

A comparison of the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) and the Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773)

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An examination of two documents from Eric Foner's *Voices of Freedom* reader – Vol I and their relevance to the historical point in time in American History.

The hearts of men were lifted in anger, reflecting the stirrings of rebellion at yet another taxation scheme imposed upon the British colonies of North America by Great Britain. Taxation was stirring sharp conflict between Great Britain and the British colonists of North America in the mid-18th century. The British colonists of North America lived under a quasi-self-government created in the early 1600's. Powerful men in the colonies established their own devices and alliances for the raising and spending of money. The arguments of liberty and freedom were to become the tenets of choice in their debate to defend this power. This paper will explore this argument through the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) from the House of Burgesses, and a resolution from the Sons of Liberty of New York City (1773). Their writings are tempered only by the politeness of the society of learned men, but let no one doubt that they took affront to the loss in authority and the economic impact of these decisions by Great Britain.

In comparing the two writings of similar theme from two sources displaced by both time and audience, a background of the establishment of each organization serves as an initial point of reference. The House of Burgesses was established in 1619 as a representative body to govern in a legislative assembly and was created by the Virginia Company to make conditions more amenable by encouraging English craftsman to settle in North America. The Virginia Company set up a system of self-government which was composed of an appointed governor from London, a group of six citizens appointed by the governor and an elected group of representatives primarily from the land owning wealthier citizens. The Sons of Liberty of New York was created in response to the enactment of the Stamp Act in 1765. It was composed of middle economic scale merchants who held a degree of respect from the artisans, craftsmen, and laborers within the population. This organization took the lead in enforcement of the resistance against the Stamp Act.

The audience for oratory within The House of Burgesses was primarily the wealthier, land owning class of men who were generally those elected to this House. They represented those trustees with which other land owning, hence wealthier citizens entrusted with the legislative duties of government. Proclamations and resolutions from this body found their way into the loci of public political debate, the taverns and pubs of the North American colonies. Their primary method of approaching problems was through oratory, such as that from the firebrand Patrick Henry, and written resolutions. The Sons of Liberty of New York approached problem resolution through an appeal to the artisans, craftsman, laborers, and more typically non-land owning men within the towns and urban areas. Their involvement used oratory, written proclamation, and street enforcement methods.

Both groups, The House of Burgesses, and The Sons of Liberty of New York perceived a grave threat in the continued efforts of Great Britain to impose taxation enacted by the

Parliament of Great Britain on the people of the North American British colonies, given that the British colonies of North America had no elected representatives within the British Parliament. The nature of the threat posed by both writings can be seen in passages from both writings. A passage from the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) from the House of Burgesses addresses this issue directly: “taxation of the people by themselves, or by persons chosen by themselves to represent them . . . is the only security against a burdensome taxation and the distinguishing characteristic of British Freedom . . .”¹ Some eight years later, The Sons of Liberty of New York wrote a declaration signed by many which stated, “[I]t is essential to the freedom and security of a free people, that no taxes be imposed upon them but by their own consent, or their representatives.”²

Prior to the imposition of various taxes including the Sugar Tax, the Stamp Act, The Townsend Act, and the Tea Act enacted by Parliament in Great Britain, the North American colonies had established their own laws for taxation and duties. British Parliament began usurping what was believed in the colonies to be their own power of taxation, essentially removing the power of taxation by a representative government to that of the colonizing power. As witness to these concerns, the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) includes in the premise, “[W]hereas, the Honorable House of Commons of England, have of late draw[n] into question how far the General Assembly of this colony hath power to enact laws for laying of taxes and imposing duties payable by the people of this, his Majesty’s most ancient colony; . . .”³, and as a resolution “[R]esolved, that his Majesty’s liege people of this ancient colony have enjoyed the right of being thus governed by their own Assembly in the article of taxes and internal police, and that the same never been forfeited . . .”⁴ The Sons of Liberty of New York continue this theme of deference in their Association document with “[A]nd thus they who, from time immemorial, have exercised the right of giving to, or withholding from the crown, their aids and subsidies, according to their *own free will and pleasure*, signified by their representatives in Parliament, do, by the Act in question, deny us, their brethren in America, the enjoyment of the same right.”⁵ A critical point to note regarding the people of the British Colonies of North America is that they regarded themselves as British, no less than those who domiciled in Great Britain. They emulated the social order and styles as communication with Britain allowed. They were British in their hearts, displaced only by time and distance from Great Britain itself. They felt they were deserving of all the rights and privileges granted to the natural born citizens of Great Britain. Passages within both writings allude to this sense of kinship felt by the colonist of

¹ Patrick Henry, “Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner (NY: Norton, 2010) P. 83

² Sons of Liberty of New York City, “Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner (NY: Norton, 2010), P. 87

³ Patrick Henry, “Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 83

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sons of Liberty of New York City, “Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 88

North America. From The House of Burgesses we have “[R]esolved, that the first adventurers, settlers of this his Majesty’s colony and dominion of Virginia, brought with them and transmitted to their posterity, and all other his Majesty’s colony, all the privileges and immunities that have at any time been held, enjoyed, and possessed by the people of Great Britain. Resolved, that by two royal charters granted by King James the first, the colonist aforesaid are declared and entitled to all privileges and immunities of natural born subjects, to all intents and purposes as if they had been abiding and born within the realm of England.”⁶ From the Sons of Liberty of New York we have “... do by the Act in question, deny us, their brethren in America, the enjoyment of the same right. As this denial, and the execution of that Act, involves our slavery, and would sap the foundation of our freedom, whereby we should become slaves to our brethren and fellow subjects, born to no greater stock of freedom than the Americans.”⁷

Both writings contain strong inferences to the penalties of the imposition of the aforementioned taxation. The Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) end with “[R]esolved, that any person who shall, by speaking or writing, assert or maintain that any person or persons other than the General Assembly of this colony, have any right or power to impose or lay any taxation on the people here, shall be deemed an enemy to his Majesty’s colony.”⁸ The Sons of Liberty of New York write in three separate references by resolution that “he shall be deemed an enemy to the liberties of America”⁹ in addressing the aiding, or assisting the landing of tea from the sea, the storing of tea, the distribution of tea, and the selling or buying of tea while it was subject to the duties imposed by the Parliament of Great Britain.

The resolutions proposed by Patrick Henry in the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) totaled seven. Four were adopted and this paper addresses the three which were not adopted. These three were considered too radical to adopt. They do show however, the discontent growing within the assemblies controlled by the land holding elites regarding the removal of the authority to tax and spend as they saw fit. The Sons of Liberty of New York Association document produced eight years later mirror the ideas expressed by the Virginia Resolutions bringing the concepts expressed closer to the street level of the current population. While the Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765) are global in nature, “shall be deemed an enemy to his Majesty’s colony”¹⁰, the Sons of Liberty of New York Association document includes “... that whoever shall transgress any of these resolutions, we will not deal with, or

⁶ Patrick Henry, “Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 83

⁷ Sons of Liberty of New York City, “Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 88

⁸ Patrick Henry, “Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 84

⁹ Sons of Liberty of New York City, “Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 89, 90

¹⁰ Patrick Henry, “Virginia Resolutions on the Stamp Act (1765),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 84

employ, or have any connection with him”¹¹ This difference within the documents addresses the scope of the targets of influence within each organization. The House of Burgesses target the intellectuals, and the administration of both continents, where the Sons of Liberty of New York strike at the heart of the population with enforcement on the local level to insure that the taxes and duties are not collected. One seeks change by intellectual argument, while the other seeks change by local enforcement making the collection of duties a moot point.

The continued attempts at enacting tax policy and duties from Great Britain were foreign in concept to these colonists. Great Britain was changing the rules, their own rules, of the game. Britain needed money and saw this taxation as a rightful extension of its power and a necessary component of the extension of mercantilism. The colonist contested the imposition of this expression of power and desired to limit this outside taxation for economic reasons, along with a growing sense of independence from Great Britain particularly as more and more tax schemes are introduced by Great Britain. Both organizations, The House of Burgesses, and The Sons of Liberty of New York sought to express this discontent under Great Britain’s policy by raising intellectual arguments and increasing the bar of rhetoric for a continuation of these policies. The Sons of Liberty of New York added the component of street enforcement. This war of words and actions taking place on the streets would escalate and in less than one and a half years would break out into warfare that would involve the North American colonist and Great Britain with many of the European powers joining in to varying degrees with the colonist of North America.

¹¹ Sons of Liberty of New York City, “Association of the New York Sons of Liberty (1773),” *Voices of Freedom*, ed. by Eric Foner, P. 90