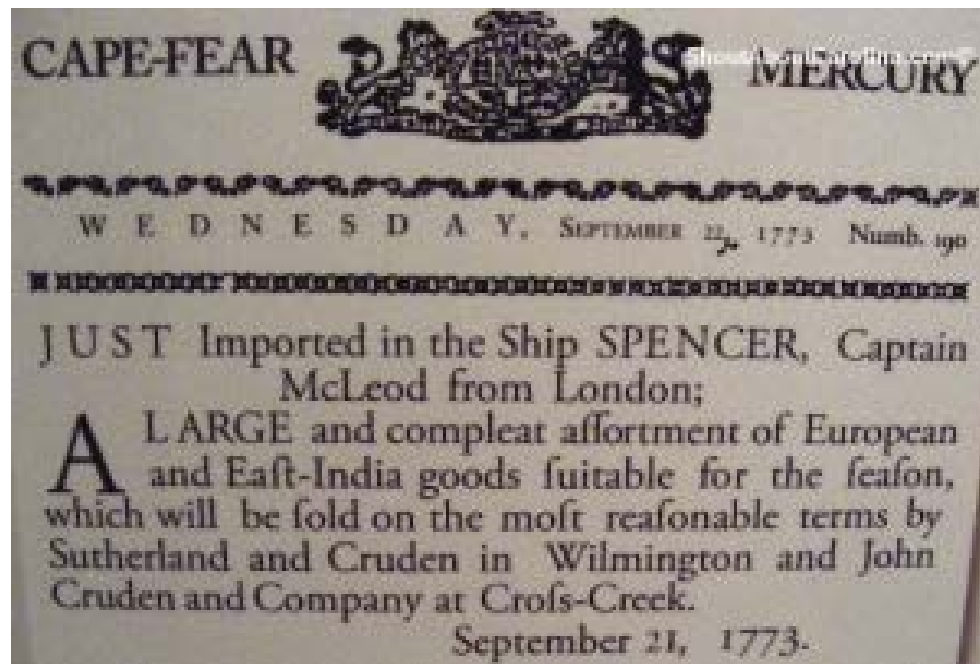


# Consumer Politics in the American Revolution

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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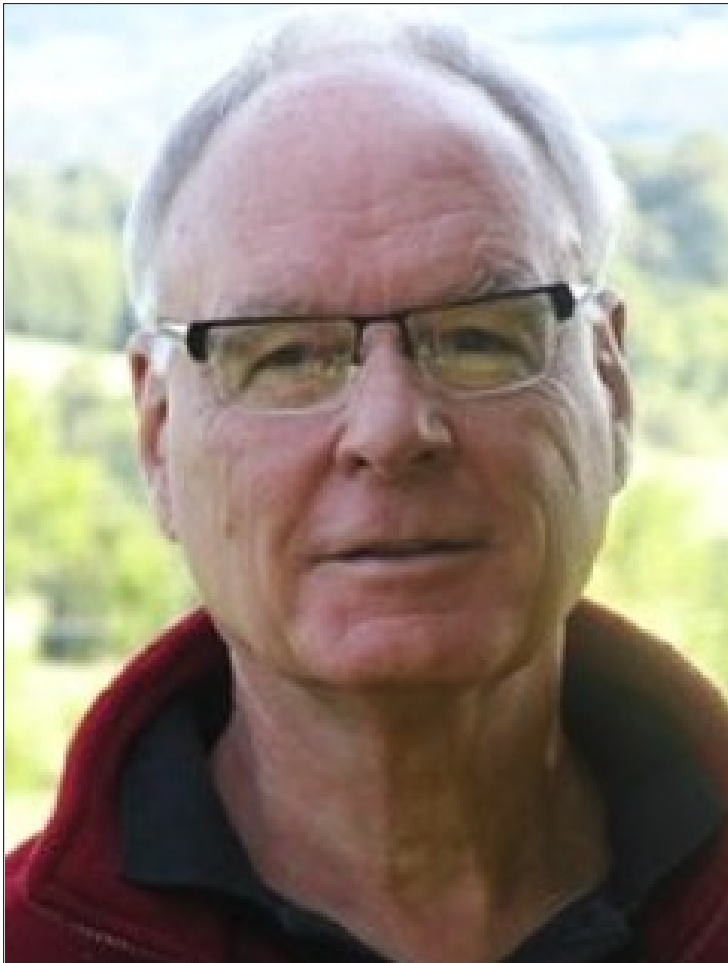
## UNDERSTANDING

During the years before national independence colonial Americans invented a new form of political resistance, transforming an exciting consumer marketplace into an effective weapon against perceived imperial oppression. By refusing to buy imported goods, a decision that required genuine sacrifice, they at once influenced imperial policy and developed a powerful way to identify ideological friends and enemies.

## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What role did women play in establishing and maintaining the non-importation strategy?
- Was alcohol among the consumer goods the Patriots boycotted?
- Was the boycott a new political strategy at the time?
- What hardships did non-importation impose on the colonies?
- How effective was the boycott?
- Were there regional differences in adherence to the boycott?



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*Tobacco Culture: the Mentality of the Great  
Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution*  
(T. Saloutos Prize)

*Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories*  
(Historical Preservation Book Prize)

*Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer  
Politics Shaped American Independence*  
(Colonial War Society Prize)

## INTRODUCTION

- Show how the economic experience of ordinary Americans in a new, exciting consumer marketplace was able to generate innovative forms of political resistance to Great Britain.
- Explain how participation in a broad and popular consumer market--in large part driven by the massive importation of British made cloth--suggested to Americans that by sacrificing the objects of desire and by forcing neighbors and friends to boycott British goods, they could create a genuine revolutionary movement.
- Demonstrate that since colonial women played a central role in the mid-eighteenth-century consumer marketplace--buying manufactured cloth from Great Britain, for example--they acquired a meaningful voice in the colonial political protest, for without their cooperation, the boycott movement between 1764 and 1775 would have failed.
- Make clear that the pre-Revolutionary economy was not a simple world of self-sufficient producers spinning and weaving, but rather, a sophisticated commercial system involving long-distance exchange.

We have an English Proverb that says,

He that would thrive  
Must ask his Wife;

it was lucky for me that I had one as much dispos'd to Industry and Frugality as my self. She assisted me cheerfully in my Business, folding and stitching Pamphlets, tending Shop, purchasing old Linen Rags for the Paper-makers, &c., &c. We kept no idle Servants, our Table was plain and simple, our Furniture of the cheapest. For instance, my Breakfast was a long time Bread and Milk (no Tea), and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen Porringer, with a Pewter Spoon. But mark how Luxury will enter Families, and make a Progress, in Spite of Principle. Being call'd one Morning to Breakfast, I found it in a China Bowl, with a Spoon of Silver. They had been bought for me without my Knowledge by my Wife, and had cost her the enormous Sum of three and twenty Shillings, for which she had no other Excuse or Apology to make, but that she thought her Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon and China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbours. This was the first Appearance of Plate and China in our House, which afterward, in a Course of Years, as our Wealth increas'd, augmented gradually to several Hundred Pounds in Value.

**Discussion Questions:** How would you characterize Franklin's attitude toward consumer goods?  
What does this passage tell us about the colonial marketplace?

# *Hamilton's Itinerarium:* *Being a narrative of a journey*

Morison (who, I understood, had been at the Land Office in Annapolis, inquiring about a title he had to some land in Maryland) was a very roughspun, forward, clownish blade, much addicted to swearing, at the same time desirous to pass for a gentleman, notwithstanding which ambition, the conscientiousness of his natural boorishness obliged him frequently to frame ill-timed apologies for his misbehaviour, which he termed frankness and freeness. It was often,— “Damn me, gentlemen, excuse me; I am a plain, honest fellow; all is right down plain-dealing, by God.” He was much affronted with the landlady at Curtis’s, who, seeing him in a greasy jacket and breeches, and a dirty worsted cap, and withal a heavy, forward, clownish air and behaviour, I suppose took him for some ploughman or carman, and so presented him with some scraps of cold veal for breakfast, he having declared that he could not drink “your damned washy tea.” As soon as he saw his mess, he swore, — “Damn him, if it wa’n’t out of respect to the gentleman in company” (meaning me) “he would throw her cold scraps out at the window and break her table all to pieces, should it cost him 100 pounds for damages.”

(cont’d)

## *Hamilton's Itinerarium:* *Being a narrative of a journey, pp. 14-15*

Then, taking off his worsted nightcap, he pulled a linen one out of his pocket, and clapping it upon his head, — “Now,” says he, “I’m upon the borders of Pennsylvania and must look like a gentleman; t’ other was good enough for Maryland, and damn my blood, if ever I come into that rascally Province again if I don’t procure a leather jacket, that I may be in a trim to box the saucy jacks there and not run the hazard of tearing my coat.” This showed, by the bye, that he paid more regard to his modesty and self-denial. He then made a transition to politicks, and damned the late Sir R—— W—— for a rascal.

We asked him his reasons for cursing Sir R——, but he would give us no other but this,—that he was certainly informed by some very good gentlemen who understood the thing right well, that the said Sir R—— was a damned rogue, and at the conclusion of each rodomontade he told us that **tho’ he seemed to be but a plain, homely fellow, yet he would have us know that he was able to afford better than many that went finer; he had good linen in his bags, a pair of silver buckles, silver clasps, and gold sleeve buttons, two Holland shirts and some neat nightcaps, and that his little woman at home drank tea twice a day, and he himself lived very well and expected to live better so soon as that old rogue B——t died, and he could secure a title to his land.**

**Discussion Question: How does the cursing man distinguish his status?**



“To Mssr’s Greens, Printers,

The public papers, have well entertained us with excitements to manufactory and industry, and methinks [?] in this Crisis would not only be palatable but cogent to practice; while facts stare us in the face. The subject has been so well handled by masterly pens, that I might have spared my paison and let me pen continue its nap, and not troubled the publick with these coarse and undigested Lines, were it not for two inducements. I was edged on by a desire to show friendship to my Country, if I could go no further, then attempting some good, and appearing as a friend in a noble cause, and also found in the whirl of my mind, that some things had presented themselves, which in my scanty sphere, I had not seen publicly noticed. **When I considered the Country we live in, and how it might abound with Flax and Wool to cover our nakedness, and Silk sufficient for ornament; I have been obliged to look upon the importation of Cloathing, from Europe and Asia, as big a Blunder in Politicks, as if the Men should drink in a notion, that the Women were so defective in their natural genius, that they are incapable of working up the Produce of the Country that bred them; and send to foreign Countries for Ship Loads of Women to be their Wives.**

(cont’d)

“I would therefore propose Stratagem and Capitulation. Many excellent Resolves have been come into, I propound these to be resolved by both Sexes, which if complied with, and I should call a blow at the Root.

These conclusions therefore, I offer to both Sexes for consideration; as we have all Liberty of offering our thoughts to the Publick. And first let the Men Resolve, viz.

1. We will not from the first day of, &c. make Suit to any Woman whatsoever to be our Wife, but what is dressed in Home-Spun Clothes, and choose they should be of her own Spinning.
2. We will not from the date above, offer the common Salutation to any Female in Publick or Private, but what is dressed in Ditto. And if we meet any of the said Female Sex, dressed in Foreign Silks, and Laces &c. we will pass by them, as persons that have been too free with some Merchant, and are Adulteresses forsaking the interest of their Country.
3. We will not invite any Lady to appear in Publick with us, but what shall carry the Badge of the excellent soil and industry of the Country with her.
5. We will not from said date, sit and chat with any Ladies at the Tea Table, but such as make use of Tea the growth of our own Country.

**Discussion Question: How do consumer politics place women at the center of the Revolution?**

“And let the Women Resolve.

1. We will not from the date above, entertain any Man in our Company, that is so Proud and Fopish , that he scorns to wear Cloaths wrought by the Women in this Country.

2. We will not accompany with any man whatsoever, that haunts the Tavern and grogs to the expense of his Senses.

3. We will not receive the common Salutation from any Man that it is apparent, has more than a gill of Rum, or half pint of Wine in him; or receive a Compliment from a Man that Staggers.

**Discussion Questions:** What role did women play in the boycott’s success?  
To what extent did the boycott empower women?

“What should induce you to think, gentlemen, that those of us who are daily witnesses to the difficulty of procuring an estate, or even of providing for a large family, should be incapable of feeling for our country, for our husbands, for our offspring, amidst the—impending distress universally apprehended.——You all allow us to have a good deal of spirit. Let me inform you, we have a good deal of the publick spirit. We are not unconcerned spectators of the general calamity. We are not indifferent whether our native country sinks or swims. We don’t set our trinkets and bawbles in competition with the prosperity of North-America. But off with our gay feathers in a moment, if the publick interest so requireth. Away with every article costly finery, whenever that general parent [Great Britain] issues her injunctions.

**Discussion Question: How did the boycotts integrate women politically into the Revolution?**

“If the people of America, in the midst of so much might sink into a state of slavery, they must counteract the convictions of their own breasts and obstinately refuse to be free. The nature and causes of our disease have been sufficiently explored, and a remedy, a safe and easy, a sovereign and an efficacious remedy prescribed and held up to view; the medicine is cheap, it is within our reach, and its virtues abundantly manifest, and we are invited to the application of it be every thing that is tender and valuable in life; our own interests, the rights of posterity and the happiness of unborn millions bespeak our attention, and plead with us to be a free and a flourishing people. The means of safety are so easy to come at, and so thoroughly known, that to plead ignorance would serve only to enhance the criminality of our actions in the eyes of posterity. The capacity of an Hottentot at this time of day is sufficient to discern that our ruin can come only from our selves; and that our fellow subjects in Great Britain can’t deprive us of our rights if we mind our own business and let theirs alone. **The truth is we have no occasion for British manufactures; they are rank poison to the constitution of this country; and the absurdity and danger of importing them at this juncture, have been affected with a conjugation of arguments, and a cloud of witnesses sufficient to open the eyes of the blind. We live in a land that flows with milk and honey, and with suitable culture will presently yield us the necessaries and conveniences of life in rich abundance.**”

.....

(cont’d.)

“To conclude, let us all my countrymen, resolve to be free; and not barter away our birthright privileges for that which profiteth not. **Let us save our money in order to save our country; let the business of importation, already thickest with difficulties, and dangerous to pursue, come to a period, and those who promote it to the disadvantage of the cause of liberty, be look’d upon with an eye of contempt; let us by no means promote or esteem those who are pursuing interests diametrically opposite to the interest of the public, and who to gratify an unconquerable appetite for filthy lucre, would sell their country, and comp[????]es and land for to obtain articles, which if obtained tend to involve America in irretrievable ruin.**”

PHILO PATRIA

At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou'd be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors; but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question.

That no man shou'd scruple, or hesitate a moment to use arms in defence of so valuable a blessing, on which all the good and evil of life depends; is clearly my opinion; Yet Arms I wou'd beg leave to add, should be the last resource; the de[r]nier resort. Addresses to the Throne, and remonstrances to parliament, we have already, it is said, proved the inefficacy of; how far then their attention to our rights & priviledges is to be awakened or alarmed by **starving their Trade & manufactures, remains to be tryed.**

The northern Colonies, it appears, are endeavouring to adopt this scheme--In my opinion it is a good one; & must be attended with salutary effects, provided it can be carried pretty generally into execution; but how far it is practicable to do so, I will not take upon me to determine. That there will be difficulties attending the execution of it every where, from clashing interests, & selfish designing men (ever attentive to their own gain, & watchful of every turn that can assist their lucrative views, in preference to any other consideration) cannot be denied;

(cont'd)

The extravagant & expensive man has the same good plea to retrench his Expences--He is thereby furnished with a pretext to live within bounds, and embraces it--prudence dictated economy to him before, but his resolution was too weak to put it in practice; for how can I, says he, who have lived in such & such a manner change my method? I am ashamed to do it: and besides, such an alteration in the System of my living, will create suspicions of a decay in my fortune, & such a thought the world must not harbour; I will e'en continue my course: till at last the course discontinues the Estate, a sale of it being the consequence of his perseverance in error. This I am satisfied is the way that many who have set out in the wrong tract, have reasoned, till ruin stares them in the face. And in respect to the poor & needy man, he is only left in the same situation he was found; better I might say, because as he judges from comparison, his condition is amended in proportion as it approaches nearer to those above him.



Our All is at Stake, & the little Conveniencys & Comforts of Life, when set in Competition with our Liberty, ought to be rejected not with Reluctance but with Pleasure: Yet it is plain that in the Tobo. [tobacco] Colonys We can't at present confine our Importations within such narrow Bounds as the Northern Colonys; a plan of this kind, to be practicable, must be adapted to our Circumstances; for not steadily executed, it had better have remained unattempted—We may retrench all Manner of Superfluitys, Finery of all Denominations, & confine ourselves to Linnens Woolens &c, not exceeding a certain price: it is amazing how much this (if adopted in all the Colonys) would lessen the American Imports, and distress the various Traders &Manufacturers in Great Britain—This wou'd quickly awaken their Attention—they woud see, they wou'd feel the Oppressions We groan under, & exert themselves to procure Us Redress: this once obtain'd, We shou'd no longer discontinue our Importations, confining ourselves still never to import any Article that shou'd hereafter be taxed by Act of Parliament for raising a Revenue in America;

WILLIAM JACKSON,  
an IMPORTER; at the  
BRAZEN HEAD,  
North Side of the TOWN-HOUSE,  
and Opposite the Town-Pump, in  
Corn-hill, BOSTON.

It is desired that the SONS and  
DAUGHTERS of LIBERTY,  
would not buy any one thing of  
him, for in so doing they will bring  
Disgrace upon *themselves*, and their  
*Posterity*, for ever and ever, AMEN.

## Discussion Question

How coercive is the  
boycott?

To obtain redress of these grievances, which threaten destruction to the lives liberty, and property of his majesty's subjects, in North-America, we are of opinion, that a non-importation, non consumption, and non-exportation agreement, faithfully adhered to, will prove the most speedy, effectual, and peaceable measure: And, therefore, we do, for ourselves, and the inhabitants of the several colonies, whom we represent, firmly agree and associate, under the sacred ties of virtue, honour and love of our country, as follows:

1. That from and after the first day of December next, we will not import, into British America, from Great-Britain or Ireland, any goods, wares, or merchandise whatsoever, or from any other place, any such goods, wares, or merchandise, as shall have been exported from Great-Britain or Ireland; nor will we, after that day, import any East-India tea from any part of the world; nor any molasses, syrups, paneles, coffee, or pimento, from the British plantations or from Dominica; nor wines from Madeira, or the Western Islands; nor foreign indigo.

**Discussion Question:** How did the boycott force colonists to take sides?

Final slide

Thank You