

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S PRINTING
NETWORK AND THE STAMP ACT

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“Some Political Revolutions will probably mark the Beginning of the next Session; for the Struggle for Power is constant in this Country; nor can I see an End to it,” London printer William Strahan wrote to Philadelphia printer David Hall in 1764. The English Parliament, in the midst of a governmental shakeup, would in the next session be “endeavouring to extinguish, in some Degree at least, our enormous Debt, which, if it is suffered to increase, must sooner or later overwhelm us.”¹

These two forces, political reorganization and the enormous national debt, prompted Parliament to devise the Stamp Act. This measure, which taxed publications and legal papers, jeopardized the revenue of printers and lawyers—the two groups most capable of leading public opinion—and set the stage for the American Revolution.

Because of their tangible influence on the public, it is particularly important to consider the reactions of printers to the Stamp Act. When the tax took effect, there were twenty-two

newspapers printed in colonial British North America. Nine of these were under the proprietorship of printers allied with Benjamin Franklin. Some had formal partnerships with Franklin, others had worked for him in his Philadelphia printing house, and still others were related to him or financially indebted to him. As a group, this informal association of printers comprised Franklin's printing "network." His network began in 1729 when he formed a printing partnership with Hugh Meredith in Philadelphia and continued through his partnerships in the 1780s with grandson Benjamin Franklin Bache, who printed in Philadelphia, and with Philadelphia and New York printer Francis Childs. Franklin's network stretched from New England to the West Indies, comprised more than two dozen printers, and was the first chiefly non-family-based printing alliance in America. It served as a training ground for many early American printers, a mechanism of growth for the domestic press, and a source of moral principles for a mass audience.²

The Franklin network had existed for more than three decades when the Stamp Act crisis arose. Lord George Grenville advocated the tax as a means of collecting revenue, effectively forcing the colonies to pay a portion of the costs incurred during the French and Indian War. This military victory enabled Great Britain to become the predominant world power, albeit a nearly bankrupt one. By January 1763, the British national debt was 130 million pounds sterling. Strapped with a huge debt, Parliament decided that since the American colonists had benefited from the victory, they should assume part of the financial burden.³

At the beginning of the French and Indian War, colonial assemblies had approved stamp taxes in Massachusetts in 1755 and New York in 1757 to raise revenue for military expenditures. These taxes received a mixed response from printers in the Franklin network. In New York, Hugh Gaine raised the subscription price of his newspaper and defended the tax as a necessary expense to defend the colony from French incursions. James Parker also raised the price of his newspaper but publicly opposed the tax, claiming luxury items should be taxed instead.⁴

Opposition to these taxes was limited, though, because they were imposed by the colonial legislatures themselves, with some public support, and also because they were not overly burdensome to colonists. The levies were modest and sporadically enforced, and the acts creating them expired during the early years of the fighting. By the war's end, colonial contributions to defray the costs of the lengthy military campaign were nominal. This prompted

such key figures in British government as the Earl of Halifax, Charles Townshend, and the Earl of Bute to conclude the colonies would not voluntarily remit their share to reduce the debt. They determined that Parliament would have to force the colonists to pay for their defense.⁵

Grenville's plan, which had been suggested by merchant and land speculator Henry McCulloh, required that a stamp be placed on all legal documents, including loans, bills of sale, court briefs, college degrees, appointments to office, and indentures of apprenticeship, as well as on all dice, cards, almanacs, and newspapers. The tax would be almost impossible to violate because without the stamp colonists jeopardized their property, liberty, and economic prosperity. In short, British officials believed that self-interest would compel colonists to comply with the law. The tax would be easy to collect and would facilitate the enforcement of other laws such as charging fees on bonds and bills of lading; these documents had to bear the stamp or else they could be regarded as evidence of attempted fraud or smuggling.⁶

However, royal leaders knew it would be difficult to convince colonists to accept the tax. One Connecticut legislator used Franklinesque rhetoric to justify it. "The Stamp Duty may in some respects be distressing to ye present Generation, tho they would certainly be a means of promoting industry," William Johnson wrote. Upon learning from a member of Parliament about the Stamp Act's imminent passage, lawyer Jared Ingersoll responded, "You say America can and ought to contribute to its own Defence. We, one and all, say the same on this Side of the Water, we only differ about the Means."⁷

Grenville's plan received the support it needed and was approved by Parliament on February 27, 1765, with little dissent. It was signed into law by King George III the following month and designated to take effect on November 1, despite Benjamin Franklin's arguments in London against the tax. Franklin, who favored American representation in Parliament, contended colonists would bridle at an internal tax that neither they nor their legislatures had approved. English ministers countered by insisting that "the Colonies were all virtually represented in Parliament." Franklin offered an alternative to the tax. He recommended the Crown generate revenue by issuing one form of paper currency for all of the colonies, charging interest on it, and using the interest to pay the military debt. Since the colonists needed a reliable medium of exchange, Franklin argued, they would not object to paying the interest. However, Grenville disapproved of issuing paper money as legal tender and asserted Parliament's right to tax the colonists. He was, Franklin observed, "besotted with his Stamp Scheme."⁸

Despite the suspicion among some colonists that Franklin had encouraged the passage of the Stamp Act (a view exacerbated by the fact that Franklin arranged for several of his friends to become stamp distributors), Franklin remonstrated against passage of the tax. London printer William Strahan told Franklin's Philadelphia printing partner David Hall that Franklin "took all possible Pains to remove some of the Inconveniencies" of the Stamp Act, "tho' without Effect. But to think of his preventing the Tax being imposed altogether, he is as little able to stem the Tide at London Bridge with his little Finger."⁹

Franklin repeatedly professed that he had done everything possible to oppose the tax. "God knows I did all in my Power to prevent" the Stamp Act, he assured Hall, and informed Philadelphia politician Charles Thomson, "I took every Step in my Power, to prevent the Passing of the Stamp Act."¹⁰ Beaten by Grenville's resolve, Franklin advised that submitting to the tax was the most prudent course. "We might as well have hinder'd the Suns setting," he wrote to Thomson. "But since 'tis down, my Friend, and it may be long before it rises again, Let us make as good a Night of it as we can. We may still Light Candles. Frugallity and Industry will go a great way towards indemnifying us." Thomson responded that such infringements on colonial liberties as trade curtailment, the creation of vice-admiralty courts to prosecute offenses against the Stamp Act without juries, and a press "so restricted that we cannot complain," had stirred up public resentment past the point "of the candles you mention being lighted." The problem, he added, was that "Should the behaviour of the colonies happen not to square with these sovereign notions, (as I much fear it will not) what remains but by violence to compel them to obedience. Violence will beget resentment, and provoke to acts never dreamt of."¹¹

Thomson's assessment was accurate. Colonists were incensed, contending they should not be taxed by a political body to which they did not send representatives.¹² Inspired by journalistic rhetoric, Americans responded with unified retaliation in the form of non-importation of British goods and mob actions. Crowds gathered, riots broke out, and aggrieved factions threatened government officials in most colonial cities. The day after the tax took effect in New York, a mob attacked a British military officer's residence. As a participant recalled, "with one Consent [we] began upon the house and in Less than 10 Minutes had [it] down," then plundered and burned its contents. The following day a larger group, numbering in the thousands, "resolv'd to have the Governor Ded or Alive" if he enforced the