

Let Ben Franklin Tell the Story of the American Revolution

(Jan. 23, 2019—The following is a recent open letter to the leadership of the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, which I believe is worthy of much wider circulation. It is published with the permission of the author.—Nancy Spannaus)

By Mark Fairchild

Recently I visited the Museum of the American Revolution for my second time. The first time was in April and the second in December 2018. I am thrilled to have such an institution in Philadelphia, and proud to live in a city that has such a museum.

I am writing to make a suggestion on how to improve the presentation of the causes of the American Revolution.



The Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia.
(wikipedia)

There were times during the course of my visits that I confess I felt uncomfortable, because it appeared to me that whoever was writing the text of some of the displays wanted to give

the reader the impression that the causes of the American Revolution were really rather *trivial*. In the coverage of the Stamp Act, for example, although I don't have the exact text of the display in front of me, I remember thinking that the writer seemed to be trying to argue that actually, it was unreasonable of the Americans to be upset about this tax, because after all, it was really a very small tax, and a similar tax had already been paid by subjects in England for a long time.

In general, I felt dissatisfied with the overall presentation of the causes of the American Revolution, because it seemed as though it was rather shallow – “no taxation without representation”–and that was pretty much it.

What Ben had to Say

The truth is, of course, much deeper and much more dramatic. But, why not just let Ben Franklin tell the story?

For example, why not have on display a replica of a British newspaper that ran the story written by Franklin in 1773, entitled “[An Edict by the King of Prussia](#)”. As you can read for yourself, Ben Franklin refers to the Iron Act of 1750, in which “no Mill or other Engine for Slitting or Rolling of Iron, or any Plating Forge to work with a Tilt-Hammer, or any Furnace for making Steel, shall be erected.”

Imagine! The British Crown outlawed the making of iron in the American colonies?! How's that for outrageous? Why would they do such a thing? Because the essence of colonialism was for the Empire to loot its colonies for raw materials, and prevent them from developing industry. Keep them down, keep them backward; that makes them more manageable – that's colonialism, and the philosophy of Empire! Why not tell that story, and develop that theme?

Franklin also refers to the Wool Act and the Hat Act of 1732, both also designed to prevent industry in the colonies; then

there's the act of 1717 for transporting felons to the New World "for the better peopling of that country". And these are merely scratching the surface.

Are any of these referred to by the Museum of the American Revolution in its displays explaining the causes of the American Revolution? If they are, then I apologize and stand corrected. If they are not, then why not?

This "Edict" by Franklin could even be dramatized, by showing the outrage and shock of the British people as they at first believed this was a real edict coming from the King of Prussia. The irony and humor of the situation makes it memorable. Done properly, this display could become one of the most popular and most memorable of the museum, in my opinion.



A portrait of Benjamin Franklin in 1762.

Are you open to such suggestions? If you are, I have several more.

I must mention at least one other: Ben Franklin's famous satirical essay, "[Rules by which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One](#)". Is this on display, or even mentioned anywhere in the Museum? If so, I missed it.

It seems to me the *causes* of the American Revolution are like the foundation of an edifice; if the foundation is weak, the

entire edifice will crumble. I believe you owe it to yourselves, your public, and indeed to posterity, to give as *thorough* and as *dramatic* a presentation as possible to the burning question: *why* did the Founding Fathers and the Colonists *risk everything*? Didn't it have to be something more gripping and life-threatening than simply "no taxation without representation"? Of course it did. And it was.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this suggestion. I look forward to your reply. Mark Fairchild

The Editor's Comment

The sad truth is that the argument that the American War of Independence was simply a "tax revolt" was actually the position of the British Tories at that time. Men like the Rev. Samuel Seabury of Long Island accused the members of the First Continental Congress of being petty, ungrateful wretches for not appreciating the Mother Country, and risking a huge conflict over a tiny tax.

Among those taking this sophistry head-on was the young Alexander Hamilton, then a lad of 17. He addresses it at the beginning of his first response to Seabury (who wrote under the pen name of "A.W. Farmer"), *A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress*. Hamilton accuses critics of the Congress of being presumptuous, and then says:

And first, let me ask these restless spirits, whence arises that violent antipathy they seem to entertain, not only to the natural rights of mankind; but to common sense and common modesty. That they are enemies to the natural rights of mankind is manifest, because they wish to see one part of their species enslaved by another. That they have an invincible aversion to common sense is apparent in many respects: They endeavour to persuade us, that the absolute sovereignty of parliament does not imply our absolute slavery; that it is a Christian duty to submit to be plundered of all

we have, merely because some of our fellow-subjects are wicked enough to require it of us, that slavery, so far from being a great evil, is a great blessing; and even, *that our contest with Britain is founded entirely upon the petty duty of 3 pence per pound on East India tea*; whereas the whole world knows, it is built upon this interesting question, whether the inhabitants of Great-Britain have a right to dispose of the lives and properties of the inhabitants of America, or not? [emphasis added]



A depiction of the Boston Tea Party, December 1773. (Nathaniel Ives, public domain)

You see, the American patriotic leadership were not fooled. They understood the issue between them and the British monarchy to be nothing less than one of slavery versus freedom. They knew what slavery was—in fact, a number of colonies (Massachusetts, most especially) had made numerous attempts to try to outlaw African slavery, only to have the Crown reject the bills. They knew that the British East India Company, the beneficiary of the tea tax, was committing genocide in India. (For an elaboration, click [here](#).) They knew the Crown had determined that Americans were not to have the right to move beyond the Alleghenies, not to be able to develop their own industry, and thus not to live as free people.

Yes, there were much more fundamental issues than a few taxes that lay behind the American Revolution, as Fairchild asserts. We'll keep you posted on how the Museum leadership responds.

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