WEEKLY READING # 8

**Article 1: A Taxing King**

Benjamin Franklin knew that sometimes the best way to get people to think is to make them laugh. So when he was serious, he wrote a joking poem. Here is part of it:

*We have an old mother that peevish is grown;*
*She snubs us like children that scarce walk alone;
She forgets we’re grown up and have sense of our own.*

Who was the “old mother?” Why, England, of course! “We” were the colonists. Ben Franklin was right. King George III and his ministers didn’t believe the colonists were grown up and capable of ruling themselves. The colonists knew they were. After all, they’d been running most of their own affairs from the time they first arrived in the New World. But even England’s William Pitt, who was a friend of America, wrote, “This is the mother country, they are the children; they must obey, and we prescribe.”

Part of the problem was that almost none of the English leaders had been to America—or cared to go. They didn’t understand the country or its people. One London newspaper called Americans “a mongrel breed.”

Now we were, and are, exactly that. A mongrel (MONG-grull) is a dog that is a mixture of breeds—a mutt. From our beginnings, we were a mixture of peoples. That was unusual for a nation. We were attempting something difficult and challenging. The London newspaper thought it was insulting us when it said “mongrel breed.” Well, it was no insult—unless, of course, they were calling us dogs.

As I’ve told you, most colonists (no matter where they came...
from) thought of themselves as English citizens, so they were hurt
by sneers from London. But, to be fair, the colonists didn’t quite
understand themselves. Even those who had come from England
weren’t really English anymore. They were now Americans. The
people who came to America were different from the stay-at-homes
in Europe. Many had risked their lives and gone through great hard-
ships to cross the ocean and build homes and farms in a land of
thick forests. They weren’t going to let anyone tell them how to run
their country. King George never thought about that.

What George and his ministers wanted to do was to teach the
colonists a lesson. So they levied taxes, they wouldn’t listen when
the colonists complained, and they sent soldiers to America. The
soldiers had to be housed and fed by the Americans. The British
claimed the soldiers were to protect the colonists—but from whom?

At first the Americans were bothered, then they were angered,
and then they fought. That fight is called the American Revolution
or the War of Independence.

In some ways it really was like a fight between parents and children.
Sometimes those kinds of fights come about because parents don’t
realize their children are grown-up and can take care of themselves.
Sometimes the children aren’t as thoughtful as they could be. There
was something to be said for both sides in this quarrel. But, almost
everyone agrees, King George made some big mistakes. His pride

An English historian said of
George III (above), “He was
very stupid, really stupid—a
clod of a boy whom no one
could teach.” George was fur-
rious when, in 1773, a group
of men threw a shipful of tea
into Boston harbor rather
than pay tax on it (below).
The inset shows a tax
stamp for 1 shilling and 6
pence, proving that the
correct tax has been paid
for a certain amount of tea.
Party On, George

It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hatchet... 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.... 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.... 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 to thoroughly expose them to the effects of the water.

—George Hewss, A Participant in The Boston Tea Party

The tea rebels smeared their faces with red ocher and dressed as Indians.

was more important to him than the valuable American colonies. George wanted to be a good king. But to be a good king you need some wisdom, and George III didn’t have much. He wasn’t anywhere as smart as you are. When George was 10 he was just beginning to learn to read. He never read well. His mother was often heard saying to him, “Be a king, George.” Maybe she realized that he wasn’t made of kingly material. Later in his life he became ill and hardly able to work. Sometimes he raged and screamed and scared his advisers. That is one of the problems with monarchies: you never know how those royal kids are going to turn out. George III wasn’t a bad man; he was actually quite nice. He just wasn’t up to the job of being king.

Remember the Glorious Revolution that gave Parliament more power than the king? Well, George III wasn’t happy with that arrangement. He wanted kings to have more power. He chose government officials who seemed to agree with him. One was Charles Townshend (TOWNS-end). Townshend was known to his friends as “Champagne Charlie.” He was a likable man who sometimes got very drunk. Townshend enraged the Americans by sponsoring taxes they thought were unfair.

Nobody likes to pay taxes. In England, people had just protested over a tax on cider. (Cider was a very popular drink. It was alcoholic, unlike the sweet cider you may have tried.) But the British government was having problems with its budget; it needed money. Foreign wars had left England with big bills to pay. The British thought the colonies should help pay some of those bills, especially the ones from the expensive French and Indian War. And maybe we would have, in 1774 a band of angry colonists tarred and feathered the British customs commissioner, Mr. John Malcomb, for doing his job—trying to collect customs duties on goods imported into America.
but George III and his ministers didn't explain things well; they just demanded taxes. The colonists knew how European kings and barons taxed the peasants and kept them poor. They didn't want to risk that kind of treatment. People in America began to get nervous and angry.

The colonists kept talking about Magna Carta and English rights. They said Englishmen had the right to vote on their own taxes. They expected that same right. But since no colonists served in Parliament, no colonists got to vote on taxes. The colonists complained that they were being taxed without being represented. They said, "No taxation without representation." That meant they wanted to vote on their own taxes, in their own assemblies, as they had been doing.

King George and his ministers were stubborn. They wanted to show the colonists who was boss. So they levied more taxes.

It was the Stamp Tax (passed in 1765) that enraged most Americans. The colonists were supposed to buy a British stamp for every piece of printed paper they used. That meant every sheet of the newspaper, every document, every playing card—everything. The colonists wouldn't do it. They got so angry they attacked some of the British stamp agents and put tar all over them and then feathers in the tar. It was a nasty thing to do, but George III and Parliament got the idea. The Stamp Tax could not be collected. It was repealed.

The actual blend of tea that was thrown overboard at the Boston Tea Party (a mixture of Ceylon and Darjeeling teas, from Sri Lanka and India) can still be bought from the original shippers, Davison Newman of London. The label says, "This tea is from the same London blending House which in the Year of Our Lord 1773 had the Misfortune to suffer a Grievous Wrong in that certain Persons did Place a quantity of its Finest Produce in Boston Harbour."

This famous cartoon portrayed the repeal of the Stamp Act as a solemn funeral for "Miss Stamp." She didn't last long—less than a year.
One area of George Washington's life that historians simply don't have much evidence to draw conclusions about is his marriage.

Shortly after resigning his military commission, GW wed Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy young widow, on January 6, 1759. They had met the previous year when Colonel Washington returned to supervise extensive renovations at Mount Vernon.

George and Martha never had any children of their own, but Martha had two young children by her first husband, Jacky (John Parke Custis) and Patsy (Martha Parke Custis), whom George was instrumental in raising. In later years, the Washingtons also adopted two of their grandchildren, known as Washy and Nelly.

From the documents, it is very clear that GW cared a great deal for his stepchildren and step-grandchildren. There are records of his careful management of their inheritances as well as letters to and from them. Furthermore, GW corresponded frequently with his many nieces and nephews and gave them advice, jobs and financial help over the course of his life.

There are, however, only three known letters that exist between George and Martha Washington. Before she died, Martha Washington purposefully burned the letters from her husband, to keep their relationship private. Two letters from Washington to his wife were found in a desk that Martha gave one of her granddaughters. Both date from the early months of the Revolutionary War, in June 1775. A brief note from Martha from 1777 has also recently been discovered by one of the editors at the Papers of George Washington.

Continue reading: Washington’s views on slavery
Washington's attitude toward slavery has been a topic of great interest in recent years. At the time of his retirement, there were 317 slaves at Mount Vernon. Of these, 124 belonged to Washington, 153 were "dower" slaves who belonged to the estate of Martha's first husband and would go to Custis family heirs, and 40 others were leased from a neighbor.

Although he had both inherited and bought slaves as a young man, there is evidence in his letters that Washington was uncomfortable with the arrangement as he grew older. While still President in 1794, he wrote his secretary about a desire "to liberate a certain species of property I possess, very repugnantly to my own feelings, but which imperious necessity compels." (Link here to letter at the Library of Congress: George Washington Papers).

GW died on the evening of December 14, 1799 of acute epiglottis—a condition that caused his throat to close up so that he could no longer breathe. Washington's very detailed 29-page will offers insight into his final thoughts on the subject of slavery.