The Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?

Supporting Questions

1. Why were the colonists upset before the Tea Party and what actions had they already taken to try and resolve their problems with Great Britain?
2. What actually happened at the Tea Party on December 16, 1773?
3. Was Great Britain’s reaction to the Tea Party justified?
# 8th Grade American Revolution Inquiry

## Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?

### Kentucky Key Ideas & Enduring Understanding

KY Academic Expectations 2.20: Students understand, analyze, and interpret historical events, conditions, trends, and issues to develop historical perspective. **Enduring Understanding:** Explain how the ideals of equality and personal liberty that developed during the colonial period were motivations for the American Revolution and proved instrumental in forging a new nation.

### Staging the Question

Label a series of modern photographs as examples of “activism” or “vandalism” or “both”. Use this discussion to make an initial judgment about the Boston Tea Party.

### Supporting Question 1

Why were the colonists upset and what actions had they already taken to resolve their problems with Great Britain?

### Formative Performance Task

Create a T-Chart listing the colonists’ grievances and the steps they had taken before the night of December 16, 1773.

### Featured Sources

- **Source A:** Summary of the Boston Tea Party from the DPLA website.
- **Source B:** A Petition to the selectmen of Boston for the resignation of the tea consignees, Nov. 17, 1773.
- **Source C:** An excerpt from *Tea Leaves*, an 1884 collection of letters and documents.

### Supporting Question 2

What actually happened at the Tea Party on December 16, 1773?

### Formative Performance Task

Draw a storyboard of the events that happened on December 16, 1773.

### Featured Sources

- **Source A:** An excerpt from *Traits of the Tea Party*, a memoir of George Hewes, a Tea Party participant, 1835.
- **Source B:** A Broadside from 1876, reproducing a postscript to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from Dec. 24, 1773, about the destruction of tea in Boston.

### Supporting Question 3

Was Great Britain’s reaction to the Tea Party justified?

### Formative Performance Task

Develop a claim supported by evidence defending or condemning Britain’s treatment of the colonists after the Tea Party.

### Featured Sources

- **Source A:** A notice from Boston announcing the British law blocking Boston Harbor until the East India Company was compensated for its lost tea, 1774.
- **Source B:** A cartoon titled “Bostonians in Distress” published in London, 1774.

### Summative Performance Task

**ARGUMENT** Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that addresses the compelling question, using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views.

**EXTENSION** Research a present-day social activist group and share the list of their grievances, the actions they have taken, and the response of the government. During a class discussion, determine whether they are activists, vandals, or both.

### Taking Informed Action

**UNDERSTAND** Identify an example of social injustice in the school or community (racism, poverty, destruction of the environment, access to quality health care, etc.).

**ASSESS** Create a list of possible responses to the issue of your choice that are examples of activism.

**ACT** Choose one of the options and implement it as an individual, a small group, or a class project.
Overview

Inquiry Description

The goal of this inquiry is to help students analyze a pivotal event within the American Revolution. Nearly every American student is familiar with the actions of the Sons of Liberty, yet this inquiry sheds light on the motivations for and consequences of The Boston Tea Party, a turning point in Colonial-British relations. Students look at the grievances of American colonists prior to 1773, and then examine their choice of action, as well as the British response. This inquiry invites students to use multiple perspectives to assess historic and modern-day cries for justice and why revolutionaries often break laws to further their cause. This analysis and application is key to helping students engage in what it means to think and act like historians.

NOTE: This inquiry is expected to take five to seven 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question "Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?" students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument with evidence while acknowledging competing perspectives.

Staging the Compelling Question

The compelling question could be staged by having students label various images as examples of "activism," "vandalism," or "both." Teachers could begin by displaying and briefly discussing the meanings of the terms "activism" and "vandalism," and then have students assess four separate modern-day images in a whole-group or small-group setting. Once students have labeled and discussed the images, the teacher could then present four additional images, each a "zoomed-in" portion of a lithograph of The Boston Tea Party. Students then work to label the Tea Party images and present their opinions to the class.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—"Why were the colonists upset and what actions had they already taken to resolve their problems with Great Britain?"—establishes the political climate and setting leading up to the Boston Tea Party. This first
formative performance task asks students to create a T-Chart listing the colonists’ grievances and the steps they had taken before the night of December 16, 1773. Featured Source A, a summary of the Boston Tea Party from the Digital Public Libraries of America website, is significant in providing concise details of the Tea Party before, during, and after the event. Featured Source B, “A Petition to the selectmen of Boston for the resignation of the tea consignees, Nov. 17, 1773,” is significant in presenting an act of peaceful protest made by the colonists prior to the Tea Party. Finally, Featured Source C, an excerpt from Tea Leaves, lists measures taken by the colonists to try and avoid conflict with Britain.

**Supporting Question 2**

The second supporting question—“What actually happened at the Tea Party on December 16, 1773?”—requires students to examine the events of the entire day, not just the few hours when the tea was tossed into the harbor. The first featured source is an excerpt from Traits of the Tea Party, a memoir of George Hewes, a Tea Party participant, in 1835. This unique first-hand account provides a snapshot of events while onboard a boat during the Tea Party, as well as meetings held among colonists prior to the night’s actions. The second featured source is an annotated broadside from 1876, reproducing a postscript to the Pennsylvania Gazette from Dec. 24, 1773, about the destruction of tea in Boston. It, too, sheds light on the attempts of the colonists to resolve the matter peacefully before the decision was made to dump the tea. After reading the two essays, the formative performance task asks students to draw a storyboard of the events that occurred over the course of the entire day on December 16, 1773.

**Supporting Question 3**

The third supporting question—“Was Great Britain’s reaction to the Tea Party justified?”—builds on students’ understanding of the colonists’ perspective and asks them to consider that of Great Britain. Featured Source A, “A notice from Boston announcing the British law blocking Boston Harbor until the East India Company was compensated for its lost tea, 1774,” details the penalties laid upon the colonists in response to the Tea Party. Featured Source B, a political cartoon published a year later, offers a glimpse of the colonists’ reactions to the penalties. Therefore, students examine examples of both fact and opinion leading up to the formative performance task, which asks them to develop a claim supported by evidence defending or condemning Britain’s treatment of the colonists after the Tea Party.

**Summative Performance Task**

At this point in the inquiry, students have created a T-Chart listing the colonists' grievances and actions prior to the Tea Party, drawn a storyboard of the events on Dec. 16, 1773, and developed a claim supporting or condemning Britain’s response. Students should be able to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument.
responding to the compelling question “Boston Tea Party: Activism or Vandalism?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster, or essay.

Students’ arguments likely will vary, but could include any of the following:

- The Boston Tea party is an example of activism. Colonists had tried to resolve their grievances multiple times and with various methods to no avail. It was this act of protest that finally got the attention of the British.
- The Boston Tea party is an example of vandalism because the British government had made their position clear through multiple channels and the Colonists just didn’t like their answer.
- The Boston Tea party is both an act of vandalism and activism because the colonists were attempting to take action in opposition to the British taxes, yet they chose to deliberately destroy property in the process.

Students could extend their study of the debate over whether or not the Boston Tea Party was an example of activism or vandalism by researching a present-day activist group. Using their arguments as a foundation, students could analyze the grievances of the present-day group, examine their actions, and make a claim as to whether their acts of opposition are examples of activism, vandalism, or both.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by drawing on their analysis of the colonists' actions. They demonstrate that they understand by identifying an example of injustice in their school or community. They show their ability to assess by creating a list of possible responses to the issue of their choice that are examples of activism. Finally, they act by choosing one of the options and implement it as an individual, small group, or part of a class project.
Staging the Compelling Question

**Featured Source**
Photos of graffiti and acts of protest; an illustration depicting the Boston Tea Party, 1881 (various viewpoints) from the DPLA website https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1190.

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**Image 1**: Graffiti on the side of a wall in New York City.

http://streetartnyc.org/blog/2016/02/21/octogenarian-photographer-allan-ludwig-aka-elsisha-cook-jr-on-soho-street-art-graffiti-david-bowie-and-more/

**Image 2**: Environmental protesters in Badung, Sept. 28, 2012


**Image 3**: Protestors throwing molasses on the ground outside of a petroleum corporation, December, 2011.

http://art.350.org/tate-may-not-renew-bp-sponsorship-deal-after-environmental-protests/

**Image 4**: 30 Greenpeace protestors pour non-toxic, washable yellow paint around L’Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France to promote clean energy, Dec. 11, 2015.

http://insideclimatenews.org/content/greenpeace-activists-yellow-paint-arc-de-triomphe-climate-un
Image 1: "An Illustration Depicting the Boston Tea Party, 1881" (isolated view)
https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1190

Image 2: "An Illustration Depicting the Boston Tea Party, 1881" (isolated view)
https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1190

Image 3: "An Illustration Depicting the Boston Tea Party, 1881" (isolated view)
https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1190

Image 4: "An Illustration Depicting the Boston Tea Party, 1881" (isolated view)
https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1190
Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**


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**Boston Tea Party Summary**

On December 16, 1773, over one hundred American colonists dressed as Native Americans boarded three merchant ships in Boston Harbor and dumped 342 chests of tea (valued at approximately $1.7 million in today’s currency) into the water. The tea belonged to the British East India Company, which had been granted a monopoly over tea imports into the colonies by the Tea Act of May 1773. This monopoly let the company undercut colonial merchants’ prices on untaxed tea, forcing colonists who bought the cheaper product to recognize a British tax. Three ships loaded with tea, the *Dartmouth*, the *Eleanor*, and the *Beaver*, had arrived in Boston between November 28 and December 15. Colonists initially insisted that the tea be returned to England, but the colonial governor of Massachusetts and the East India Company’s consignees—officials empowered to sell and collect taxes on the tea—refused.

In response, the Sons of Liberty organized a mass meeting of thousands at Boston’s Old South Meeting House. When final word came that the tea ships would not be allowed to return to England, the Sons of Liberty set in motion a secret plan to destroy the tea. A group of colonists disguised in Native American attire headed from the meeting to Griffin’s Wharf, where the tea ships were moored. Many hundreds more followed to watch the destruction of the tea.

When word got back to England about what the Bostonians had done, British officials punished the rebellious Massachusetts colonists by passing a series of laws that became known as the “Intolerable Acts,” further increasing tensions between Britain and the American colonists. The destruction of the tea, which came to be known as the Boston Tea Party, was a crucial turning point in the escalation of the American Revolution and became a powerful symbol of American protest and independence.

*Published by Samantha Gibson, Digital Public Libraries of America, https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sets/the-boston-tea-party*
The consignees were the officials appointed to oversee the sale of tea and the collection of the taxes on behalf of the British East India Company. Richard Clarke, a Boston merchant, was one of the consignees working on behalf of the tea company.

Transcript:

The Selectmen of the Town of Boston
Boston, Nov. 17th 1773

Gent[lem]en.
Whereas at the late meeting of the Town their Committee applied to the Messr. Richard Clark & c. supposed consignees of Teas to be exported by the East India Comp[any] to this Port, who then declined giving satisfaction to the Town who requested their resignation of s[ai]d [courus?] ; a? assigning for reason that they were not sufficiently informed upon what terms the Teas would come out on -- The Town being now justly highly allarm[e]d [sic], with the hourly reputation of the arrival of said Teas, & apprehending that said Consignees are now thoroughly apprised of the conditions upon which the India Comp[any] are exporting this detestable commodity in to America we the subscribers request that the Town may as soon as possible, be called together to consult whether further application shall be made to s[ai]d Consignees, or otherwise to act or the Town shall think proper on the present dangerous & allarming [sic] exigence.

Will Powell
Tho[ma]s Hand? Peck
James Ivers
Joseph Warren
M[???]? or W [???] Doum?
John Browne?
Moses Gill
Eleazer Johnson
Thomas Lee
Jos[seph] Henderson
William Foster
Tho[mas] Walley
John Langdon
Peter Boyers
John Sweetner Jr.
Nat Barber
Nath[aniel] Appleton
Joseph P. Palmer
Steph[en] Bruce
James Swan
John Winthrop Jr.
John Marston
Josha Pice
Nathan Spear
Bossenger Foster

To view the original document, visit https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1185
Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**

**Source C:** An excerpt from *Tea Leaves*, an 1884 collection of letters and documents.

Gentlemen,

Your tea is destroyed, which was brought in three ships, Captains Bruce, Hall, and Coffin, and the brig with tea is cast away. *Every possible means has been used to send it home safe again to you, but the tea consignees would not send it; then, application was made to the commissioners of the customs to clear out the vessel – they would not do it, then to the Governor to grant a pass*, which he refused, and finally the people [of Boston] were obliged to destroy it...or else, by an unlawful unrighteous Act, imposing a duty [tax] on this tea would have destroyed them [the people of Boston]...

*The full version of this document is available at [https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1194](https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1194).*

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### Formative Task: T-Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grievances</th>
<th>Steps Taken</th>
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From *Traits of the Tea Party*, a memoir by George Hewes

The tea destroyed was contained in three ships, laying near each other, at what was called at that time Griffin's wharf, and were surrounded by armed ships of war: the commanders of which had publicly declared, that if the rebels, as they were pleased to style the Bostonians, should not withdraw their opposition to the landing of the tea before a certain day, the 17th day of December, 1773, they should on that day force it on shore, under the cover of their cannon's mouth.

On the day preceding the seventeenth, there was a meeting of the citizens of the county of Suffolk, convened at one of the churches in Boston, for the purpose of consulting on what measures might be considered expedient to prevent the landing of the tea, or secure the people from the collection of the duty. At that meeting a committee was appointed to wait on Governor Hutchinson, and request him to inform them whether he would take any measures to satisfy the people on the object of the meeting. To the first application of this committee, the governor told them he would give them a definite answer by five o'clock in the afternoon.

At the hour appointed, the committee again repaired to the governor's house, and on inquiry found he had gone to his country seat at Milton, a distance of about six miles. When the committee returned and informed the meeting of the absence of the governor, there was a confused murmur among the members, and the meeting was immediately dissolved, many of them crying out, Let every man do his duty, and be true to his country; and there was a general huzza for Griffin's wharf. It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hat, which I and my associates denominated the tomahawk, with which, and a club, after having painted my face and hands with coal dust in the shop of a blacksmith, I repaired to Griffin's wharf, where the ships lay that contained the tea.

When I first appeared in the street, after being thus disguised, I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me, and marched in order to the place of our destination. When we arrived at the wharf, there were three of our number who assumed an authority to direct our operations, to which we readily submitted. They divided us into three parties, for the purpose of boarding the three ships which contained the tea at the same time. The name of him who commanded the division to which I was assigned, was Leonard Pitt. The names of the other commanders I never knew. We were immediately ordered by the respective commanders to board all the ships at the same time, which we promptly obeyed.

The commander of the division to which I belonged, as soon as we were on board the ship, appointed me boatswain, and ordered me to go to the captain and demand of him the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles. I made the demand accordingly, and the captain promptly replied, and delivered the articles; but requested me at the same time to do no damage to the ship or rigging. We then were ordered by our commander to open the hatches, and take out all the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately proceeded to execute his orders; first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as thoroughly to expose them to the effects of the water. In about three hours from the time we went on board, we had thus broken and thrown overboard every tea chest to be found in the ship; while those in the other ships were disposing of the tea in the same way, at the same time. We were surrounded by British armed ships, but no attempt was made to resist us. We then quietly retired to our several places of residence, without having any conversation with each other, or taking any measures to discover who were our associates; nor do I
recollect of our having had the knowledge of the name of a single individual concerned in that affair, except that of Leonard Pitt, the commander of my division, who I have mentioned. There appeared to be an understanding that each individual should volunteer his services, keep his own secret, and risk the consequences for himself. No disorder took place during that transaction, and it was observed at that time, that the stillest night ensued that Boston had enjoyed for many months.

For the original version, please visit the DPLA website, https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1193
Thursday, December 16, 1773

Having met on Thursday morning, 10 o’clock, they sent for Mr. Rotch, and asked him, if he had been to the Collector, and demanded a clearance? He said he had, but the Collector said that he could not, consistent with his duty, give him a clearance until all the dutiable items were out of his ship; then they demanded of him, whether he had protested against the Collector? he said he had not: they ordered him, upon his peril, to give immediate orders to the Captain, to get his ship ready for sea that day, enter a Protest immediately against the Custom-House, and then proceed directly to the Governor (who was at his seat at Milton, 7 miles off), and demand a pass for his ship to go by the castle. Then they adjourned until 3 o’clock, to wait for Mr. Rotch’s return; having met according to adjournment, there was the fullest meeting ever known (it was reckoned, that there were 2000 men from the country) they waited very patiently till about 5 o’clock, when they found Mr. Rotch did not return, they began to be very uneasy, called for a dissolution of the meeting, and finally obtained a vote for it: But the more moderate part of the meeting, fearing that there would be consequences, begged that they would reconsider their vote, and wait till Mr. Rotch’s return, for this reason, that they ought to do everything in their power to send the tea back, according to their resolves.

They obtained a vote, to remain together one hour longer; in about three quarters of an hour, Mr. Rotch returned; his answer from the Governor was, that he could not give a pass, till the ship was cleared by the Custom-House; the people immediately, as with one voice, called for a dissolution, which having obtained, they repaired.

Annotations

Mr. Rotch was the owner of the Dartmouth, one of three ships carrying tea from Britain’s East India Company. The colonists had been guarding all 3 ships in the harbor so that no one could unload the tea, and they demanded that all of the ships return back to England with the tea still on board. Mr. Rotch had been lingering in the harbor, however, and had not as yet complied with the colonists’ demands to sail back to England because if he didn’t unload and sell the tea in Boston, it would ruin him financially.

In order for a ship to gain clearance to sail back to England, the owner needed permission from the Collector and the Governor.

The men in attendance were not only from Boston, but from the surrounding countryside as well.

The protestors’ original plan, beginning in November, was to send all of the tea back to England unsold.

When Mr. Rotch said he still hadn’t been given permission to return his ship to England with the tea, the meeting was dissolved.

Some accounts say that, at this point, there was a small
to Griffin's Wharf, where the tea vessels lay, proceeded to fix tackles, and hoisted the tea upon deck, cut the chests to pieces, and threw the tea over the side; there were two ships and a brig, Captains Hall, Bruce, and Coffin, each vessel having 114 chests of tea on board; they began upon the two ships first, as they had nothing on board but the tea, then proceeded to the brig, which had hauled to the wharf but the day before, and had but a small part of her cargo out. The Captain of the brig begged they would not begin with his vessel, as the tea was covered with goods, belonging to different merchants in town. They told him the tea they wanted, and the tea they would have; but if he would go into his cabin quietly, not one article of his goods would be hurt. They immediately proceeded to remove the goods, and then dispose of the tea...It is to be observed, that they were extremely careful, that not any of the tea should be stolen, so kept a good look out, and detected one man filling his pockets, whom they treated very roughly, by tearing his coat off his back, and driving him up the wharf, through thousands of people, who cuffed and kicked him as he passed.

They were careful to only dispose of the tea, not any other goods on the ships.

They wanted to ensure no colonists stole the tea that was being thrown out.

Other accounts put the number of people in the crowd watching at hundreds, not “thousands,” and say that once the tea had been discarded, it was one of the quietest nights in Boston ever.

For the original version, please visit the DPLA website, https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1186
Formative Task 2: Storyboard

STORYBOARDS

1  2  3  4

5  6  7  8
### Supporting Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Featured Source</th>
<th>Source A: Excerpt from, &quot;A notice from Boston announcing the British law blocking Boston Harbor until the East India Company was compensated for its lost tea, 1774,&quot; (annotations provided).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Boston, May 12, 1774**

Gentlemen,

By the last advices from London we learn that an **Act** has been passed by the British Parliament for blocking up the Harbor of Boston, with a fleet of ships of war, and preventing the **Entrance, or Exportation** of, all sorts of Merchandise, on **Penalty of Forfeiture** of the Goods and the Vessels with carry them; And not only the goods and vessels, but the very **Wharfinger** who shall assist in lading or discharging such Goods or Merchandise, shall forfeit **treble** their value, at their highest Price, together with Cattle, Horses, Carriages, Implements whatsoever made use of in lading or landing them...

**Annotations**

This was the **Boston Port Act**, part of the Intolerable Acts.

People in Boston could no longer receive goods from England, nor could they export goods to make a profit.

**Forfeiture** = to seize: People caught trying to receive or ship goods would have those goods seized.

**Wharfinger** = person responsible for the loading and unloading of ships stationed in a wharf

**treble** = three; The Wharfinger would have to pay back 3 times the amount of the goods and any animals or carriages he used to load or unload the goods onto / off of the ship.

*For the original version, please visit the DPLA website, [https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1195](https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1195)*
### Supporting Question 3


*For the original version, please visit the DPLA website, [https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1196](https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/sources/1196)*