

The Edenton "Tea Party"

Letter of unknown author printed in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, January 31, 1775. Reprinted by the Edenton Woman's Club in *Historic Edenton and Countryside* (The Chowan Herald, 1959), pp. 3–4.

As you read...

WHERE'S THE TEA?

In October 1774, several prominent women of Edenton gathered at the home of Elizabeth King, with Penelope Barker presiding, to sign a petition supporting the American cause. You'll notice that their petition, reprinted here, doesn't actually mention tea, but only the "resolves" of the Continental Congress against importing British products such as clothing and tea. The name "Edenton Tea Party" didn't come about until later, when North Carolinians telling stories about it wanted to compare it to the Boston Tea Party.

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

Unlike many famous documents from the American Revolution, the petition signed at the "Edenton Tea Party" survives only through *British* accounts. The text of the petition, and the list of signers, was printed in the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* on January 16, 1775, taken from a letter sent from North Carolina to someone in England.

The first paragraph is from the letter, and introduces the petition. The petition itself begins after the first paragraph, with *Edenton, North Carolina...* and is marked with quotation marks.

VIRTUOUS WOMEN

In the eighteenth century, *virtue* was a quality associated mainly with men. The virtues praised by Revolutionary leaders were qualities they thought would make a strong society able to resist Great Britain, such as industry (hard work) and frugality (avoiding waste and being willing to make do with less). Men were thought to have these virtues, but women were thought to be weak and unable to control their passions.

Most colonists participated in the resistance to Britain through *nonimportation*, simply refusing to buy goods imported from Britain. The idea was both to refuse to pay taxes on these goods and to force British manufacturers and shippers to support the colonial cause by cutting into their profits. (Today we'd call this kind of behavior "conscientious consumption (see <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/11/23/style/rgiftethic.php>).")

The women of Edenton, by supporting nonimportation and refusing to drink tea, were showing that they, too, could be frugal — that they, like their husbands, had the kind of virtue a strong republic needed.

But their act was revolutionary in another way: Before the 1770s, it was unheard of for women to sign a petition, or to take any other part in politics.

A WILMINGTON TEA PARTY

Not to be outdone, the patriotic ladies of Wilmington held their own “party” in the spring of 1775 and actually burned their tea. Janet Schaw, a visitor from Scotland who had no sympathy for the colonial rebellion, reported the event in her journals, and noted that not everyone in Wilmington approved of the protest:

The Ladies have burnt their tea in a solemn procession, but they had delayed however till the sacrifice was not very considerable, as I do not think any one offered above a quarter of a pound. The people in town live decently, and tho’ their houses are not spacious, they are in general very commodious and well furnished. All the Merchants of any note are British and Irish, and many of them very genteel people. They all disapprove of the present proceedings. Many of them intend quitting the country as fast as their affairs will permit them, but are yet uncertain what steps to take.

(Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/schaw/schaw.html>) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921).

Extract of a letter from North Carolina, Oct. 27.

The Provincial Deputies of North Carolina having resolved not to drink any more tea, nor wear any more British cloth, &c. many ladies of this Province have determined to give a memorable proof of their patriotism, and have accordingly entered into the following honourable and spirited association. I send it to you, to shew your fair countrywomen, how zealously and faithfully American ladies follow the laudable example of their husbands, and what opposition your Ministers may expect to receive from a people thus firmly united against them:

Edenton, North Carolina, Oct. 25, 1774.

As we cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country, and as it has been thought necessary, for the public good, to enter into several particular resolves¹ by a meeting of Members deputed from the whole Province, it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections who have concurred in them, but to ourselves who are essentially interested in their welfare², to do every thing as far as lies in our power to testify our sincere adherence to the same; and we do therefore accordingly subscribe this paper, as a witness of our fixed intention and solemn determination to do so.

- Abigail Charlton
- Mary Blount
- F. Johnstone
- Elizabeth Creacy
- Margaret Cathcart
- Elizabeth Patterson
- Anne Johnstone

- Jane Wellwood
- Margaret Pearson
- Mary Woolard
- Penelope Dawson
- Sarah Beasley
- Jean Blair
- Susannah Vail
- Grace Clayton
- Elizabeth Vail
- Frances Hall
- Elizabeth Vail
- Mary Jones
- Mary Creacy
- Anne Hall
- Mary Creacy
- Rebecca Bondfield
- Ruth Benbury
- Sarah Littlejohn
- Sarah Howcott
- Penelope Barker³
- Sarah Hoskins
- Elizabeth P. Ormond
- Mary Littlede
- M. Payne
- Sarah Valentine
- Elizabeth Johnston
- Elizabeth Cricket
- Mary Bonner
- Elizabeth Green
- Lydia Bonner
- Mary Ramsay
- Sarah Howe
- Anne Horniblow
- Lydia Bennet
- Mary Hunter
- Marion Wells
- Tresia Cunningham
- Anne Anderson
- Elizabeth Roberts
- Sarah Mathews
- Elizabeth Roberts
- Anne Haughton
- Elizabeth Roberts
- Elizabeth Beasley

On the web

The non-importation resolves

http://www.constitution.org/bcp/res_non-import.htm

The "Declaration and Resolves" passed by the First Continental Congress, October 14, 1774.

You're Invited! The Edenton Tea Party

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/edentonteparty8.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will learn about the Edenton Tea Party, one of the earliest organized women's political actions in United States history that occurred in 1774 in Edenton, North Carolina. Students will then exhibit their understanding of the event by creating an invitation that combines artistic and creative measure with learned facts of the protest.

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Notes

1. In August 1774, delegates from thirty of North Carolina's thirty-six counties and four towns met in New Bern. This First Provincial Congress, as it would be called, met for three days, during which it elected delegates to the Continental Congress that would meet in Philadelphia that fall and pledged to support its decisions. The Provincial Congress also supported the growing movement in the colonies to boycott British imports, called *nonimportation*, and created local "committees of safety" to enforce its acts. Although they had no legal standing, the delegates claimed to represent the people, and therefore to have more authority than the royal governor. Essentially, the Provincial Congress was the beginnings of a government in North Carolina separate from royal control.

Two months later, the first Continental Congress made nonimportation more formal when its members agreed "to enter into a non-importation, non-consumption, and non-exportation agreement or association." This meant that they would not purchase any goods imported from Britain or from any British colonies in the West Indies, including not only tea but clothing, sugar, rum, and slaves.

2. Here, the women note their duty to their "near and dear" — that is, to their husbands who are active in the opposition to British authority. So while this petition was a bold step — it was practically unheard of for women to sign a petition in the 1770s — they still made it clear that they were supporting their husbands. They don't, in other words, seem to have been demanding any greater role in politics.
3. According to local traditions, Penelope Barker organized the "tea party." Another story tells that during the Revolution, while her husband was away, British soldiers occupying Edenton took the horses from her stables. She grabbed her husband's sword, ran outside, and cut the reins from the hands of the officer, who told her that for such bravery she could keep her horses. Unfortunately, it's impossible to know whether this story — like a lot of the really good stories from the American Revolution — is true.