The Townshend Duties of 1767

New Taxes on Lead, Paint, Paper, Glass and Tea Enrage the Colonists

One year after the repeal of the Stamp Act, King George III and Parliament attempted to tax the colonists again when they passed the Townshend Duties. The Townshend Duties required the colonists to pay taxes on imported items such as lead, paint, paper, glass and tea. The money raised from these taxes helped England pay judges, governors, tax collectors and soldiers living in the colonies.

The Townshend Duties were very unpopular and led to many protests, especially in major ports up and down the Atlantic Coast. In Boston, for example, British tax collectors were nearly killed by an angry mob when they seized a ship belonging to a popular merchant named John Hancock. The men were eventually forced to retreat to an island fortress in the middle of the harbor until they were rescued by a fleet of Royal Navy warships several weeks later (see image at right). Another way that people protested the Townshend Duties was by refusing to buy imported goods. Rather than relying on items that were shipped in from England, many colonists learned how to knit their own clothing and make their own paper. They found local spices to substitute for tea and left their houses unpainted. This eventually caused businesses in England to lose money.

In order to ensure that revenue from the Townshend Duties was collected, King George III assigned the job of enforcing the new taxes to the British Royal Navy. A small fleet of ships was created that would patrol colonial waters to prevent smuggling, assist British tax collectors and restore order in unruly ports when necessary. The ships that were most suited for this job were sloops and schooners. These vessels were perfect for patrolling in colonial waters because they could sail into the wind, chase down colonial ships at a moment’s notice and navigate shallow waters where large warships couldn’t go. In 1768, a small schooner named Sultana was purchased by the Royal Navy and added to this fleet. She would soon set sail for North America and into the growing struggle between England and the thirteen colonies.

When news of the Townshend Duties reached the port of Boston, chaos erupted throughout the city. In response, England sent this fleet of ships to ferry troops into Boston to restore order. The schooner Sultana would join this fleet in September of 1768, shortly after this engraving by Paul Revere was made.

1768 engraving by Paul Revere courtesy Winterthur Museum
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NAME: ____________________________________________ DATE: __________

DIRECTIONS: Use information from the reading to answer each of the following questions in a complete sentence.

1. What were four items taxed by the Townshend Duties?

2. How did England use the money raised from the Townshend Duties?

3. What were some ways that the colonists protested the Townshend Duties?

4. What was the role of the small fleet of ships created by the Royal Navy?

5. Why were sloops and schooners ideally suited for patrolling colonial waters?