

FEATURES

Did the Newburyport Tea Party Predate the Boston Tea Party?

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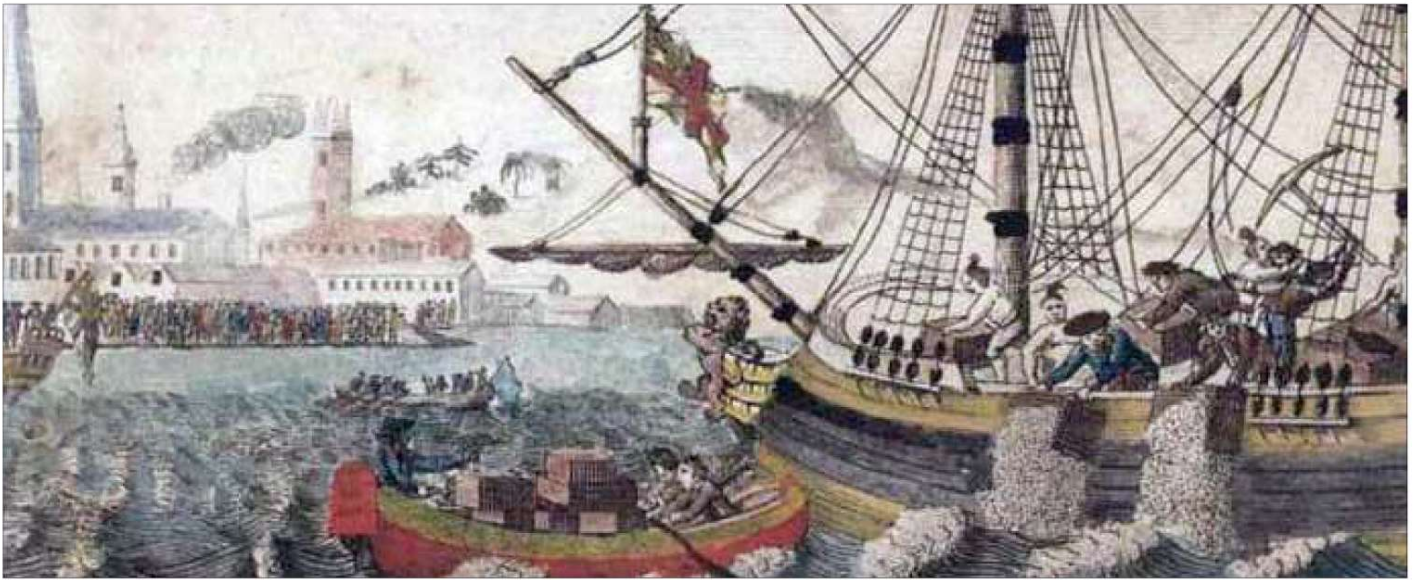


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The Boston Tea Party on December 16 1773, usually regarded as the first tea party rebellion, is the most famous political protest in the US history, as the Sons of Liberty dumped tea in the water to oppose the British Tea Tax. This political upheaval nettles the British government, which leads to the Intolerable Acts and eventually the American Revolution. However, since 2014 is the 250th anniversary of Newburyport, many sources start to recount Newburyport's history and one of the most astounding claims is that the first tea party rebellion occurred in Newburyport instead of Boston. According to Newburyport—Stories from the Waterside by Liz Nelson, the first tea party rebellion occurred in Newburyport "three days before" the famous Boston tea party as a band of patriots led by Eleazer Johnson "seized tea and burned it." If the Newburyport tea party had actually predated the one in Boston, the Newburyport tea party would be the first "tea party" protest against the British tax levied on tea. However, since nearly all Newburyporters were devoted to assist the Boston Tea Party in December 1773 and Eleazer Johnson, the leader of the movement, was not politically active at that time, it is therefore likely that the Newburyport tea party happened after the Boston tea party.

Claims that the Newburyport Tea Party is the first Tea Party are ambiguous and biased. Most of these claims draw their evidence from the plaque in Market Square, which is a secondary source. The plaque is comprised of ambiguous diction such as "the people" instead of the names of the participants. Also, the plaque does not contain a specific date for the event and the only source of information, "having heard the story from eye witnesses," is unreliable. That the first tea party occurred in Newburyport was also claimed by the Greater Newburyport Chamber of Commerce & Industry and the Clif-

ford Properties Inc. However, since these associations profit more from a glorified image of Newburyport, their claims are biased and thus untrustworthy.

Moreover, Newburyporters closely followed the brewing conflict in Boston before the Boston Tea Party, and never did records of their town meetings mention any tea party in Newburyport. According to historian Labaree in Patriots and Partisans—The Merchants of Newburyport, throughout the fall of 1773, Newburyport was stressed by the imminent ship Dartmouth that carried tea and was "in anticipation of the first shipments of tea sent under the new arrangement." As stated in The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet Vol. 1 No. 1 on December 4 1773, a "notification was posted up in all parts of the town" and the town proposed to fight against the landing of tea with "a united and forceful resistance." According to Labaree, on December 9 the town "selected a committee of prominent citizens" to assist the protest in Boston. Per town record, the committee stated that "[we] are Determined to give them all the Assistance in our power even at the Risque of our Lives & Fortunes." The diction of the plural "our Lives & Fortunes" and "all the Assistance" emphasizes that the townsmen, including radicals and moderates, were determined to resist the landing of tea in Boston. On December 15, 1773, according to historian John Currier, Newburyport held a town meeting "to consider the serious condition of public affairs." Per town records, the meeting passed the vote that the town would assist the patriots in Boston "with utmost Endeavors." According to Labaree, on December 20 1773, after the news of the Boston Tea Party reached Newburyport, "some citizens thought the town should reaffirm its vote of the previous week" and the town "voted unanimously to address the Boston committee in its strongest language yet."

History of Newburyport by John Currier, Patriots and Partisans The Merchants of Newburyport and The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet are reliable sources since they are all factual recordings of the events that happened in Newburyport. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the Newburyport Tea Party happened three days before the Boston Tea Party with neither record in the town's history nor the county's Newspaper.

Besides the town's wholehearted commitment in the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, the alleged leader of the Newburyport Tea Party Eleazer Johnson was not politically active then, sharply contrasting his role of leading "a band of patriots" as described by Nelson. In December 1772, according to Currier, Samuel Adams facilitated the formation of a correspondence committee in Boston to "maintain the political rights and privileges of the province." The milieu of protest sprawled to Newburyport as a committee of Newburyport was established per town records, "consisting of Capt. Patrick Tracy, Mr. Jonathan Jackson, Mr. Benjamin Greenleaf..." Some members listed above were directly related to the custom and shipbuilding industry, such as Capt. James Hudson, while other members were from a plethora of diverse backgrounds such as the merchant Nathaniel Carter and the surgeon John Prague. Despite the variety of professions, all were willing to protest the British taxation. However, the claim that the shipbuilder Eleazer Johnson, who was not a member of the town's political committee at that time, led an event as significant as the first "tea party" rebellion in the United States history was unreliable. According to Currier, the town also convened to discuss the public affairs after the Boston Tea Party on December 16. If the Newburyport Tea Party had preceded the Boston Tea Party, Eleazer Johnson would be politically prominent

at that time due to his supposed leading role in the Newburyport Tea Party and would therefore be invited to attend the assembly. However, Eleazer Johnson was absent from the congregation and did not have a solid historical record.

It is therefore likely that the Newburyport Tea Party happened after the Boston Tea Party. A communication "dated Newburyport, January 24, 1774," per historian John Currier and the Essex Gazette, claimed:

A large quantity of the forementioned pernicious stuff was consumed here last week; in order to imitate at the same time both Boston and Charlestown. It was done by Fire and Water; and so general was the spirit, that all ranks and degrees of people, high and low, rich and poor, Whig and Tory, agreed in the affair;

This statement shows that the Newburyport Tea Party, indeed, was not the first tea party, as it is after "Boston and Charlestown." "Fire" corroborates that the tea "went to flames," as Nelson described. "Water" is possibly an unrecorded method of destroying tea due to the scale of the event. Besides, the event involved "all ranks and degrees of people," which flawlessly accounts for how the largely unknown Eleazer Johnson led the Newburyport Tea Party. Labaree also points out that even though the Newburyport Tea Party was "perfectly plausible," it happened around 1774-1775, which is a later date than the Boston Tea Party's December 1773.

Even though the Newburyport Tea Party was an emblem of the struggle against oppression before the American Revolution, it was not the first tea party as it followed Boston's December 16, 1773 tea party.