**THE TOWNSHEND ACTS**

The Townshend Acts of 1767 were a series of laws which set new import taxes on British goods including paint, paper, lead, glass and tea and used revenues to maintain British troops in America and to pay the salaries of some Royal officials who were appointed to work in the American colonies.

Background Information

The Townshend Acts was one of a series of taxes that divided Great Britain and its colonies in America. Unlike the Stamp Act of 1765, the laws were not a direct tax, but a tax on imports.

The Stamp Act had been repealed due to the opposition in the colonies which include the boycott of British goods. The boycott of British goods resulted in British merchants applying pressure on the government to repeal the Stamp Act. The reaction of the merchants together with the violent reaction of the American colonist, which verged on revolution, resulted in the repeal of the hated stamp tax. The colonists were not against the law but they were strongly opposed to taxes imposed by the British parliament, complaining bitterly with the shout of "No Taxation without representation!" As the colonists celebrated their political victory, the British parliament passed the Declaratory Act. The Declaratory Act provided the British with a broad mandate to impose laws, and taxes, on the American colonies. Within a year of the passing of the Declaratory Act new trade laws were imposed on America. The new taxes, were introduced by the Townshend Acts of 1767.

Charles Townshend and the Townshend Acts of 1767

The Townshend Acts of 1767 were the idea of Charles Townshend who was one of the ministers of William Pitt. Charles Townshend, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, had the difficult role in the British government of managing finances. Charles Townshend, known as “Champagne Charlie” to his friends, believed that considerable revenue could be raised by placing duties (taxes) on wine, oil, glass, lead, painter's colors, and tea that was imported to the American colonies. Charles Townshend was careful not to impose direct taxes. He also chose to tax commodities that would not hurt the British trade but still raise enough revenue from the colonies. The Townshend Acts made common items like lead, glass, paint, paper, and tea more expensive. None of these items were produced locally and had to be imported into North America. The colonists responded by refusing to buy the products.

The Townshend Acts of 1767 regulated colonial trade by taxing items needed by the colonies. Charles Townshend introduced the series of laws, referred to as the Townshend Acts, firstly to impose import taxes on some lucrative British goods sent to America. He followed the initial Townshend Act with others to reorganize the colonial customs service and make it possible to collect the duties (taxes). He even provided that offences against the revenue laws should be tried by judges appointed directly by the king, without being submitted to a jury of any kind.

Reaction of the Colonists

1. The colonists felt the issue regarding the taxation of goods was the same as the previous taxes, leading, once again, to the cry of "No Taxation without representation!"

2. Patriots encouraged the consumption of smuggled tea as a political protest of the Townshend taxes

3. The colonist disagreed with an Act that removed the authority of the assemblies to pay the salaries of British officials. The “power of the purse” gave the assemblies the ability to effectively check royal power by withholding, or threatening to withhold, payments.

Most patriots refused to buy tea unless it had been smuggled. They believed the use of Search Warrants without the sanction of the court would be abused by British officials. Colonists were outraged because this Act gave tax collectors the unprecedented authority to search merchants’ ships & warehouses without official regulation. Search warrants, called Writs of Assistance had been used to search houses, the legality of which had been previously contested by James Otis

One of the laws in the Townshend Acts, created new Admiralty Courts in which colonial smugglers would be prosecuted without a jury. The verdicts of the Admiralty courts were to be decided solely by the judge.

The Significance of the Townshend Acts

The British had passed similar measures before the Townshend Acts with Navigation Acts and the Sugar Act. Had the Sugar Act been enforced the trade of Massachusetts and other New England colonies would have been virtually ruined. But due to the British policy of Salutary Neglect the law was not enforced and, as the taxes were not collected, no one cared whether they were legal or not. The Townshend Acts made it very clear that this tax and the other Townshend taxes were to be collected.

The Massachusetts General Court denounced the Townshend Acts in violation of the principle of no taxation without representation. The Massachusetts House of Representatives began a campaign against the Townshend Acts by sending a petition to King George asking for the repeal of the Townshend Revenue Act. In February 1768 Samuel Adams of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, drew up a circular letter (the Massachusetts Circular Letter) to the other colonial assemblies asking them to join the resistance movement and oppose the new taxes imposed by the Townshend Acts. The British government ordered the Massachusetts House of Representatives to recall the letter. The House refused and was dissolved. The other colonial assemblies were directed to take no notice of the circular letter. They refused and were dissolved.

In 1768 the new Customs Officers at Boston seized a small ship called *The Liberty,* owned by John Hancock, that was carrying a cargo of Madeira wine. *The Liberty* was seized because John Hancock had not paid the taxes on the wine.

The customs officers seized the ship and towed her under the guns of a warship which was in Boston harbor. The people of Boston could not recapture *The Liberty* but they managed to seize one of the British war-ship's boats. Bostonians carried the boat to the Common, and had a famous bonfire. John Hancock who was a wealthy patriot was charged with smuggling, but was acquitted.

British troops had been stationed at New York ever since the end of the French Indian war. In 1768, following the Liberty Affair, two regiments were ordered to leave New York to go to Boston to protect the customs officers. This action would ultimately lead to the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770.

The Virginia Resolves, 1769

The Virginia Resolves of 1769 were resolutions passed by the Virginia House of Burgesses. Parliament had asked the king to have colonists, accused of certain crimes including treason, brought to England for trial. The Virginia Resolves of 1769 asserted that:

* No colonist should to be sent to England for trial
* Only the colonists had the right to tax the colonists
* The colonists had the right to petition either by themselves or with the people of other colonies

Within a matter of months, similar sets of resolutions to the Virginia Resolves were adopted by other colonial assemblies.

The Virginia Association and the Nonimportation Agreements

The Nonimportation Agreements were a series of agreements made by the Virginia Association. The Virginia Association became the forerunner to the larger more powerful Continental Association. The Nonimportation Agreement of 1769 opposed the Townshend Acts.

The Nonimportation Agreement of 1769 was a written agreement not to use British goods upon which duties had been paid. All of the members of the Virginia House of Burgesses signed this agreement. Other colonies joined Virginia in the Nonimportation Agreement standing united against continued British taxation and trade control.

Partial Repeal of the Townshend Acts 1770

The agreement by the colonies not to use no British goods upon which duties had been paid soon effected British trade. British merchants found their trade growing smaller and smaller. They could not even collect their debts, for the colonial merchants said that trade in the colonies was so upset by the Townshend Acts that they could not sell their goods, or collect the money owing to them.

The British merchants petitioned Parliament to repeal the taxes imposed by the Townshend Acts. Parliament repealed the Townshend Acts on April 12, 1770, except the tax on tea.