

## **The Image of the Indian on the Eve of American Independence**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

Few events of the American revolutionary era have been fixed on the nation's popular memory like the Boston Tea Party. Nearly everyone learned in high school history class that the patriots who dumped tea in Boston Harbor dressed as American Indians. The tea dumpers did not choose their symbol arbitrarily. As the imported tea symbolized British tyranny and taxation, so the image of the Indian, and the Mohawk disguise, represented an emerging American identity and a voice for liberty in a new land. The image of the Indian was figured into tea-dumpers' disguises not only in Boston, but also in cities up and down the coast. The tea parties were not spur-of-the-moment pranks, but the result of a decade of colonial frustration with British authority. Likewise, the Mohawk symbol was not picked at random. It was used as a revolutionary symbol, countering the tea tax. The image of the Indian became synonymous with American independence.

The image of the Indian, particularly the Mohawk, also appears at about the same time, in the same context, in revolutionary songs, slogans and engravings. Paul Revere, whose "Midnight Rides" became legend in the hands of Longfellow, played a crucial role in forging this sense of identity, contributing to the revolutionary cause a set of remarkable engravings that cast as America's first national symbol an American Indian woman.

Colonists formed the Sons of Liberty and participated in the Stamp Act Congress that met in New York City in the fall of 1765. By the spring of 1766, the Sons of Liberty had an office in New York and sent their correspondence throughout the different Provinces." As the unrest grew and the British began to reinforce the troops in New York City, the British observed that the New York Sons of Liberty had sent belts of wampum to the 6 Indian nations to intercept the British troops on their march to New York City. A major cause of this organized rebellion, and the escalating British response, was the Stamp Act, one of a number of measures imposed to help Britain pay the enormous debts from the Seven Years' War, which had ended in 1763. An engraving by Paul Revere in 1765 portrays the Stamp Act as a monster being attacked by America's "free born sons."

As a result of the war, Great Britain's national debt had doubled to 140 million Pounds Sterling. As they had done at Albany in 1754, the colonists were once more consulting with the Iroquois about unity and military aid. According to his biographer, John Rutledge of South Carolina at the age of 26 was exposed to Iroquois political theory while he was attending the Stamp Act Congress in the fall of 1765. At the Constitutional Convention, Rutledge would recall his experience with the Iroquois.

In the eyes of the rebellious American colonists, the Iroquois symbolized autonomy and a new American identity. These ideas and symbols of the Iroquois would become pervasive as the revolution approached. The colonists used the American Indian as a national symbol in their earliest protests of war taxes. In an engraving titled "The Great Financier, or British Economy for the Years 1763, 1764 and 1765," George Grenville, first Lord of the Admiralty, holds a

balance, while a subordinate loads it with rubbish. Lord William Pitt, the prime minister, leans on a crutch at one side as an Indian, representing the colonies, groans, on one knee, under the burden of royal taxes. In this early engraving, America is shown enduring the load, but within a dozen years, the same symbol would assume a more aggressive stance, pointing arrows on taut bows at the hearts of their oppressors, a prelude to armed insurrection by the colonists themselves.

There had been a brief glimpse of peace in 1766, however, after moderate advisors to King George III had prevailed on him to repeal the Stamp Act. Bostonians took the repeal as a victory, and Revere designed an obelisk to commemorate it. This enormous structure made of oiled paper was large enough to carry three hundred lanterns inside. Here, for the first time, he used the figure of an Indian as a patriotic symbol. The first of four panels depicts an oppressed American; the Indian, dejected, lies under a pine tree as his oppressors approach him -- the prime minister (carrying a chain) and Lord Bute (caricatured as a flying devil in tartan with the Stamp Act in his claw) -- trying to crowd out the angel of liberty.

On the second panel of the obelisk, as Liberty raises her trumpet, the victorious Indian, who has already risen to one knee, points over his shoulder to the retreating British lords, the victims of a cloudburst. On the third panel, an eagle (another national symbol adopted from Native American cultures) feeds her young atop yet another borrowed symbol, the Liberty Tree (the Great White Pine of the Iroquois), as the angel looks on and blesses the scene. The final panel finds King George III at last introducing America (the Indian figure) to the Goddess of Liberty.

Paul Revere had been one of the earliest Sons of Liberty, a clandestine society that agitated against the British. The Boston Tea Party was only one of its many acts of agitation, propaganda, and creative political mischief that used American Indian imagery as a counterpoint to British tyranny. Some of the Sons of Liberty's units named themselves after native peoples before they dressed as Mohawks at the tea party. The "Mohawk River Indians" was the most notable. Within the Sons of Liberty, John Pulling was called "a bully of the Mohawk Tribe" by an unnamed British satirist.

For several years before the tea party, colonial propagandists had admonished Americans to substitute "Indian tea" for the British variety imported by the East India Company. Also called Labrador or Hyperion Tea, "Indian tea" was made from the red-root bush that grew profusely in swamps near many New England Rivers. Boosters of "Indian tea" invented stories to spur its consumption. One such fable had it that "Indian tea" had become so popular in France that the East India Company was lobbying to have its importation banned.

The *Gaspee* was commanded by an unpopular captain who had avidly pursued smugglers off the coast of New England. On June 9, 1772, the ship ran aground near Providence, Rhode Island. A group of local men and boys responded to the call of a drum that evening in Providence. After some discussion, they allegedly dressed up as American Indians and rowed out to the British ship and burned it as a protest of British authority. Dressing as Indians became a way to assert a new identity that was emerging as the colonists became more restive

under British rule. After the burning of the *Gaspee*, committees of correspondence were regularized in most of the colonies by 1773. The purpose of the committees was to promote unity. An article in a Rhode Island newspaper summed up the importance of unity among the colonists in 1773:

The union of the colonies which is now taking place is big with the most important advantage to this continent. From this union will result our security from all foreign enemies; for none will dare to invade us against the combined force of these colonies, nor will a British Parliament dare to attack our liberties, when we are united to defend them. . . . In this union every colony will feel the strength of the whole; for if one is invaded all will unite their wisdom and power in her defense. In this way the weakest will become strong, and America will soon be the glory of the world, and the terror of the wicked oppressors among nations.

In Charlestown and New York, as well as Philadelphia and Boston, committees of "Mohawks" mobilized to meet the incoming tea. Secret committees of correspondence coordinated their efforts using special riders on horseback, of which Paul Revere would become the best known. In New York City, a broadside appeared signed "THE MOHAWKS," warning anyone who aided in the landing of British tea to expect "an unwelcome visit, in which they shall be treated as they deserve." In New York, the patriots backed down, not wanting to risk mauling by General Gage and two divisions of Redcoat regulars under his command. In Charlestown, both sides decided that their rhetoric had outgrown the issue. The "Mohawks" stayed inside, as did the tea, which was quietly padlocked in wharf side warehouses by the agents, who hoped to sell it when the issue cooled. It never did.

Boston's patriots were not known for their civility in the face of British authority, and it was Boston's "Mohawks" who sparked physical confrontation over the tea tax the length of the seaboard. On November 3, 1773, about one thousand people met around Boston's Liberty Tree to condemn the Tea Act. After that meeting, protestors marched to the waterfront and presented East India Company agents with letters of resignation, complete except for their signatures. When the agents refused to resign, several other meetings were held. The last one, in and near the Old South Church, rallied roughly 5,000 people, almost a quarter of Boston's population at that time, until then the largest public gathering in American history.

In early December, handbills signed "A Ranger" warned that if the Redcoats tried to put down Boston's protests by force, they would be met with the same tactics that the French and their Indian allies had used to defeat General Braddock twenty years earlier: "We can *bush fight* them and cut off their officers very easily, and in this way we can subdue them with very little loss." Another handbill was titled "Mohawk Tea Proclamation," purportedly the work of "Abrant Kanakartophqua, chief sachem of the Mohawks, King of the Six Nations and Lord of all Their Castles." The broadside asserted that tea is "an Indian plant . . . and of right belongs to Indians of every land and tribe." It urged "Indians" to abstain from the "ruinous Liquor Rum, which they [the British] have poured down our throats, to steal away our Brains." The "Mohawk Tea Proclamation" concluded that British tea should be "poured into the Lakes," and that any true American should be able to break addictions to European beverages in favor of pure, cold

American water. On Monday, December 13, the people of Boston learned that the Philadelphia tea agents had resigned. By the time 5,000 patriots gathered at Old South Church the following Thursday, they were ready for action. It was said that the tea was being sold for less in the Colonies than in England. Who, then, was the first to "dump" tea?

After the last of the tea had been dumped, the "Mohawks" marched off the three ships single file, passing Admiral Montague, who was spending the night with a friend at the foot of Griffin's Wharf. "Well, boys," Admiral Montague shouted from a window, "You have had a fine, pleasant evening for your Indian caper, haven't you? But mind, you have got to pay the fiddler yet!" "Never mind," growled Lendall Pitts, one of the "Mohawks," as he waved his "tomahawk" at the admiral. "Never mind, squire, just come down here, if you please, and we'll settle the bill in two minutes!" Admiral Montague then yanked the window shade shut.

Within hours, Paul Revere had stripped off his Mohawk disguise and begun the first of his "Midnight Rides," carrying news of the Boston Tea Party to other cities: Springfield, Hartford, New Haven, New York City, and Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, on December 27, more than 8,000 people gathered at the State House to hear Revere, including one unwilling participant: a certain Captain Ayres, captured as he guided the tea-ship Polly up the Delaware River, under cover of darkness. The captain seemed suitably impressed as he was guided by a group of "American Braves" through a crowd that comprised a quarter of Philadelphia's population, most of whom loudly promised another tea party on Ayres' ship if he tried to land any British tea. The next day Ayres sailed south, back to England, with 598 chests of tea still on board.

Throughout the colonies, patriots openly agitated to shut down the tea trade. A peddler passing through Shrewsbury was forced by "Indians" to toss his tea onto a hastily built bonfire. In Lyme, Connecticut, another itinerant trader lost 100 pounds of tea the same way. In March, 1774, the brig Fortune arrived in Boston Harbor with 28 tea chests on board. The crew expressed astonishment at discovery of the small cargo, and agreed to return it to England, but a customs collector named Harrison ordered the tea unloaded. The next evening, the "Mohawks" climbed on board and dumped all of it.

Between the Boston Tea Party and his most famous "Midnight Ride" on April 18, 1775, Paul Revere created a remarkable series of engravings which carried messages akin to modern political cartoons. The engravings were meant to galvanize public opinion against the British. Many of them used the Indian (usually a woman) as a symbol of independent American identity, much as the "Mohawk" disguise had been used in the Tea Party, which Revere also helped plan and execute.

In addition to his engravings, Revere also contributed the logotype of the *Royal American Magazine*, showing an Indian figure, representing America, offering a calumet (an American Indian pipe) to the genius of knowledge, a figure out of European mythology -- a graphic illustration of the colonists' awareness that America and its native people had something to teach the Old World. Revere's engravings which used an Indian woman as a patriotic symbol often were sharply political. One of them, titled "The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the

Bitter Draught," portrays the Indian woman being held down by British officials, forced to drink "the vile Bohea." Lord Mansfield, in a wig and judicial robe, holds America down as Lord North, with the Port Act in his pocket, pours the tea down her throat. Lord Sandwich occupies his time peering under "America's" skirt as Lord Bute stands by with a sword inscribed "Military Law." The bystanders (Spain and France) consider aid for the colonies. In the background, Boston's skyline is labeled "cannonaded;" a petition of grievances lies shredded in the foreground, symbolic of the British government's failure to provide justice for America. This engraving, published in the *Royal American Magazine's* June, 1774 edition, was copied from a similar work in England's *London Magazine* two months earlier.

In 1775, as Revere was creating his engravings, another symbol, "The Pine Tree Flag" became one of the first flags of the United States. The same tree had been used as a national symbol for centuries by the Iroquois, and several Indian confederacies in the Northeast, around Boston. James Wilson used "Iroquois Chain Imagery" in early 1775 when he stated that a "chain of freedom has been formed . . . to preserve the greatest of human blessings . . . liberty."

An anonymous engraving created at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, in 1776, pits "The Female Combatants," an English woman in an enormous beehive hairdo, against America, an Indian woman. The English woman says: "I'll force you to Obedience, you Rebellious Slut," to which America replies: "Liberty, Liberty forever, Mother, while I exist." The revolutionary Americans adapted the symbol as an icon of an emerging national identity and the image of the Indian was for ever identified with the era of American independence.

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