TEA PARTY Etiquette

Viewer’s Guide to the 30-minute documentary by the American Social History Project

Through his experience in the streets of colonial Boston, a poor shoemaker joins the struggle for American independence. Based on the life of George Robert Twelves Hewes, *Tea Party Etiquette* follows this colonial artisan through celebrated events such as the 1770 Boston Massacre and 1773 Boston Tea Party, revealing how working people helped make the American Revolution and how they were changed in the process.

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THE WHO BUILT AMERICA? MATERIALS

*Tea Party Etiquette* and nine other documentaries are a part of the *Who Built America?* series, which explores the central role working women and men played in key events and developments of American History. See also the two-volume *Who Built America?* textbook, *Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution*, a high school text on the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the *WBA?* interactive CD-ROM.

Complete list of *WBA?* documentaries:

*History: The Big H*— This film-noir detective story introduces the history of working people and the challenge of understanding the past.


*Daughters of Free Men*— Lucy Hall leaves her New England farm to work in the Lowell textile mills of the 1830s and confronts a new world of opportunity and exploitation.

*Five Points*— The story of 1850s New York City and its notorious immigrant slum district, the Five Points, is seen through the conflicting perspectives of a native born Protestant reformer and an Irish-Catholic family.

*Doing As They Can*— A fugitive woman slave describes her life, work, and day-to-day resistance on a North Carolina cotton plantation during the 1840s and 1850s.

*Dr. Toer’s Amazing Magic Lantern Show*— The struggle to realize the promise of freedom following the Civil War is told by ex-slave J.W. Toer and his traveling picture show.

*1877: The Grand Army of Starvation*— In the summer of 1877 eighty thousand railroad workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands soon followed. The Great Uprising began a new era of conflict about equality in the industrial age.

*Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire*— The story of the Philippine War (1899-1902) and turn-of-the-century world’s fairs reveal the links between everyday life in the U.S. and the creation of a new expansionist foreign policy.

*Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl*— Framed by the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, this program presents a panoramic portrait of immigrant working women in the turn-of-the-century city.

On the eve of the American Revolution, George Robert Twelves Hewes was a poor Boston shoemaker who had been swept up by the fight for American independence. In 1770 Hewes witnessed the bloody Boston Massacre; three years later he took part in the Boston Tea Party. During the Revolutionary War, Hewes served in the militia and as a Patriot sailor.

How do we know about George Hewes' role in the Revolution? In 1835, when he was ninety-three years old and one of the last survivors of the Patriot cause, Hewes became a minor celebrity. Hewes was the subject of two published biographies. One of them was based on an interview conducted by gentleman lawyer Benjamin Thatcher in Boston in 1836.

Tea Party Etiquette recreates the 1836 Hewes-Thatcher interview. Sympathetic yet skeptical, Thatcher does not easily accept Hewes' claim that ordinary citizens helped win American liberty. Thatcher believes more traditional views of the Revolution, which emphasize the role of Patriot leaders like John Hancock and John Adams. Listening to Hewes' version of these well-known events helps Thatcher (and all of us) to see the American Revolution in a new light.

The Centenarian.
Despite its title, George Robert Twelves Hewes was ninety-three when Joseph G. Cole painted this portrait in 1835. Based on Hewes' clothes and demeanor, viewers of the painting probably did not know about his artisanal background or that he was destitute.

Courtesy of the Bostonian Society, Old State House, Boston

1783 engraving of the battle of Bunker Hill.
Library of Congress
Everybody knows something about our country’s “Founding Fathers,” men like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and George Washington. In 1776, prompted by British attacks on colonists’ rights, these men fought for independence from the “tyrant,” King George. Once victorious, the Founding Fathers created a new republic that we still celebrate today.

In fact, the American Revolution did not proceed so smoothly. Nor were men like Adams and Washington the only actors in the dramatic events of the Revolutionary era. Rather, the winning of independence and the creation of the American nation resulted from years of struggle in which ordinary men and women, as well as the Founding Fathers, played a central role.

The promise of the Revolution—a nation based on the republican ideals of liberty, independence, and equality—was only partially achieved. Yet the high ideals of the Revolution have long shaped our ideas of what it means to be an American. The story of George Robert Twelves Hewes helps us understand the part that working people played in the struggle for independence and the republican legacy they left for future generations.

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**Timeline of Key Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1620</td>
<td>Pilgrims land in Massachusetts</td>
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<tr>
<td>1743</td>
<td>George Hewes born</td>
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<tr>
<td>1763</td>
<td>Britain wins French &amp; Indian War (the Seven Years War)</td>
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<td>1765</td>
<td>Britain adopts Stamp Act; Colonists resist Stamp Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>British troops sent to Boston</td>
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<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>Boston Massacre</td>
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<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>Boston Tea Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>Battle of Lexington and Concord; Revolutionary War begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>Declaration of Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781</td>
<td>Battle of Yorktown</td>
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<tr>
<td>1783</td>
<td>Revolutionary War ends</td>
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<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Federal Constitution approved</td>
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<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>George Hewes interviewed</td>
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“Preparation for War to Defend Commerce”. A late eighteenth-century engraving by William Birch depicted in unusual detail work in a Philadelphia shipyard.
American was very different in the colonial era than it is today. In 1763 only 2.5 million people lived in the thirteen colonies. Nine out of ten colonists lived on farms. Small family farms were typical in Pennsylvania, New England and parts of the South, but tenants worked for lordly estate owners in New York’s Hudson Valley. Nearly 500,000 African-Americans lived and worked as slaves, most of them on tobacco and rice plantations in Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas.

Only 100,000 Americans lived in large seaport cities. Philadelphia had 35,000 residents; Boston had 15,000. Yet these ports were the centers of colonial political and economic life. Wealthy merchants like John Hancock of Boston dominated seaport society. Slightly below them on the social ladder were the “middling” sorts: small merchants, lawyers, ministers, and the most prosperous master craftsmen.

The “laboring classes” were the largest group in colonial cities. Most men worked at a skilled trade; they were shipbuilders, carpenters, shoemakers or tailors. Semi-skilled workmen such as seamen and common laborers provided muscle power for the bustling seaports. Most colonial working men hoped to someday own their own workshop or farm. This vision of economic independence and the dignity of honest labor shaped their participation in colonial social and political life.

Few trades were open to colonial women, though larger towns offered more opportunities than the countryside. Women worked as dressmakers, midwives, shopkeepers, and prostitutes. Most women were limited to tasks that paid little money and were centered around the home. When women married they lost most legal rights, such as ownership of property. Yet in many trades, artisans depended on their wives to help out in the workshop, and widows of artisans sometimes took charge of their husbands’
shops. Artisans’ families often lived above their shops; work-life and homelife were closely integrated.

Colonial society was based on a system of deference. Deference means that people willingly show respect for those above them. Today we usually defer to our parents and to people with special skills, such as athletes or doctors. In colonial times, when sharp social divisions were common, a rich merchant expected deference from laboring people because of his greater wealth and status. Similarly, a master craftsman expected deference from his apprentice, as did a husband from his wife.

*Tea Party Etiquette* recalls young George Hewes’ visit to John Hancock. The shoemaker’s apprentice awkwardly paid his respects to his social “better” and patron. In the 1760s, such deference was expected in personal, commercial and political life. This deferential world would be “turned upside down” by working
The seeds of the American Revolution were planted in the 1740s and ‘50s. While Britain fought several wars with France, colonists were left to govern and tax themselves through colonial assemblies. Though voting was limited to male property holders, and colonial assemblies were led by wealthy men like John Hancock and George Washington, this system gave colonists a taste of independence.

After the wars ended in 1763, the British tried to tighten the reins on the colonists. Aiming to rebuild its weakened treasury, Britain’s Parliament taxed the colonies with the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, and other laws. Since Parliament had ignored the colonial assemblies, colonists of all classes resented these Acts as “taxation without representation.”

Other British actions hurt relations with the colonies. The British began to forcibly “impress” colonial workingmen into the British Navy. When thousands of British troops were stationed in Boston, they were a constant source of friction. Colonists saw British soldiers and “press gangs” as an assault on their political liberties.

The British also tried to restrict colonial manufacturing. The colonial economy weakened, and urban laborers were hit especially hard. Meanwhile, off-duty British soldiers competed with laborers for jobs. One Bostonian, describing the condition of the city’s common people, noted that “Poverty and Discontent appear in every face... and dwell upon every tongue.”
The economic and political tensions of the 1760s and early 1770s encouraged colonists of all classes to question British rule. As the spirit of resistance spread, working men and women like George Hewes challenged British authorities in public confrontations, or “crowd actions,” which pushed the colonies towards open conflict with the mother country.

Colonial working people, especially the young and those who could not vote, traditionally had expressed their social grievances through crowd actions such as bread and rent riots. As tension with Britain mounted, such popular actions now took on new political meaning.

Boston was a hotbed of crowd activity. In 1767, Boston sailors and laborers rioted to protest the actions of British customs officials and “press gangs.” When Britain sent 3,000 soldiers to occupy Boston, working people took direct action against the troops. A 1770 street fight between American ropemakers and off-duty British soldiers led to the Boston Massacre, in which British troops killed five Boston workingmen.

Throughout the colonies, crowds of working men and women protested the Stamp Act and other British policies. In some areas, they also challenged local inequities. In New York, tenant farmers turned to protesting against their landlords. Following Stamp Act marches in South Carolina, a group of slaves and free blacks demonstrated for freedom for all. Once loose, the spirit of liberty was hard to contain.

Popular resistance to British policies sometimes ended in the tarring and feathering of Britain’s appointed officials, or suspected informers. Colonial crowds took such violent actions when they felt the courts would not punish an offender. By humiliating and isolating these individuals, working men and women made it hard for the British to enforce their policies.

Colonial leaders, who often disavowed crowd ac-
tions as “the work of the mob,” helped organize the most famous action of all, the 1773 Boston Tea Party. More than a hundred Patriots, including workingmen such as George Hewes, destroyed chests of British tea to protest a newly imposed tea tax. When Hewes later claimed he stood next to John Hancock at the Tea Party, he revealed his belief that he and other workingmen had become Hancock’s equals in the American Patriot cause.

Crowd actions and public meetings gave working people a new sense of power and importance, and helped undermine the colonial system of social and political deference. As the British tried to crack down on crowd actions, their policies grew increasingly desperate and harsh. By 1775, relations between Britain and the colonies were explosively tense.
I
n April 1775, tension turned into open warfare. British troops, sent from Boston to capture Patriot arms in nearby Lexington and Concord, found themselves fighting a bloody battle with aroused Patriot farmers. As word spread, thousands of armed Patriots surrounded Boston and trapped the British Army. The Revolutionary War had begun.

The history of the Revolutionary War has been told many times. The gallantry of George Washington, the winter hardships of Valley Forge—these stories are legendary. Yet we often forget that the war lasted seven long years, and that American forces were sometimes on the verge of defeat. Using guerilla-like tactics of harassment and hit-and-run warfare, the poorly-equipped Patriots kept the cause alive until American armies and their French allies were ready for full-scale battles with the British.

The American forces, which included state militias as well as the Continental Army, were composed mainly of the young, laboring men, and the poor. Some were drafted, some volunteered, as George Hewes did, and some were hired as substitutes by wealthy men. “It is incredible, “ wrote a French observer, “that men of every age, even children of fifteen, whites and blacks, almost naked, unpaid, and rather poorly fed, can march so well and withstand fire so steadfastly.”

“Yankee Doodle, or the American Satan.”

This print, by an American-born engraver living in London, may have mocked British characterizations of the Patriot enemy by portraying the “evil” archetypal American as a plainly-dressed, serious-looking young man. After British soldiers started losing battles, their favorite song deriding colonists, “Yankee Doodle,” was proudly appropriated by American forces.

Joseph Wright, Yankee Doodle, or the American Satan, engraving, c. 1778, Chicago Historical Society
Women also played a role in the war. When husbands, brothers and sons went off to fight, women ran the farms that fed America. Meanwhile, thousands of women joined their menfolk as Army "camp followers," providing such important services as cooking, washing clothes, and nursing the wounded.

At times, the diverse, ragtag American army resembled in spirit the revolutionary crowd. The democratic artisans and laboring men who served in the Philadelphia militia, for example, demanded in 1776 that they have the right to elect all officers. Since each man had to pay for his own uniform, they proposed "levelling all distinctions" by making their uniform "Hunting Shirts," which all could afford.

Patriot leaders could not ignore such demands, because they did not have a firm hold on the country. Some colonists opposed the Revolution, and many were neutral or apathetic. Some colonists had good reason for their lack of enthusiasm. Most black slaves were reluctant to fight for a revolution that included slave owners in its leadership. Similarly, Hudson Valley farmers wanted assurance that the revolution would help them throw off their Patriot landlords and get land of their own.

To keep the Patriot fighting force intact, and to assure that indifferent colonists did not become British allies, Patriot leaders had to address some of the demands of "ordinary" men and women. What had begun in 1775 as a war for independence led to deeper questions about the nature of freedom and equality in the emerging nation.
After the war ended in 1783, Americans of all classes set about building a new nation. Though the promise of the Declaration of Independence—that all men are created equal—was not fully achieved, the Revolution did bring about important changes in American society.

The transformation from colonial status to nationhood broadened democratic ideas and practices. The right to vote, though still limited by property, was extended to many more craftsmen and small farmers. Meanwhile, more men took part in political debates and used their right to vote. The sense of being American citizens spread; farmers and workingmen like George Hewes now felt America was their country, and they should have a voice in its government.

The Revolution also affected everyday life. For decades, Americans valued egalitarian simplicity in dress and speech. Moreover, by taking part in crowd actions, battles and political debates, working people had gained a sense of their ability to shape events. The idea that the “lower orders” should follow the commands of their “betters” had been undermined by the experience of the Revolution. As George Hewes exclaimed, “I’ll not take my hat off to any man!”

Most craftsmen supported the new Constitution. With the promotion of commerce and manufacturing, they believed, America would become a “republican” nation of sturdy farmers and craftsmen. To them, equality meant that economic independence would be within the reach of every man.
In many ways, however, the American Revolution was incomplete. Many farmers worried that the new federal government was too powerful, and would lead to rule by a wealthy few. They applied pressure at state ratification conventions, and helped win a Bill of Rights to guarantee individual rights and liberties.

Other issues were not resolved so quickly. While the northern states had abolished slavery by 1804, slavery actually grew stronger in the south. The Constitution protected the slave system and guaranteed the continuation of the slave trade for twenty years. For women, too, equality was a distant dream. Women could not vote, and continued to lack many legal rights.

In the decades to come, farmers and artisans like George Hewes found the ideals of the Revolution harder to realize. A new upheaval, the Industrial Revolution, would soon challenge the sons and daughters of the revolutionary generation. As the nation’s economy changed, many working men found it difficult to protect the “republican” ideals of independence. Yet the promise of the Revolution inspired working people to fight for the rights denied them. The legacy of equality would guide the abolition, women’s rights, labor and civil rights movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In 1877, working people drew upon the Revolutionary ideals of equality and independence to protest the growing power of America’s industrial corporations.
In the over 225 years since the American Revolution, many artists have created pictures of its famous events. Some pictures are so familiar that we hardly look at them. But we should not unthinkingly accept what they tell us about our national past. Let’s look at pictures of the Boston Massacre.

How can pictures of the same event look so different? Is one picture wrong, and the others right? Not really. The answer is that pictures of the Revolution (and other historical events) are not representations of fact. Rather, they are interpretations or opinions. When we look at such pictures, we need to think carefully about who drew them and what they were trying to say about events in the past.

**“The Bloody Massacre.”**
Paul Revere issued his version of the Boston Massacre three weeks after the incident. The print (which Revere plagiarized from a fellow Boston engraver) was widely circulated and repeatedly copied (over twenty-four times). The print was the official Patriot version of the incident: British soldiers actually did not fire a well-disciplined volley; white men were not the sole actors in the incident; and the Bostonians provoked the soldiers with taunts and thrown objects.

Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre perpetuated in King Street Boston on March 5th, 1770*, etching, 1770
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress
Scholarly Works


