

The Origins of the American Revolution

1763 - 1775

by Margot Morrell



"The strength of patriotism, however it might seem to slumber, was ready to break forth in every crisis of danger, as a beam of light ceases to be invisible when it has something to shine upon. The people never lost buoyant self-reliance, nor the readiness to make sacrifices for the public good."

*History of the United States, Vol. 6.
George Bancroft*

Territory France Ceded to Britain, 1763

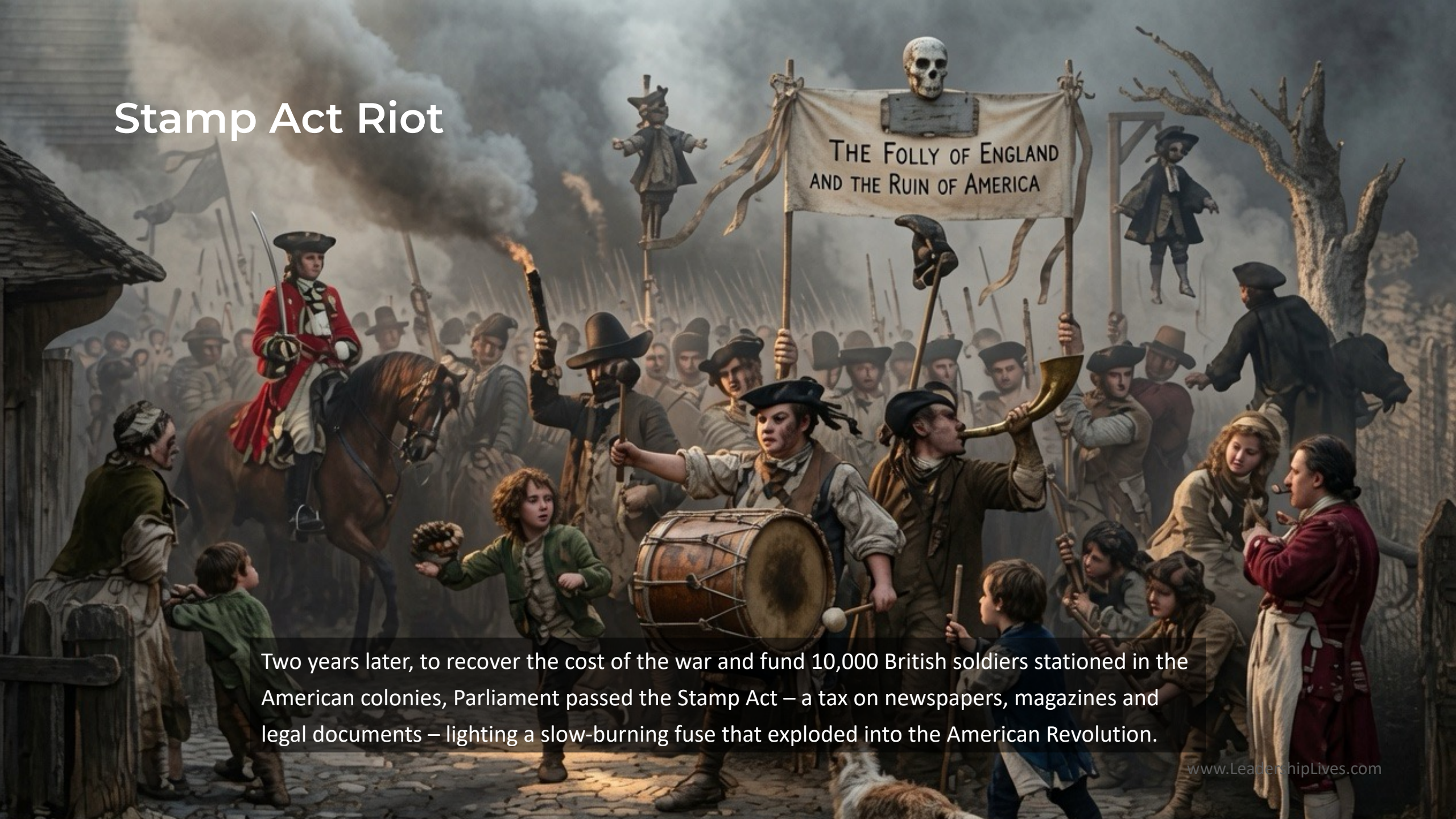
-  Ceded by France to Britain, 1763
(Canada / New France and territory east of the Mississippi River, excluding New Orleans and the west bank)
-  Thirteen Colonies (British)
-  Spanish Louisiana
(West of the Mississippi River)

Ceded by France to Britain, 1763

In 1763, American colonists celebrated when the victorious British signed the Treaty of Paris with France putting an end to the French and Indian War.

The French ceded vast amounts of territory on the American continent – all the land between the Mississippi River and the Appalachian Mountains and large swaths of Canada – to the British.

Stamp Act Riot



Two years later, to recover the cost of the war and fund 10,000 British soldiers stationed in the American colonies, Parliament passed the Stamp Act – a tax on newspapers, magazines and legal documents – lighting a slow-burning fuse that exploded into the American Revolution.

Sons of Liberty

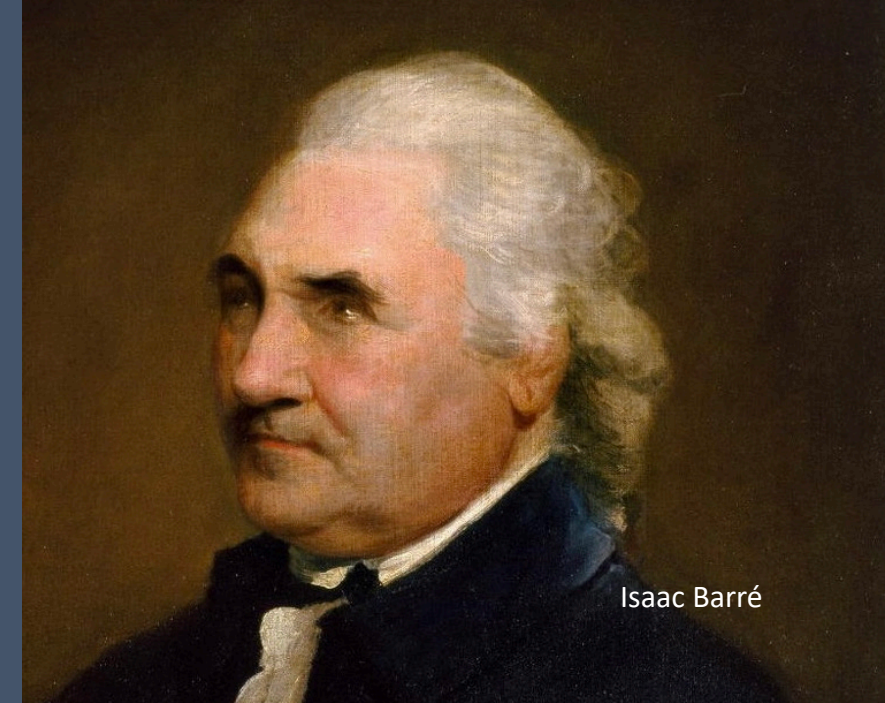
When Britain's Treasury Secretary, Charles Townshend, introduced the Stamp Act in Parliament, he spoke mockingly of the American colonists.

Isaac Barré, a member of Parliament from Ireland, leaped to his feet and retorted, "They fled from your tyranny to a then uncultivated and inhospitable country... And yet, actuated by the principles of true English liberty, they met all these hardships with pleasure."

Barré then coined the term "Sons of Liberty" which was enthusiastically embraced by Americans.



Charles Townshend



Isaac Barré

St—p! st—p! st—p! No!

Tuesday-Morning, December 17, 1765.

THE True-born Sons of Liberty, are desired to meet under LIBERTY-TREE, at XII o'Clock, THIS DAY, to hear the the public Resignation, under Oath, of ANDREW OLIVER, Esq; Distributor of Stamps for the Province of the *Maffachusetts-Bay*.

A Resignation ? YES.

The Stamp Act provoked outrage and cries of "No taxation without representation."

In Boston, a loose-knit, somewhat secret group sprang up. They called themselves the Sons of Liberty. Their idea caught fire and spread through the colonies.

Virginia Resolves



As the senior colony, founded in 1607, Virginia hastened to respond to the Stamp Act.

The House of Burgesses passed the Virginia Resolves on May 29, 1765, asserting that, under British law, Virginians could only be taxed by an assembly they had elected.

As the debate raged a young law student named Thomas Jefferson stood in the doorway admiring the fiery rhetoric of Patrick Henry.

Stamp Act Congress

Using a communication system organized by Samuel Adams, the Massachusetts Assembly sent a letter to the other colonies – including the British colonies in Canada – proposing a meeting in New York to "consult together on the present circumstances of the colonies."

For the first time, colonial representatives gathered to discuss common concerns. The Stamp Act Congress met at Federal Hall on Wall Street in October 1765.

Nine colonies participated – Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and South Carolina.

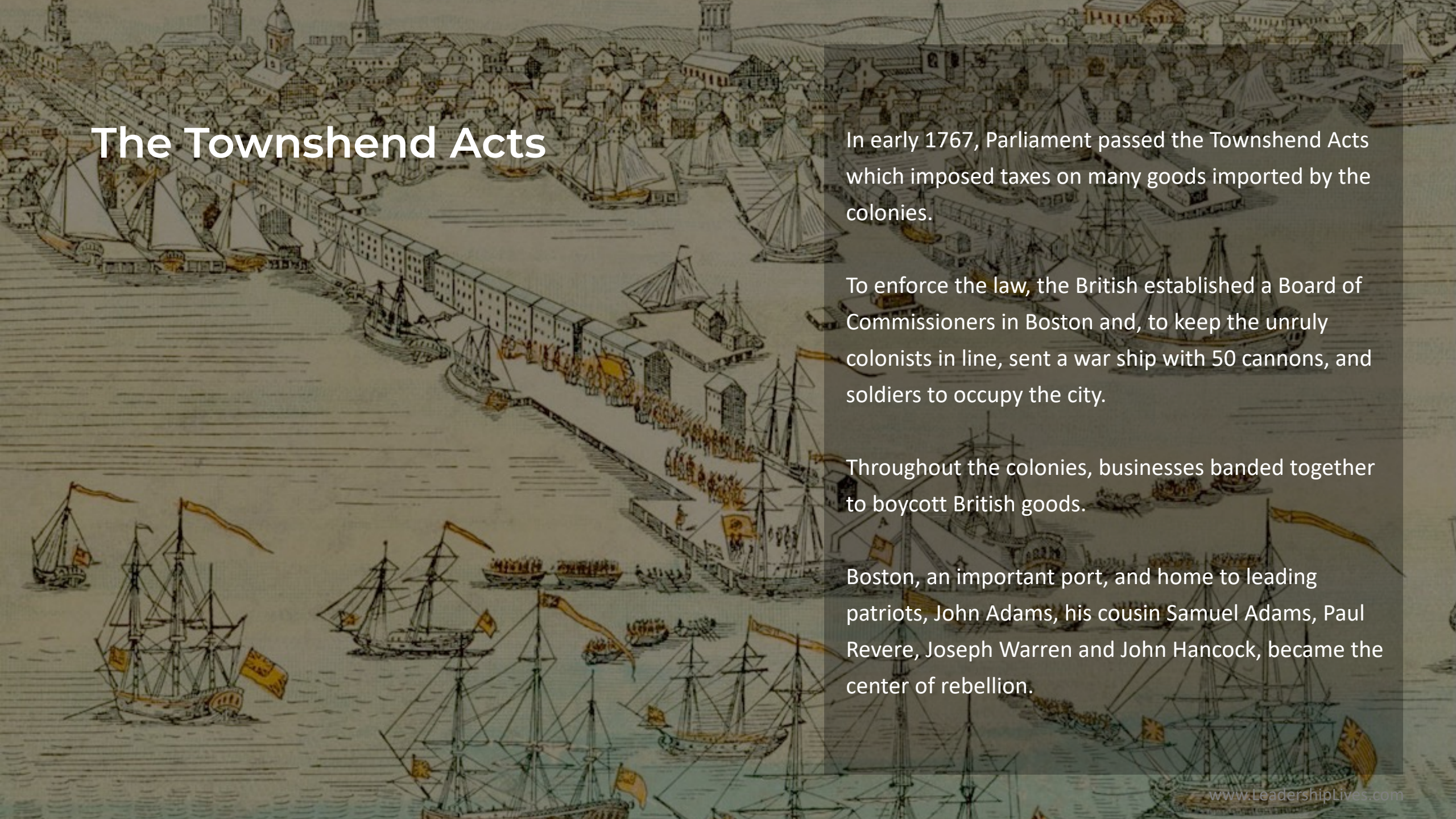
Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia were prevented from attending by their governors. New Hampshire had problems with timing and logistics.

Stamp Act Repealed



Pressured by British businesses, who feared boycotts of their products, the Stamp Act was repealed on March 18, 1766. Boston celebrated.

But on the same day, Parliament had passed the Declaratory Act which asserted "full power and authority to make laws and statutes ... to bind the colonies and people of America ... in all cases whatsoever." Many colonists were slow to notice that.



The Townshend Acts

In early 1767, Parliament passed the Townshend Acts which imposed taxes on many goods imported by the colonies.

To enforce the law, the British established a Board of Commissioners in Boston and, to keep the unruly colonists in line, sent a war ship with 50 cannons, and soldiers to occupy the city.

Throughout the colonies, businesses banded together to boycott British goods.

Boston, an important port, and home to leading patriots, John Adams, his cousin Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, Joseph Warren and John Hancock, became the center of rebellion.



"A Farmer"

In response to The Townshend Acts, "A Farmer" from Pennsylvania began writing anonymous letters that shaped the thinking of colonists on British policies. The letters spread throughout the colonies and were published as a pamphlet – a precursor of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and today's social media.

The "Farmer," was a Philadelphia lawyer, John Dickinson, who served as a delegate to the 1765 Stamp Act Congress, the First and Second Continental Congresses, and in the Revolutionary army.

The "Farmer's" letters inspired colonists to organize "nonimportation groups" to protest British taxes.

The Boston Massacre

On the evening of March 5, 1770, a 13-year-old apprentice began taunting a British soldier guarding the Custom House in Boston. The situation escalated.

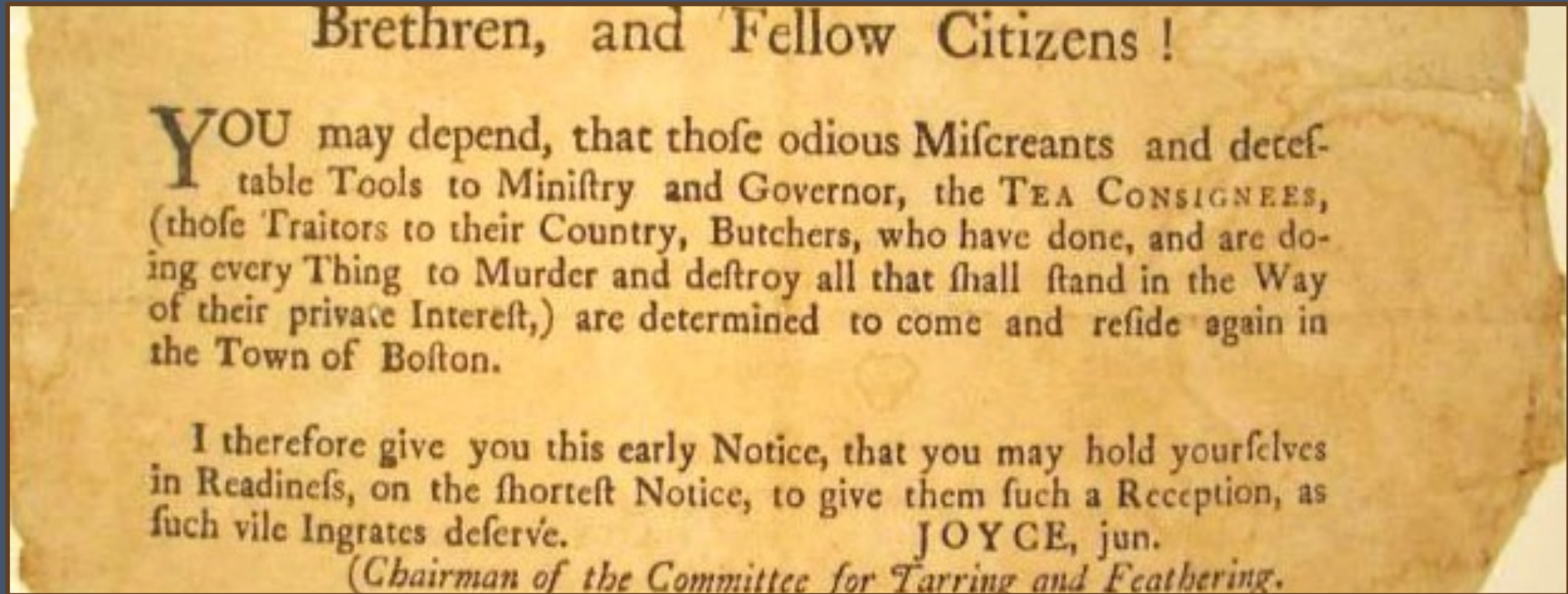
Over the next few hours, 300 – 400 colonists gathered to throw snowballs and other objects at the soldiers.

In the end, five colonists were dead, and two soldiers were found guilty of man-slaughter. The British called it "The Incident on King Street."

Sam Adams and Paul Revere, members of the Sons of Liberty, proclaimed it "The Boston Massacre."

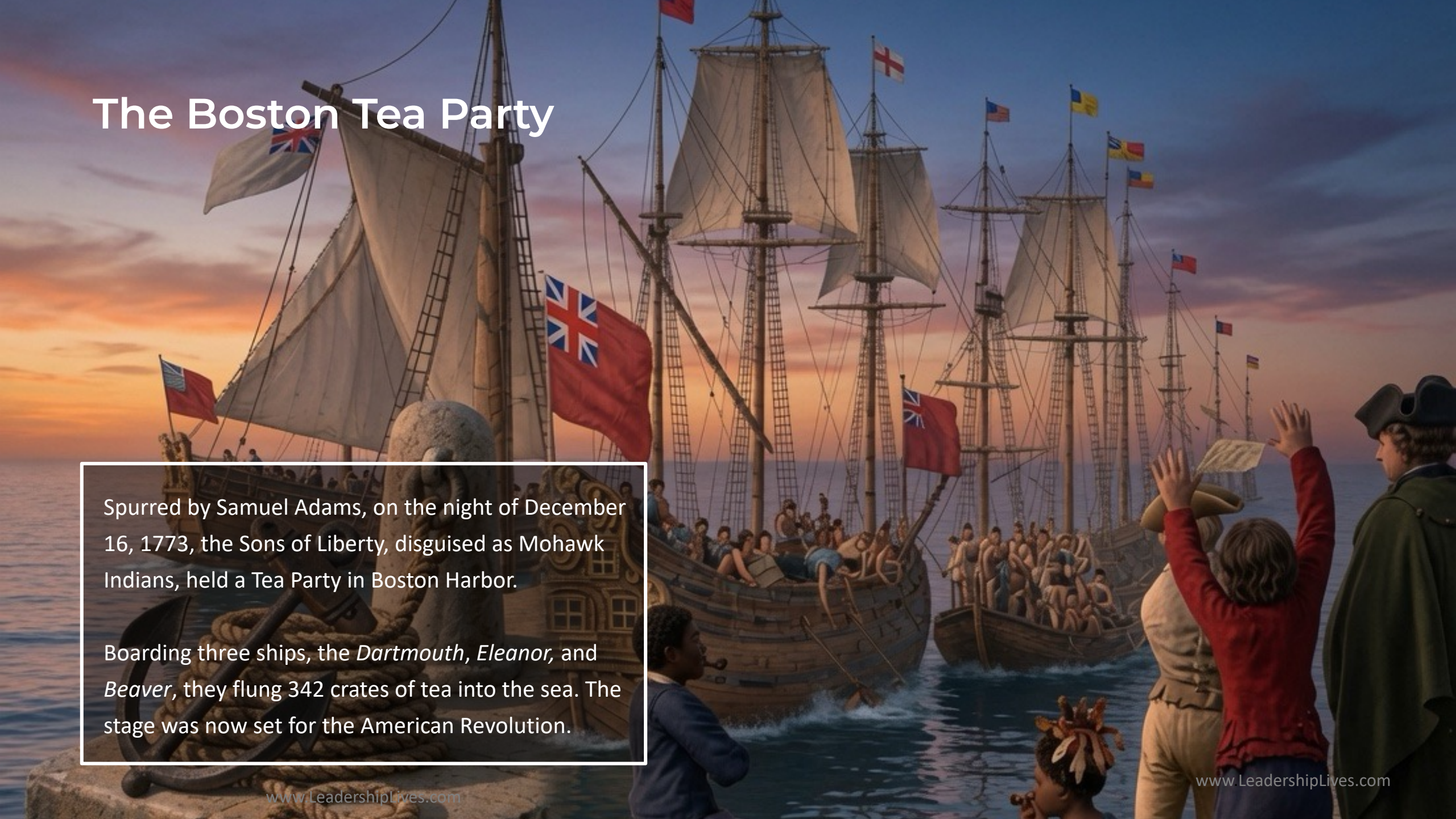


The Tea Act



Three years later, Parliament passed the Tea Act to help the failing East India Company. Once again, colonists were enraged and major ports refused to allow tea to be delivered.

The Boston Tea Party



Spurred by Samuel Adams, on the night of December 16, 1773, the Sons of Liberty, disguised as Mohawk Indians, held a Tea Party in Boston Harbor.

Boarding three ships, the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, and *Beaver*, they flung 342 crates of tea into the sea. The stage was now set for the American Revolution.

"This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire. The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered—something notable And striking. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I can't but consider it as an Epoch in History."

John Adams

Diary entry, December 17, 1773

The Intolerable Acts

In angry response, Parliament rapidly passed a series of new laws the colonists dubbed the Intolerable Acts. Most notably:

1. *The Boston Port Act* closed the port of Boston until colonists paid for the tea that had been destroyed.
2. *The Massachusetts Government Act* revoked the colony's charter of 1691 and crushed almost all forms of self-government.
3. *The Administration of Justice Act* permitted Royal governors to move trials of British officials to any location. George Washington called this the "Murder Act" because it allowed British officials to escape justice.
4. *The Quebec Act* expanded the territory of the Province of Quebec into what is now Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, parts of Minnesota and Indiana voiding the land claims of the Ohio Company.

The Intolerable Acts prompted colonists to redouble their efforts to strengthen local militias.

Join, or Die



In 1754, with extraordinary foresight, Benjamin Franklin designed a woodcut, *Join, or Die*.

Twenty years later, shocked by Parliament's decision to close the port of Boston, the colonists chose to unite.

The formidable Samuel Adams organized "committees of correspondence" to coordinate colonial resistance. Statesman, Francis Dana, called this communication system "the cornerstone of our Revolution." Now the underground network of about 8,000 patriots called for a meeting – the First Continental Congress.

1st Continental Congress



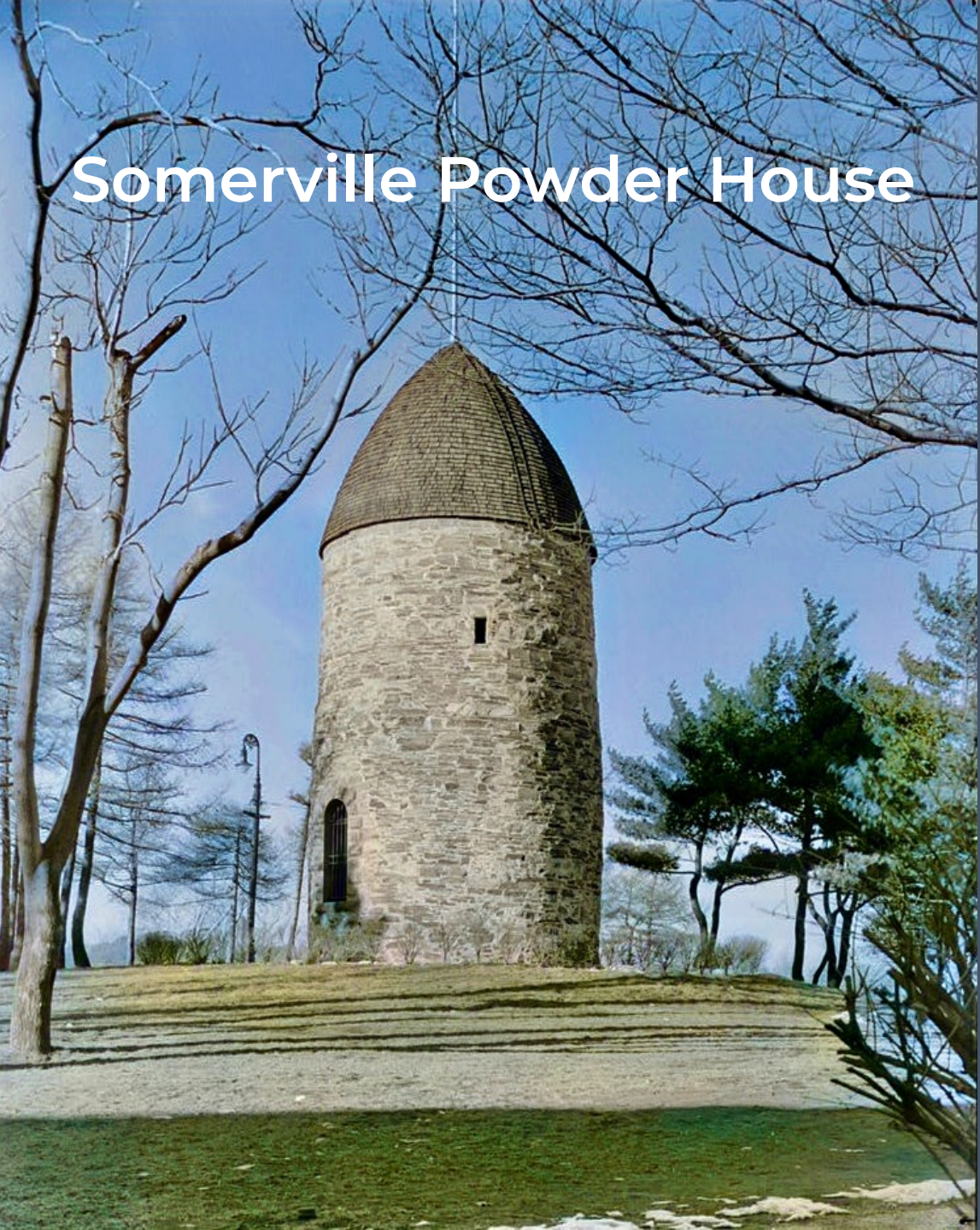
The First Continental Congress met from September 5 – October 26, 1774, at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia.

56 elected delegates from twelve colonies participated. Only Georgia, where Loyalist sympathies prevailed, abstained.

Congress's first order of business was to endorse the Suffolk Resolves.

Initiated by four Massachusetts counties, the Resolves called for a boycott of British goods and urged each colony to organize and train a militia.

Somerville Powder House



As delegates gathered in Philadelphia, British General Thomas Gage, in charge of enforcing the Intolerable Acts in Boston, ordered soldiers to remove gunpowder stored in nearby Somerville.

Alarm and outrage was immediate. Militiamen by the thousands headed towards Boston in a fore-shadowing of the Spring 1775 battles at Lexington and Concord.

Hearing exaggerated reports of what had happened in Boston, John Adams wrote to Abigail from Philadelphia:

"When the horrid news was brought here of the bombardment of Boston, which made us completely miserable for two days, we saw proofs both of the sympathy and the resolution of the continent.

War! war! war! was the cry, and it was pronounced in a tone which would have done honor to the oratory of a Briton or a Roman."

Peyton Randolph

Highly-regarded Peyton Randolph of Virginia was unanimously elected president of the First Continental Congress and re-elected president by the Second Continental Congress.

Randolph was Speaker of Virginia's House of Burgesses as had been his father, grandfather and great grandfather.

In contrast to the inflammatory rhetoric of fellow Virginian Patrick Henry, Randolph was a voice of calm and reason.

In October 1775, Randolph suffered a stroke and died while having dinner with his cousin, Thomas Jefferson.

John Hancock replaced Randolph as president of the Second Continental Congress.



Address to the People of Great Britain

Congress appointed lawyer Robert Livingston from New York's Hudson River Valley, to write an Address to the People of Great Britain explaining the controversial issues from the colonists' perspective.

In his carefully worded document, Livingston wrote, "The cause of America is now the object of universal attention; it has at length become very serious. This unhappy country has not only been oppressed, but abused and misrepresented; and the duty we owe to ourselves and posterity, to your interest, and the general welfare of the British Empire, leads us to address you on this very important subject."



"A great Heap of Letters."

Not ready to declare independence, the primary goal of the First Continental Congress was to send a letter to King George III seeking repeal of The Townshend Acts and reconciliation.

To that end, a committee was formed to write a petition to the King stating the colonists' loyalty to the crown and desire to stay connected to Britain.

In fits and starts, the "Humble Petition" made its way to London where it was finally presented to Parliament on January 19, 1775, and, in the words of Benjamin Franklin who was there, overlooked amidst "a great Heap of Letters."



Edmund Burke



In London, only Edmund Burke, known as "a friend of America" recognized the conflict had escalated to a new level.

His words of warning in Parliament fell on deaf ears.



"Give me liberty
or give me death."

The image shows the interior of a church with rows of wooden pews, a carpeted aisle, and a large stained glass window on the right. The church has a high ceiling and a chandelier.

In March 1775, Virginians – including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson - met at St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond to avoid interference from the royal governor.

Speaking in support of arming Virginia's militia, Patrick Henry concluded with his immortal words, "Give me liberty or give me death." and swayed the vote in support of the cause.

The Virginians voted to urge the Second Continental Congress to declare independence from Britain when the delegates reconvened in Philadelphia in May.

"One if by land, two if by sea."

In Massachusetts, once again, trouble was brewing.

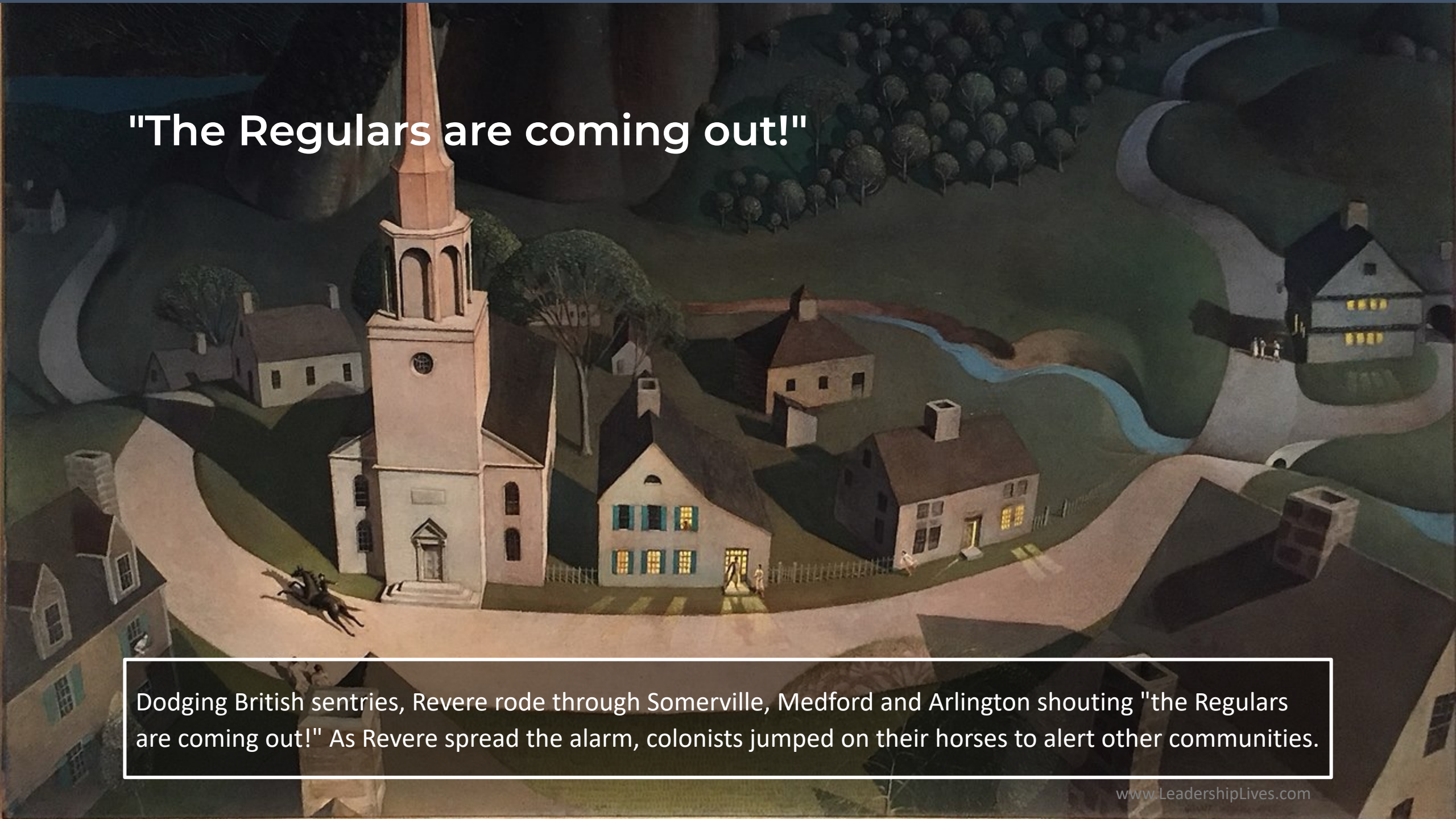
At the direction of Parliament, the British were planning to squash the Massachusetts Provincial Congress which was meeting in Concord where a large stockpile of the patriots' weapons was stored.

The president of the Provincial Congress was Joseph Warren, a 34-year-old physician and widower with four children. Warren sent Paul Revere to warn the Provincial Congress that the British intended to seize the weapons and arrest and imprison Samuel Adams and John Hancock. The patriots hid the weapons.

A week later, on the night of April 18, 1775, Warren notified Revere that the British were ready to march to Concord. The question was which route would they take.

Revere had arranged with the sexton at the Old North Church to post a signal to indicate which way the British were going – "one if by land, two if by sea." When Revere spotted two lanterns, he slipped by the British in a rowboat and crossed the river to Charlestown.



A painting of a village at night. A large church with a tall, pointed steeple is the central focus. Several houses with lit windows are scattered around the church. A river or stream flows through the landscape. In the foreground, a person on horseback is visible. The overall scene is dark, with the light from the windows and the church providing the main illumination.

"The Regulars are coming out!"

Dodging British sentries, Revere rode through Somerville, Medford and Arlington shouting "the Regulars are coming out!" As Revere spread the alarm, colonists jumped on their horses to alert other communities.

700 British troops



In the early hours of April 19, 1775, 700 well-trained British troops marched eighteen miles from Cambridge to Concord.

The Battle of Lexington

At Lexington, the soldiers fought a brief battle with the militia. Eight colonists were killed and nine were wounded.

The news tore through the region. When the British soldiers reached Concord two hours later, the colonists were better prepared. The billows of smoke in the center of this image indicates the British soldiers have fired at the colonists.



"the shot heard round the world"



In Concord, a unit of British soldiers guarded the North Bridge. Militia units took up positions nearby.

When colonists saw smoke rising over Concord, they thought the town was being burned. They moved forward. The British retreated but paused to pull up planks so the colonists could not follow.

A colonist yelled at the soldiers to stop tearing up the planks. The British fired and killed two militia men and wounded one. The Minute Men fired back – "the shot heard round the world."

The American Revolution

The patriots' gunfire wounded four of the eight British officers present and seven soldiers.

The British retreated. The militia chased the redcoats back to Lexington where the British were reinforced by fresh units. The colonists pressed on, firing from behind trees and stone walls. By the time the British got back to Boston, almost 300 soldiers were dead, wounded, or had fled.

Patriots from all over New England rushed to join the fight. The numbers swelled. 20,000 patriots surrounded Boston and held the city under siege for the next ten months. The American Revolution had begun.



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IMAGE CREDITS

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