in terms of “liberty” kept their aggressive tactics largely unchecked by authorities. Maryland’s Deputy Governor Horatio Sharpe wrote to London of how the populace “with one Voice” denounced the Stamp Act, while publications “inflamm[e] the People & persuade them that Obedience to such an Act was a Surrender of all the Rights they had hitherto enjoyed as British Subjects.”⁴⁹ Colonial civil society’s most influential sectors – newspapermen, lawyers, judges, merchants, and legislators – felt collectively aggrieved. Nor were the still-small urban areas isolated: Gage reported “Country-People who are flocking in” to join the protests.⁵⁰ With “the Ministry’s giving no instructions” on implementation, Sharpe complained that enforcement appeared impossible without gravely escalating the crisis.⁵¹

As news of the colonial disturbances spread, authorities in London remained uncertain about how to counter the anti-Stamp Act campaign. Secretary of State Henry Conway wrote to Gage and each colonial governor, not offering “positive instructions,” but urging them to navigate between

⁴⁷ Thomas Gage, *The Correspondence of General Gage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), Vol. 1, 67–68, 71.

⁴⁸ LC Peter Force Papers, Massachusetts Town Records, Box VII E: 39–41.

⁴⁹ LC Horatio Sharpe Papers, MSS 1722.

⁵⁰ NA CO 5/1098 8.

⁵¹ LC Horatio Sharpe Papers, MSS 1722.

“caution” and the “vigour necessary to suppress outrage and violence” as necessary.⁵² Following early disturbances, no high-profile protester prosecutions occurred, perhaps due to their usually avoiding physical violence despite engaging in intimidation and destroying property. The newspaper press, meanwhile, despite being the campaign’s most influential facilitator and directly violating the Stamp laws, remained unpunished. Given “the present temper of the people,” New York’s Lieutenant Governor wrote to British authorities, “this is not a proper time to prosecute the Printers and Publishers of the seditious Papers.”⁵³ Already afoul of colonial opinion, many officials favored tolerating protests to endure the controversy.

While volatile street-protests provided important events for galvanizing common citizens, consensus grew for a “Stamp Act Congress” for continental legislatures to issue a common rebuttal against the act. Though congresses had only previously convened to discuss military defense, Massachusetts issued invitations to “consider a general Address” to British authorities demonstrating colonial opposition.⁵⁴ Samuel Adams believed a “Union of Comtees from the several Colonys” could “collect the whole Strength of Reason & Argument” to make common cause.⁵⁵ Twenty-seven deputies from nine colonial legislatures met in New York from October 7 to 25, resolving “no Taxes be imposed on them, but with their own Consent, given personally, or by their representatives,” considering their right under British precedent.⁵⁶ The Congress presented an imposing front: “The Spirit of Democracy is strong among ’em,” Gage considered.⁵⁷ With the formal protest lodged, the body did not discuss further resistance, but neither did it discourage popular campaigning.

The trans-colonial congress’ implications were not lost on Parliament when the American petition arrived. Maryland’s colonial agent in London, Charles Garth, wrote of how Members of Parliament he consulted considered it “bespoke too much of a Federal Union,” carrying “great Danger to his Majesty’s Authority and Government.” Parliament refused to formally consider the American address, not wanting to legitimize the Congress.⁵⁸ Americans moved boldly and British authorities recognized the risks.

Colonists increased pressure through an organized withdrawal from overseas trade by adopting nonimportation agreements. Particularly fitting since

⁵² *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 16, 113–7; LC Peter Force Papers, Ezra Stiles Diary.

⁵³ Henry Dawson, *The Sons of Liberty in New York* (Poughkeepsie: Platt & Schram, 1859), 78.

⁵⁴ Walter H. Conser, Jr., “Stamp Act Resistance,” in *Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765–1775*, in Conser, Ronald M. McCarthy, David J. Toscano and Gene Sharp, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986), 48; Weslager, 50.

⁵⁵ Samuel Adams, *Writings*, Vol. 1, 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 106; LC Peter Force Papers, American Stamp Act Papers, Box VIII B: 5–6.

⁵⁷ NA CO 5/219 18.

⁵⁸ Maryland Historical Society, Revolutionary War Collection, MSS 1814.

authorities demanded customs duties be paid on stamped paper, nonimportation deprived the government of revenue while pressuring British manufacturing constituencies to join the repeal campaign. The American colonies, though having consumed only 5 percent of English exports in 1700, by the late-colonial crises purchased 25 percent.⁵⁹ Disrupting American Atlantic trade could trigger an Empire-wide recession. Mather in Boston that August already described resistance spreading “thro all the Colonies” and believed redress would come once colonists “endeavour less & less to be beholden to Great Britain for its Manufactures,” so the British “will certainly lose more than they will ever gain by oppressive Measures.”⁶⁰ Repeal ought to follow once the Stamp Act became economically unfeasible and politically damaging in Britain.

Organizing such a trans-colonial American effort required a significantly more concerted effort than scattered effigy-burnings, necessitating near-comprehensive adherence across the colonies to be effective. The compacts spread quickly, with Maryland planter Charles Carroll on October 5 describing a tense climate in which “no business will be done after the first of November,” when the boycott would take effect alongside the Stamp Act.⁶¹ In New York, Stamp Act opponents advertised their intention “to form an ASSOCIATION of ALL who are not already SLAVES, in OPPOSITION to all ATTEMPTS to make them so.”⁶² On October 31, a merchants’ meeting of more than two hundred agreed to cease transatlantic exporting after January 1 for the Act’s duration, depriving Britain of raw materials as well as markets for manufactured products. Widespread coordination remained essential: the merchants appointed a five-man “Committee of Correspondence” for broader mobilization and enforcement.⁶³ Albany followed suit. Philadelphia adopted a matching agreement on November 14 signed by four hundred.⁶⁴ Despite the economic risk, many grasped the movement’s potential, through which resistance, the *Boston Gazette* wrote, “will ketch from Town to Town, and Province to Province, than which nothing can more contribute to a speedy Redress of our Grievances.”⁶⁵ Boston merchants (belatedly) joined on December 9.⁶⁶ The movement’s size and ramifications became unparalleled.

⁵⁹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Political Protest and the World of Goods,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

⁶⁰ MHS Samuel Mather Papers.

⁶¹ Charles Carroll, *Dear Papa, Dear Charley: The Peregrinations of a Revolutionary Aristocrat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Vol. 1, 383.

⁶² *Newport Mercury*, October 28, 1765.

⁶³ Dawson, *Sons*, 84–86; *New-York Gazette*, October 31, 1765.

⁶⁴ Tiedemann, *Reluctant*, 71; LC Galloway-Maxcy-Markoe Papers MSS 21857, Vol. 8; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 7, 1765.

⁶⁵ *Boston Gazette*, November 25, 1765.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 194.

The boycott effort entailed both risk and opportunity for the colonies. Some, especially in the imperial administration, expected economic catastrophe: Virginia's Lieutenant Governor prophesized to the Board of Trade in London in early November, "the distress the country will feel on a total stagnation of business, will open their eyes and pave the way for the Acts' executing its self."⁶⁷ Gage predicted that with a "Stop to Business, the people idle, and exasperated," would lose patience.⁶⁸ The British Navy increased patrols, deterring colonists' rampant smuggling with French and Spanish ports.⁶⁹ Yet as Boston merchant James Murray described, such restrictions could give domestic industry a "necessary Spur" with long-term benefits for the colonial balance of trade.⁷⁰ Other merchants favored nonimportation as a way to clear a glutted market, with Philadelphian John Chew estimating "there will be no want of goods for a Twelve month," while prognosticating that "the riotous Spirit of the Manufacturers of Great Britain," feeling the contraction worse than the colonists, "will work our Cure."⁷¹

If American merchants had departed from the nonimportation agreements, popular reprisals appeared almost certain. Philadelphia merchants' form letter to those of British ports on November 7 warned if goods arrived after the measure took effect, "and the Stamp-Act not be repealed, I shall not dare to dispose any Part of them, without a forfeiture of my Honour; nor indeed can I engage for their or my own safety."⁷² Popular control of streets and wharves extended to the flow of commerce – and perhaps of politics. Expressing support for the Stamp Act or the ruling ministry in the colonies became anathema, with reprisals likely to follow.⁷³

British preparations to enforce the Stamp Act met popular reprisals. Stamp Officer George Saxby's late-October arrival in Charleston sparked unrest led by "people who called themselves Sons of Liberty," likely the first combination taking that name.⁷⁴ A dual effigy procession of Saxby and Lord Bute began once his ship came into view, with townspeople crowding the docks to demand his resignation. The stamp man agreed, given popular dissatisfaction, that he "would not act in that office till his Majesty's further pleasure was known," satisfying those assembled. To "shouts of joy," the official entered town in triumph to ringing church bells and beating drums. Following "the laudable example of the northern Provinces," one Charlestonian described the campaign as "opening their Eyes and communicating a noble sense and spirit of

⁶⁷ LC Peter Force Papers, Virginia Reports to British Secretary of State, Box VII E: 17–18.

⁶⁸ Gage, *Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 71.

⁶⁹ "Journal of a French Traveler," 82.

⁷⁰ MHS James Murray Papers, P-141.

⁷¹ LC Galloway-Maxcy-Markoe Papers, MSS 21857 Vol. 8.

⁷² APS MSS 973.2.M31 Vol. 2, 2.

⁷³ Virginia Historical Society, Mercier Correspondence, MSS 5345 a124.

⁷⁴ South Carolina Historical Society, Robert Raper Papers, 34/0511.

Freedom.” A trans-colonial movement coalesced even before the Stamp Act began.⁷⁵

Colonists organized dramatic public demonstrations for the day the Stamp Act took effect. On November 1 in Boston, radicals again hung two effigies from the Liberty Tree and made an evening march through town culminating in the figures’ destruction. Unlike in August, however, no property was attacked.⁷⁶ Later that week on Pope’s Day, the North and South Ends renounced their annual brawl to make a unified procession, ending with incinerating not just the Pope and devil, but figures representing “tyranny, oppression, slavery, &c.”⁷⁷ Portsmouth, New Hampshire protesters, the day after extracting a loyalty oath from a suspected stamp distributor, mournfully marched a casket marked “LIBERTY, aged 145, STAMPED,” from the state-house to burial outside town.⁷⁸ In New York, with crowds “composed of great numbers of Sailors headed by Captains of Privateers” calling themselves “The Sons of Neptune” – a nickname long predating “Sons of Liberty” – together with thousands of locals, engaged in five days of disorder stretching from the Act’s promulgation (that evening burning two effigies representing the Lieutenant Governor and the Devil) to Guy Fawkes Day. At their culmination, crowds gathered to storm the Battery fort where royal troops held stamped paper, only relenting after the governor released the hated cargo for incineration.⁷⁹ In Philadelphia a crowd menaced the house of Franklin, who as a colonial lobbyist in London seemingly acquiesced to the legislation.⁸⁰ Savannah, allegedly “occasioned by the inflammatory Papers & Messages sent by the Liberty Boys” from Charleston, conducted an effigy march and burning to the “acclamations of a great concourse of people of all ranks and denominations,” declaring any stamp collector would meet “the sentiments of the people” on arrival.⁸¹ A Fairfield, Connecticut, group, calling itself “true Sons of Liberty,” performed the same ritual on November 12.⁸² Such widespread, ostentatious demonstrations broadcast the depth and breadth of American anger.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Richard Hutson Papers, 34/0559, 3.

⁷⁶ *Boston Evening Gazette*, November 7, 1765; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 7, 1765.

⁷⁷ MHS James Freeman Diary.

⁷⁸ *Newport Mercury*, November 11, 1765; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 21, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, November 11, 1765.

⁷⁹ Gage, *Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 71; Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1997), 84–86; Mike Rapport, *The Unruly City: Paris, London and New York in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 11; NA CO 5/217 26.

⁸⁰ Standiford, *Desperate*, 84.

⁸¹ NA CO 5/218 26; *New-York Gazette*, January 16, 1766; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 2, 1766; *Boston Post-Boy*, January 27, 1766; *Boston Gazette*, January 27, 1766.

⁸² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 12, 1765.

Alongside the boycotts, colonists engaged in civil disobedience, defiantly continuing to use stamp-designated items without paying the new tax. Many newspapers, some proudly boasting of appearing on unstamped paper, continued after November 1 uninterrupted, while others resumed after brief hiatuses. Publishers proclaimed themselves obliged to continue, as otherwise “their Offices would be in Danger from the enraged People.”⁸³ Though many courts closed, rather than directly defy Parliamentary legislation (which many commoners favored as it suspended debt cases), elsewhere the populace successfully pressured their reopening. A town meeting in Norwich, Connecticut, asked “the Clerk Proceed in all Matter Relating to his office as Usual; And that the Town will save him harmless from all Damages that he may sustain thereby.”⁸⁴ Boston’s port resumed full operations by New Year, granting “Clearances with a Certificate that no Stamp Papers are to be had,” while local courts resumed sessions.⁸⁵ In Providence the following March, reportedly “all business, public and private, is prosecuted in this colony without any regard to the Stamp Act, which is considered as a mere nullity.”⁸⁶ Americans, resorting to their own interpretations of natural rights and the British constitution’s fundamental precepts, found the law illegitimate.

Through a combination of coordinated efforts and copycat tactics, a common movement coalesced against the Stamp Act. Despite scattered property damage and threats of violent resistance, however, the campaign – increasingly directed by those calling themselves Sons of Liberty – almost entirely avoided physical violence, while innovating a broader coordinated campaign of public displays, civil disobedience, and reciprocal communication than any preceding Anglo-American movement.

The Sons of Liberty Alliance

By the Stamp Act’s November 1 implementation, the Sons of Liberty moved beyond being a metaphor or temporary combination into a full-fledged association and social movement. Initially, diverse groups galvanized the anti-Stamp Act agitation, from colonial legislatures to town meetings, social clubs, commercial associations, and temporary combinations of townspeople, farmers, and sailors. From this tumultuous mix, by the year’s end the movement developed a degree of structure, coordination, and endurance unmatched by any predecessors.

On November 6, New York’s Sons met outside city limits on Manhattan Island fields and proposed appointing their own committee of correspondence

⁸³ *Newport Mercury*, November 4, 1765.

⁸⁴ LC Peter Force Collection MSS 20990, Norwich Town Papers, Box VII E:58.

⁸⁵ HBSL William Lloyd Letterbook, 263.

⁸⁶ MHS Portsmouth Sons of Liberty Papers.

to exchange intelligence with fellow continental branches. Whereas earlier corresponding committees were extensions of governmentally recognized organizations (legislative or mercantile), the Sons taking such an established, legally traceable form worried many. Though approving the design, over half an hour passed before any New York Son volunteered to participate. Only after prominent merchant Isaac Sears agreed did four others follow. They planned to “open a correspondence with all the colonies,” while requesting Boston and Philadelphia serve as regional hubs.⁸⁷

Sons of Liberty gloried in intimidation, using exemplary acts to recruit new members and raise their public standing. New York’s branch publicized their plans against Maryland stamp collector Zachariah Hood, who had fled to Long Island. On December 2, two hundred men crossed the East River to Flushing, located Hood, and forced his resignation. The group combined paramilitary action with fraternal proceedings, holding a banquet afterward in which “Many constitutional Toasts were drank” amid “good Humour and Joy.”⁸⁸ Similar actions followed elsewhere. Sons in Wyndham, Connecticut forcibly searched a prominent resident’s house for letters written to London and then publicized their contents.⁸⁹ At Boston on December 17, “true-born Sons of Liberty” organized a two-thousand-person gathering to successfully extract Oliver’s resignation.⁹⁰ Colonial newspapers increasingly described the Sons as a coherent group with central organizing principles, strategies, and forms of action.

Exemplary effigy displays maintained pressure on authorities. Philadelphia protesters in December hung a stamped newspaper “suspended by an Iron Chain, to which was affixed a Pair of Handcuffs.” New York mobilized an effigy procession of Grenville, naval commander Lord Colville, and Quebec’s governor for their respective roles in executing the Stamp Act, ending with the mannequins being “carried to the fields and burned.” When British sailors attempted to covertly land stamped papers in January, a band of armed men stormed the ship and burnt the hated cargo at the dock.⁹¹ Vehement rhetoric and reprisals against the British administration proliferated.

Anti-Stamp Act agitation spread beyond the Thirteen Colonies, across British domains northward and southward, but local responses varied. On October 31, rioters in the Caribbean port of Basseterre on St. Kitts, aided by American sailors, forced the stamp master and his deputy’s resignation and torched their houses after they fled. At the nearby isle of Nevis on Guy Fawkes Day, protesters “totally destroyed the Stamps” and burned the stamp officers in

⁸⁷ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 186–87.

⁸⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 5 and 12, 1765; *Massachusetts Gazette*, December 12, 1765.

⁸⁹ *Boston Evening Gazette*, December 16, 1765.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1765.

⁹¹ LC Peter Force Papers, American Stamp Act Papers, Box VIII B: 5–6.

effigy. Neither island enforced the Stamp Act.⁹² Similar protests occurred in Halifax, though Nova Scotia soon submitted. Kingston, Jamaica, while avoiding such confrontations, continued processing ships without stamps. In some areas, however, authorities remained unyielding: though protesters compelled Antigua's stamp officer to resign, officials kept the stamps under strict military guard and appointed a replacement, who, as one merchant apologetically wrote to Philadelphia, "distributes them to the People who are Obligated to receive them, if very much against their wills."⁹³ The rest of Jamaica and all Barbados followed.⁹⁴ Strategically vulnerable areas, wanting stronger military garrisons to guard against potential French Canadian rebellions or slave uprisings on Caribbean sugar islands, ultimately acquiesced, leading to a near-equal split among Britain's twenty-six American possessions.

The Stamp Act's broad purview encouraged mobilizations across both class and gender divides. Much as merchants became expected to lead boycotts and common men to enforce nonimportation, women altered family consumption habits and promoted "homespun" cloth. Virtuous household consumption embodied American dedication, contrasting favorably with the moral corruption associated with aristocratic Britain. The "fairer sex" could thus promote more peaceful resistance methods; one letter noted, "when such examples are enforced by the tender persuasions of amiable women they cannot fail to produce wonderful effects."⁹⁵ Already during 1764's Sugar Act agitation, localities began resolving "not to buy any clothing (they could do without) which was not of their own manufacturing," to hurt the British economy and encourage manufacturers to pressure for repeal.⁹⁶ The 1765 movement encouraged families to produce for the home market. The *Newport Mercury* hoped market conditions "will animate the country people to make plenty of linens and woollens, as they may be assured of quick sale, and good prices."⁹⁷ Nonconsumption, more often than dangerous street protests, directly involved the populace in the campaign. Colonists adopted further boycotts against eating lamb to maximize wool supply.⁹⁸ Resistance spread into colonists' lifestyles as consumer choices became politicized.

Colonial citizens, as consumers and arbiters of taste, created a new radical chic of simplicity to support the boycott. Maryland's governor wrote of how "to encourage the Inferior Class to do so, many Gentlemen will this winter

⁹² O'Shaughnessy, *Empire*, 89–91.

⁹³ Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Clifford Correspondence MSS 0136 Vol. 4 209.

⁹⁴ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 190.

⁹⁵ APS MSS 973.2.M31 Vol. 1, 2; T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 263–65.

⁹⁶ APS MSS 973.2.M31, Vol. 1, 156.

⁹⁷ *Newport Mercury*, November 4, 1765.

⁹⁸ Ramsay, *History*, Vol. 1, 70–71.

cloth themselves with the Manufactures of Maryland.”⁹⁹ The fashion revolution occurred rapidly: on November 28, a Philadelphian reported the “manufactures of this province are now daily coming to town.”¹⁰⁰ Women, as household buyers and wool-spinners, played an outsized role: by winter, respectable young “Daughters of Liberty” hosted spinning bees to promote “a laudable Zeal for introducing Home Manufactures.”¹⁰¹ Many previously imitating high British fashions now embraced colonial homespun. Franklin, testifying before Parliament in early 1766, asserted that whereas American “pride” had previously been to “indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great Britain,” now they “wear their old clothes over again, until they can make new ones.”¹⁰²

The Stamp Act would be overturned not only via intercontinental resistance, but through transatlantic campaigning. In December, news of the boycotts arrived in Britain with adjoining cancellations of colonial orders. By February, resulting British losses estimated £120,000.¹⁰³ Franklin diffused American accounts into the British press, writing home he “reprinted everything from America that I thought might be of help for a common cause.”¹⁰⁴ Many Britons, distrusting their government and hoping to economically rebound, became motivated to help secure repeal.

Influential colonists prodded potential British allies, drawing attention to the precedents coercion in America could set. Samuel Adams wrote to London in December, “The British Constitution makes no Distinction between good Subjects with Regard to Liberty,” and thus rights abridged in the colonies could be denied to Britons. The system, he argued, “admits of no more Power over the Subject than is necessary for the Purpose of Government, which was originally designed for the Preservation of the unalienated Rights of Nature.” America’s cause necessarily was Britain’s, since suppressing colonial autonomy could create precedents to abridge British rights.

Such campaigning spurred British repeal lobbying: London merchants formed a Committee of Correspondence to solicit protestations. Reportedly, “Petitions came from every trading and manufacturing Town” doing business with America.¹⁰⁵ Colonial protesters needed to influence the British to achieve changes. Ideological and economic sympathies intertwined with advocates on both sides of the Atlantic working together. “PERSEVERANCE TO THE SONS OF LIBERTY IN AMERICA” became

⁹⁹ LC Horatio Sharpe Papers, MSS 1722.

¹⁰⁰ *New Hampshire Gazette*, December 13, 1765.

¹⁰¹ *Providence Gazette*, March 12, 1766; *Boston Post-Boy*, March 31, 1766.

¹⁰² Standiford, *Desperate*, 100–101.

¹⁰³ *London Evening Post*, December 12, 1765; Morley, *Irish*, 52.

¹⁰⁴ LC Peter Force Papers, American Stamp Act Papers, Box VII B: 5–6.

¹⁰⁵ *Maryland Gazette*, March 6, 1766; Richard Champion, *The American Correspondence of a Bristol Merchant, 1766–1776* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 11.

a common toast across England and Scotland, while Irish allies pledged, "Destruction to the Stamp Act, and Success to the free Sons of Liberty in America."¹⁰⁶ The cause of liberty, and resistance against unprecedented governmental incursions, became a transatlantic effort.

Nonimportation, placing significant economic pressure on both the boycotters and boycotted, made rapidly reversing the Stamp Act essential. Royally appointed Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson wrote to Franklin on November 18, reporting New England "depend[s] upon the repeal of the stamp act as soon as the Parliament meets."¹⁰⁷ Economic interests might not be restrained much longer. In New Hampshire, Manchester's merchants and manufacturers brought a petition before their colonial assembly reminding them "home Consumption . . . is very small in Comparison of the Export Trade" and imploring relief for their plight.¹⁰⁸ Many colonials became increasingly unenthusiastic about sacrificing their financial well-being for abstract constitutional principles.

As 1765 drew to a close, colonists remarked on the unprecedented "spirit" of American unity. "The people," wrote Braintree, Massachusetts, lawyer John Adams, "even to the lowest ranks, have become more attentive to their liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be." Indeed, "so universal has been the resentment of the people" that none dared defend the Stamp Act in public.¹⁰⁹ The *New-York Gazette* recapped the year by considering, "we are still free," though everything depended "upon our Firmness and Unanimity."¹¹⁰ Particularly as word arrived of Quebec, Nova Scotia, and most of the West Indies submitting to the Act, a unified front became essential.¹¹¹

In New London, Connecticut, on Christmas Day in 1765, Sons of Liberty representatives from across the state met those of New York. Militia associations had long been common across the colonies and Britain itself, but now the Sons mobilized against imperial commands.¹¹² Going beyond the corresponding connections established in recent months, the groups composed a full mutual aid agreement. The Sons would remain "vigilant" against officials who "from the Nature of their Offices, Vocations or Dispositions, may be the most

¹⁰⁶ *Maryland Gazette*, February 20, 1766; *Boston Gazette*, February 17, 1766; *Boston Post-Boy*, March 17, 1766.

¹⁰⁷ Franklin, *Papers*, Vol. 12, 380.

¹⁰⁸ *New Hampshire Gazette*, December 6, 1765.

¹⁰⁹ John Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1852–1865), Vol. 2, 154.

¹¹⁰ *New-York Gazette*, January 2, 1766.

¹¹¹ *New London Gazette*, December 20, 1765; *Boston Post-Boy*, December 23, 1765; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 9, 1766.

¹¹² Matthew McCormack, *Embodying the Militia in Georgian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Joseph Seymour, *The Pennsylvania Associators, 1747–1777* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2012).

likely to introduce the use of Stamp'd Paper" and pursue violators. Meanwhile, they offered protection to all resisting officials, while resolving "to defend the liberty of the press" and all British rights. To accomplish this, the groups planned to spread their allied model across the colonies, strengthening connections to reinforce their efforts.¹¹³

The Sons of Liberty compact appeared highly aggressive, even paramilitary. The committees diffused their alliance across adjoining colonies with the Sons asking correspondents "to assemble as many of the true Sons of Liberty as you possibly can" to "form an Union of the Colonies" to resist British enforcement. The circular made clear the group would "not to be enslaved by any Power on Earth, without opposing force to force."¹¹⁴ Within a week of the Christmas gathering, rumors flew of British military enforcement, and in mid-January protesters seized and burned stamped papers arriving at New York.¹¹⁵ The group asserted they would physically contest Stamp Act enforcement, perhaps on a continental scale.

Sons of Liberty affiliations led to a new upsurge in collective action. Connecticut Sons set the confrontational tone, at the December 25 meeting resolving to demand "satisfaction" from their stamp collector, Jared Ingersoll. Wondering if he "Read the Late Papers of N. York and Boston," they threatened he would "Know by sad Experience all the horrors of falling away into the hands of A free & Enraged people whose bosoms Glowe with A True Spirit of British Liberty" should he not resign.¹¹⁶ In early January, a crowd confronted Ingersoll near Hartford and pressured him into renouncing his office. Protests forced a stamp man's resignation in Savannah, while in Albany protesters sacked the accused's dwelling.¹¹⁷ Crowds forced another recantation in Portsmouth, seizing the official instructions which they "stuck on the Point of a sword & carried all around the Town in Triumph, with Drums & loud acclamations," before delivering them to a ship's captain "who swore faithfull to deliver them in London" to the officials from whence they came.¹¹⁸ As affiliation spread, the organization remained firm, with New York City's Sons on January 2 printing resolutions reiterating the need to "go to the last Extremity" against Stamp Act enforcement, but "maintain the Peace and good Order of this City, so far as it can be done consistently with the Preservation and Security of our Rights and

¹¹³ Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act*, 201; CHS, American Revolution Collection, Box 11, Folder M.

¹¹⁴ APS MSS 973.2.M31, Vol. 1, 17; Standiford, *Desperate*, 91.

¹¹⁵ BL Henry Moore Papers, ADD MS 22679; NA CO 5/1098 35.

¹¹⁶ American Antiquarian Society, United States Revolution Collection, Box 1.

¹¹⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 16 and February 14, 1766; *Pennsylvania Journal*, January 2, 1766; *Boston Post-Boy*, January 6 and 27, 1766; *Boston Gazette*, January 13, 1766; *New-York Gazette*, January 9, 1766; *Newport Mercury*, February 3, 1766.

¹¹⁸ MHS Jeremy Belknap Diaries, P-363.

Privileges.”¹¹⁹ Utilizing measured force, in keeping with the movement’s principles, gave the Sons an unequalled power.

The New York-Connecticut alliance wrote to Boston, seeking formal affiliation. Boston not only allied but sent a circular letter to nearby communities for local branches to gather the “dispositions of the people” there.¹²⁰ Not just a union of colonial capitals, but dense networks within colonies took shape. A Providence Son of Liberty attending Boston’s meeting in mid-February reported the organization was “fast as Fate in their opposition to the Stamp Act & all its Abbetters, that they can at two Hours Notice Bring 3000 Men under the Tree of Liberty who would go anywhere for the preservation of the constitution,” while possessing 40,000 affiliated across Massachusetts and New Hampshire.¹²¹ With such power in numbers, the Sons’ influence could not be ignored.

Ceremonies of affiliation and solidarity became increasingly public. The Sons of Liberty of New York, Connecticut, and Boston jointly wrote to Portsmouth’s in early February, recommending, in the king’s name, they “join in every laudable Measure to support his Crown and Dignity; and their own Liberties and Property, which are inseparably connected with his Authority.” The letter was read outdoors amid a “great Concourse of the Inhabitants of this and the neighbouring Towns” and approved, after which “the Parade clear’d in Ten Minutes.”¹²² The Sons portrayed themselves as principled men, upholding the British constitution’s highest principles. Portsmouth’s branch pledged “to venture our lives and fortunes” against “fatal & ruinous measures,” vowing united resistance.¹²³ Such resolutions promoted the Sons as more than a violent extralegal body – rather, an organization speaking for their community.

The Sons planned a February 20 day of action across the colonies, in which “the united Free-born Sons of Liberty” conducted effigy and stamped paper burnings before large crowds. Boston’s members, after incinerating Grenville and Bute figures before a crowd of thousands, returned to their meetinghouse, toasting “Long Life, Health and Prosperity to all the Sons of Liberty on the Continent,” exulting in the growing alliance.¹²⁴ Four days later, the Sons published their Christmas alliance.¹²⁵ With no officials daring to challenge them, the organization’s ascendance continued.

¹¹⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 16, 1766; *Virginia Gazette*, March 7, 1766.

¹²⁰ John Adams, *Papers of John Adams*, Robert J. Taylor, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), Vol. 1, 170; Maier, *Resistance*, 79.

¹²¹ New-York Historical Society, John Lamb Papers, reel 1.

¹²² *New Hampshire Gazette*, February 14, 1766; *New-York Gazette*, March 6, 1766; *Boston Gazette*, February 17, 1766.

¹²³ MHS Portsmouth Sons of Liberty Records.

¹²⁴ *Boston Evening Gazette*, February 24, 1766; *Freeman’s Journal*, April 22, 1766.

¹²⁵ *New-York Mercury*, February 24, 1766.

The Sons of Liberty network spread with New York's Sons sending circular letters as far as South Carolina, requesting trans-colonial affiliations.¹²⁶ New York's committee asked affiliates "to enter into a firm Union for the Preservation of our inestimable and undoubted rights." Branches received orders to "assemble as many of the true born Sons of Liberty as you possibly can," propose "an Association in order to form an Union of the Colonies, in Imitation of our Brethren in Connecticut, Boston &c.," and maintain correspondence with affiliates. The Sons pursued an "everlasting" colonial alliance to "not to be enslav'd, by any Power on Earth, without Opposing force to force."¹²⁷

The circular received broad acclamations and growing Sons of Liberty affiliations. A February 24 meeting in Baltimore, displaying the New York letters, sought to recruit "subscribers" and spread the movement throughout Maryland. Building from Massachusetts' example, organizers requested each county form an association and send a dozen delegates to an Annapolis gathering on March 31.¹²⁸ Within a week, Baltimore reported "the whole Province seem unanimous in prosecuting the same design."¹²⁹ Sons in New London, Connecticut, in late February advertised a "general congress" of Sons from across the colony at Hartford the last Tuesday in March.¹³⁰ Each New Jersey branch the same month appointed a five-man committee to "act in Conjunction" with neighboring areas and "be in actual Readiness on any Emergency," while Maryland established committee coordination on township, county, and colony levels.¹³¹ Colony-wide and trans-colonial organizations consolidated, creating solidarity and significant paramilitary manpower.

Organizers responded to the multiplying affiliations with great enthusiasm. "The whole Continent breaths the same patriotic Spirit with you," the Boston Sons' committee wrote to Portsmouth's on March 14, "we have the most sanguine hopes of being a united body, from South Carolina to New-Hampshire in a few Weeks," to "remain in perpetuity as a Barrier against the unconstitutional schemes of designing Ministers."¹³² Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles reported from the Sons' Newport branch two weeks later, "the Resolves of the Sons of Liberty in different provinces, pour in upon us."¹³³ Only Philadelphia, among urban centers, remained outside the Sons' alliance.

In the uncertainty, many feared the British might send soldiers to uphold the Stamp Act by force. The Sons readied to oppose them. Norfolk's took a new

¹²⁶ Gordon, *History of the Rise*, Vol. 1, 199.

¹²⁷ MHS Portsmouth Sons of Liberty Records, 119.

¹²⁸ *Maryland Gazette*, March 6, 1766; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 20, 1766; Carroll, *Dear*, Vol. 1, 391.

¹²⁹ NYHS John Lamb Papers, reel 1.

¹³⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13, 1766; *Connecticut Courant*, March 24, 1766.

¹³¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13, 1766; Maier, *Resistance*, 80.

¹³² MHS Portsmouth Sons of Liberty Records, 119.

¹³³ LC Peter Force Papers, Ezra Stiles Diary.

oath in April that should the Stamp Act “be enforced, that they will stand by each other in order to oppose it with all their might.”¹³⁴ New York wrote to Boston on April 3, asking if they should prepare a “general plan” together for such an extremity.¹³⁵ Gage complained in February, “There seems throughout the Provinces to be a Dissolution of all legal Authority,” whereby “all coercive Powers in Government are annihilated.”¹³⁶ Rebellion neared with British influence at a frightening ebb.

Uprisings threatened in the American interior as the Stamp Act controversy broadened grievances against the ruling strata. In April 1766, Dutchess and Westchester County, New York tenant farmers seized areas belonging to rich landowners and discussed marching on Manhattan to free neighbors from debt prison. Though taking the name “Sons of Liberty,” word that “hundreds of Tenants are also turned Levellers and are in arms to dispossess some and maintain others in their own, without rent or taxation” shocked New York City’s Sons, who prepared for their town’s defense. Neither side risked attack, however, with insurgent control continuing through summer. In Connecticut, too, four thousand people “signed to make an equal dividend of property there.”¹³⁷ Though outside the Sons’ network, agrarian rebels built from its growing associational culture, making British repression against any American movement still more problematic.

The Sons of Liberty movement’s ascendance only ended with news of Parliament repealing the Stamp Act. George III dismissed Grenville as prime minister in July 1765, appointing the Marquis of Rockingham, who did not defend the hated legislation once colonial opposition’s extent became clear.¹³⁸ Though the king officially assented to repeal on March 18, ships carrying official news only simultaneously arrived in Boston and Philadelphia harbors on May 19. The Sons, who had ratcheted down their activities the previous two months as intelligence from Britain gave hope of repeal, led the celebrations. To the sounds of ringing church bells and discharging cannons, Boston’s Sons participated in the “firing of Guns, drinking loyal Toasts, and other decent Expressions of Joy.” The organization undertook no reprisals with groups seeking “to demonstrate our Affection to Great-Britain.”¹³⁹ Rural residents of both sexes joined the festivities, which continued into the night with fireworks and illuminations (including respectful animations of the royal

¹³⁴ LC Peter Force Papers, “Virginia Reports to British Secretary of State,” Box VII E: 17–18.

¹³⁵ NYHS John Lamb Papers, reel 1.

¹³⁶ Gage, *Correspondence*, Vol. 1, 84.

¹³⁷ Irving Mark, *Agrarian Conflicts in Colonial New York, 1711–1775* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 131–63.

¹³⁸ Slaughter, *Independence*, 240.

¹³⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 29, 1766; *Boston Gazette*, June 2, 1766.

family) and spilled into the next day in Cambridge.¹⁴⁰ When word arrived the next day at New York, the Sons led “liberal Rejoicings” featuring banqueting, dancing, and bonfires, where “25 barrels of strong Beer, Also Rum, with Sugar, Bread, &c were given to the populace.” The group adopted and published a proclamation congratulating their allies.¹⁴¹ At Charleston, glasses rose to “all the true Sons of Liberty on the Continent,” alongside toasts to “our worthy friends in England.”¹⁴² Colonists celebrated their associational success.

Amazingly, the movement had triumphed over a few short months. One British letter to a Philadelphia merchant reported the government now sought “to promote harmony, and an agreeable intercourse between the Mother Country and her Colonies,” reversing their prior demands.¹⁴³ A London merchant related, “the Continual Account we had of the Sons of Liberty through All North America had its proper weight & Effect.” Congratulations arrived from across the empire: one Antigua merchant reported the news “rejoicing the heart of every subject of Great Britain,” bringing “immortal honor to the Americans.”¹⁴⁴ British movements soon followed the Americans’ model.

The new legislation’s details, however, occasioned less joy. A Declaratory Act accompanied repeal, preceded on Ireland’s subordination, considering the colonies “dependent upon the imperial crown and parliament of *Great Britain*,” granting British authorities unrestricted purview to make laws for the colonies.¹⁴⁵ Virginia’s Lieutenant Governor wrote in September, “the people are sour, partly occasioned by their private distresses, and partly by being spirited up by the newspapers.” Still, “a spirit of discontent” ran against what “the late indulgencies, received from their Mother Country, ought to inspire them with.”¹⁴⁶ Virginia’s House of Burgesses, unlike other assemblies, refused to thank the king for the new legislation.¹⁴⁷ Long months of opposition instilled a conspiratorial view of British politics, and many colonists refused to view restoring long-held rights as benevolent charity.

Late 1766 brought an uncertain pause rather than resolution to the imperial crisis. As Rhode Island Son of Liberty Silas Downer prophesized in a letter to

¹⁴⁰ AAS Priscilla Holyoke Diary; HBSL William Lloyd Letterbook, 362; MHS John Tudor Papers.

¹⁴¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 29, 1766.

¹⁴² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 12, 1766; Basil Williams, *The Life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (New York: Longmans, 1913), 202.

¹⁴³ LC Stephen Collins Records, MSS 16436 Vol. 5; LC Silas Deane Papers, 8B reel 11.

¹⁴⁴ NYHS John Lamb Papers, reel 1.

¹⁴⁵ *An Act for Securing the Dependency of His Majesty’s Dominions in America upon the Crown and Parliament of Great-Britain* (London, 1766); Patrick Griffin, *The Townshend Moment: The Making of Empire and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 97.

¹⁴⁶ LC Peter Force Papers, Virginia Reports to British Secretary of State, Box VII E: 17–18.

¹⁴⁷ Middlekauff, *Glorious*, 137.

New York's Sons, "What could not be brought to pass by an undisguised and open attack upon our liberties is intended to be done by secret machinations, by artifice and cunning."¹⁴⁸ Yet should a new assault on American liberties occur, a precedent for united action had been forged. As Samuel Adams wrote to a Charleston correspondent in December:

When the Colnys saw the common Danger they at the same time saw their mutual Dependence & naturally called in the Assistance of each other, & I dare say such Friendships & Connections are establish'd between them, as shall for the future deter the most virulent Enemy from making another open Attempt upon their Rights as Men & Subjects.

Adams asserted colonial liberties would now be "infring'd upon in a less observable manner."¹⁴⁹ The new model appeared too powerful for direct assault.

The Sons of Liberty model's potential became clear even to opponents. Annapolis' former mayor wrote to Lord Baltimore in England of how though the colonies had long been "Different in Religion, and Polity, of dissimilar Manners and Habitudes, all for the most part extremely tenacious of their own, clashing Interests," the "Sharpest Oppression" had brought them into a unified design. At any future crisis, the "Unruly Democratic Sprit of our Northern Brethren" would lead a "general Union" of aggrieved colonies into "Concerted schemes of revolt."¹⁵⁰ Only the wisest British governance could prevent such a course.

In the interior, where the Stamp Act remained a secondary issue, mobilizations continued. A new association in Orange County, North Carolina, in August 1766 circulated a proposal to "Let each Neighbourhood throughout the County meet together, and appoint one or more Men to attend a general Meeting . . . where there is no Liquor," to discuss "Abuses of Power" in government.¹⁵¹ Such organizations created new ways to resist British authority. Showing their own worldliness, one group even claimed, "Every one of our Enemies here are utter Enemies to WILKES, and the Cause of Liberty." Associators claimed vigilance would bring authorities "under a better and honester regulation," contesting debt enforcement, protesting settlement restrictions, and more generally resisting tax enforcement.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Rhode Island Historical Society, Sons of Liberty Papers, MSS 9005.

¹⁴⁹ Samuel Adams Papers, LOC MSS 10223 Vol. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Maryland Historical Society, Revolutionary War Collection, MS 1814; NA PRO 39/8/97, 51.

¹⁵¹ "An Impartial Relation of the First Rise and Cause of the Recent Differences in Publick Affairs, in the Province of North Carolina; and the Past Tumults and Riots That Happened in the Province," in *Some Eighteenth-Century Tracts on North Carolina*, William K. Boyd, ed. (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1927), 257–58; Marjolene Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 112.

¹⁵² A. Roger Ekirch, *Poor Carolina: Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 164, 187.

In the absence of new imperial crises, the Sons of Liberty took the guise of a commemorative organization. Though occasionally remobilizing, as in a New York confrontation with British soldiers cutting down the Sons' liberty pole in August, no active trans-colonial alliance endured.¹⁵³ On March 18, 1767, the Stamp Act repeal's first anniversary, local organizations held festivities featuring illuminations, gunfire, and banquets. In Boston, celebrations drew "as great a Concourse of People in the Streets as scarce ever was seen." Toasts that evening included to the king, "His Majesty's Ministry," Parliament, "The Extension of Traded Commerce," and "The United & Inseparable Interest of Great Britain & Her Colonies" for prosperity. Nevertheless, they asserted recent events ought to "be ever held in memory by all True Britons & Americans."¹⁵⁴ Any similar affront would likely bring a commensurate response.

Conclusion

Despite the geographic obstacles and cultural diversity of colonial America, the British legislation's ramifications encouraged colonists to forge a common political movement across a thousand miles with great intensity. While alternately building through long-standing legislative governing networks, merchant connections, consumer sociability, work solidarities, and crowd traditions, the colonists created something new: widespread, affiliated associations primed for either peaceful debate or forceful action. Warner in his influential book *Protocols of Liberty* has conceptualized American Patriots as effecting a communication revolution, bringing "decentralized and self-organized" groups under the umbrella of a common cause, yet his emphasis on the Committees of Correspondence of 1772–1775 (see Chapter 2) minimizes how the Sons of Liberty achieved much the same effect in 1765–1766.¹⁵⁵ As Sons of Liberty affiliations grew, the unified front they projected created a model for future movements to emulate, innovating a trans-regional campaign of interlocking organizations without precedent.

Through the Sons of Liberty's alliance-building, strenuous assertion, some property destruction, many threats, and yet minimal physical violence, the Stamp Act was defeated. As the colonies learnt the power of coordinated action, discontented groups across the British Empire observed and soon emulated the Sons' model. While the new American organization dissipated at the end of the Stamp Act crisis, their precedent would soon be called on again.

¹⁵³ Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 41–43.

¹⁵⁴ *Boston Evening-Post*, March 23, 1767; John Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe, Boston Merchant, 1759–1762, 1764–1779* (Boston: Clarke, 1903), 125–26.

¹⁵⁵ Warner, *Protocols*, 1–2.