Stamp Act

This article on the Stamp Act in Colonial America provides fast facts and information about the effects of these laws and taxes.

- What was the Stamp Act?
- The Meaning and Definition of the Stamp Act & pictures of the Stamp Act stamps
- The purpose of the Stamp Act
- The significance of the Stamp Act
- The year the Stamp Act was passed was 1765
- Fast and easy to understand explanation of the Stamp Act for kids

Original Text of the Stamp Act

American Colonies Index  Taxation in the Colonies

History of the 13 Colonies and the laws & taxes that sparked rebellion against the British

The definition and purpose of the 1765 Stamp Act and the cry of "No taxation without representation!"

Definition of the Stamp Act
The Meaning and Definition of the Stamp Act: The Stamp Act of 1765 was a British Law, passed by the Parliament of Great Britain during the reign of King George III during the ministry of George Grenville (Lord Grenville).

The Stamp Act was passed on February 17, approved by the House of Lords on March 8th, and received Royal Assent on 22 March 1765. The Stamp Act took effect on November 1, 1765.

It was designed to raise revenue from the American Colonies by a duty (tax) in the form of a stamp required on all newspapers and legal or commercial documents.

The Stamp Act was first direct tax to be levied on the American colonies. It was the first serious attempt to assert governmental authority over the 13 colonies. For fast facts refer to the article on the Facts about the Stamp Tax.

Images of Stamp Act Stamps - One Penny Stamp

What was the Stamp Act?
The Stamp Act required various items such as licenses, documents, diplomas and nearly every paper item to be printed on stamped or embossed paper in the American colonies. This meant that the American colonists were obliged to pay a fee on almost every piece of paper used for legal documents. The colonists were obliged to pay extra for things that were used on a daily basis, such as newspapers. Basically anything printed on paper, except books, was taxed. The people who created public documents had to pay a tax on blank paper and then officials would place a stamp as proof of payment. The British Parliament granted colonists the right to select American tax collectors for the job. The people who
were most effected by the Stamp Act were lawyers, ministers, printers and merchants. These colonists were men of wealth and standing in the community and some of the most influential people in society.

### The Stamp Act Documents

The Stamp Act called for the taxing of 54 separate items. Many of the documents that were subject to tax by the Stamp Act are detailed on the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stamp Act Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificates (including Marriage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills of Sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomas and Certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any kind of declarations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamphlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements in papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ship's papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licences including Liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publications in Foreign Tongues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the above documents and items had to carry a tax stamp.

### Stamp Act of 1765 - Background Information

In April 1763, George Grenville (Lord Grenville) became the British Prime Minister. Although the French and Indian War (aka the Seven Years War 1755-1763) was a victory for the British they were left with a massive war debt. Before the French and Indian War the British national debt was only 72 million pounds. By the end of the French and Indian War the debt had escalated to almost 130 million pounds. British Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Grenville, needed to find ways of reducing the war debt, but the further taxation of English citizens in Britain created a serious threat of revolt. The defeat of France had removed the political threat posed by the French, and the British, under Lord Grenville, were sufficiently confident to tighten their control over the American colonies. His policy was to raise revenue by taxing the American colonists, rather than taxing the British. The various policies and taxes that he had already imposed on the American colonists included the [Reversal of Salutary Neglect](#) and the [Sugar Act](#). The Stamp Act was just one of the taxes Britain intended to impose on the colonies...

### Purpose of the Stamp Act of 1765

The Purpose of the Stamp Act of 1765 was to:

- Raise revenue to pay clear the War Debt incurred during the French Indian Wars (Seven Years War)
- Raise revenue to pay for the military presence in the American colonies to enforce the new taxes
- Divert new taxes and duties from Britain to the American colonies
- Assert British governmental authority over the American colonies
- Re-enforce the polices of previous Acts in relation to duties, taxes and currency - refer to Revolutionary Timeline and Colonial, Continental and Revolutionary Currency
- Implement new taxes on paper documents

### Stamp Act Stamps

The Stamp Act Stamps were not like the stamps that we put on envelopes. Some documents were printed on stamped or embossed paper. The stamped or embossed papers had a tax on them and had to be bought from a government stamped paper office. Other documents were indented with a hand pressed stamp or had a foil seal.

### Images of Stamp Act Stamps

What did the stamp act stamps look like? See the images of Stamp Act Stamps showing various denominations.
Images of Stamp Act Stamps showing that the Stamp Tax had been paid

Stamp Act Stamps - Denominations
The value or denominations of Stamp Act Stamps varied according to different documents. The denominations of Stamp Act Stamps ranged from a half penny to £10. The denomination of Stamp Act Stamps often increased according to the size of the document - the tax on pamphlets grew in proportion to their size. Examples of the denominations of Stamp Act Stamps are shown on the following chart (d=penny and s=shilling - there were 12 pennies in one shilling and 20 shillings in one pound):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value of Stamp Tax</th>
<th>Document Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£10</td>
<td>Attorney Licenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3d - 10s</td>
<td>Administrative Court papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1s..6d</td>
<td>Land grants under 100 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s</td>
<td>Land grants under 100 - 200 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s..6d</td>
<td>Land grants under 200 - 320 acres and an additional 2s..6d for every additional 320 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1s..0d</td>
<td>Pack of playing cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10s</td>
<td>Dice (see below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>½ penny</td>
<td>Newspaper or pamphlet printed on half a sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d</td>
<td>Newspaper or pamphlet printed on a full sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>License to sell liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2s</td>
<td>Advertisements in papers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were some other items that were subject to the Stamp Act of 1765:

- Any publications in foreign tongues had to pay twice the normal rates
- The apprenticeship system was also subject to the Stamp Tax. Indenture contracts were taxed at the rate of 6d on every £1
- Dice were the only non-paper items listed under the 1765 Stamp Act - Stamp impressions were made on the dice as proof that the Stamp Tax had been paid
  - As the Stamp Tax applied to both playing cards and dice this can be viewed as an indirect tax on gambling
Payment for Stamp Act Stamps - Gold or Silver
The Stamp Act Stamps showed that the appropriate tax had been paid in British currency (see the images of the stamps). The Stamp Act Stamps had to be paid with 'hard currency' and not in paper money, which was the most common form of payment in the colonies. The American colonies suffered a constant shortage of 'hard currency' (silver and gold). There were no gold or silver mines in the colonies. Silver and gold coins (hard currency) could only be obtained through trade as regulated by Great Britain as trade with any other countries was banned by the British - see the Currency Act of 1764.

Stamp Act 1765 - Penalties, Fines and Forfeitures
There were various penalties, fine and forfeitures for anyone who had a part in printing or offering for sale unstamped matter subject to tax. The fine was 40s up to £10. Every pack of cards or pair of dice sold unstamped there was a fine of £10. And should an unstamped newspaper or pamphlet fail to state the name and address of the publisher, the seller faced a further penalty of £20 for each offence.

Stamp Act 1765 - Counterfeited Documents - Death
The Stamp Act of 1765 was really severe on anyone involved in the counterfeit of documents. The wording of the Stamp Act says it all:

"...counterfeit mark or impression thereon, knowing such mark or impression to be counterfeited; then every person so offending shall be adjudged a felon, and shall suffer death as in cases of felony without the benefit of clergy..."

No Trial by Jury for anyone who offended the Stamp Act 1765
The fines and penalties for anyone offending the Stamp Act were harsh and these penalties caused even more consternation as any cases were heard by the Admiralty Courts. The Admiralty Courts had been originally instituted to try violations of the law on the high seas - refer to the Navigation Acts. The British had used the Admiralty Courts in America to try individuals believed to be evading duties or smuggling. There was no trial by jury in the Admiralty Courts. Cases were decided by judges rather than juries.

The Colonists Reaction to the Stamp Act of 1765
The Stamp Act of 1765 was seen as detrimental to Colonial America and sewed the seeds of dissension and rebellion in the colonies. The colonists outrage and violent reaction to the Stamp Act came as a great surprise to the British government. The British believed they had a right to enforce their trade policies and taxes as the Mother Country. And the colonists had become accustomed, to a limited degree, to the British regulation of trade and taxes. So what was the difference between the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act, why was the reaction to the Stamp Act so strong, what was the significance of the Stamp Act?

Significance of the Stamp Act of 1765
The Significance of the Stamp Act was extremely far reaching. The following points raise the elements that contributed to the significance of the Stamp Act of 1765:

- The previous policies and taxes had only applied to specific types of trade and commerce in the different areas of the American colonies
The taxes levied by the Stamp Act were not to regulate commerce and trade, but to directly grasp money out of colonists.

The Stamp Act affected all of the colonists.
The colonies believed that the Stamp Act was a deliberate attempt to undercut their commercial strength and their independence.
The tax was introduced by a direct order from Britain without approval of the colonial legislature.
The Stamp Act was the first direct tax, a tax on domestically produced and consumed items, that Parliament ever levied upon the colonists.
The colonists viewed the British regulation of trade as legal but the British imposition of internal taxes on the colonies, was perceived to be illegal.
The act was to be enforced by stamp agents, with penalties for violating the act to be imposed by vice-admiralty courts, which sat without juries.
The colonists believed in their rights to trial by jury.
The Stamp Act united the colonists in New England, the Middle and the Southern colonies and stirred a storm of protest in the New World.
The Stamp Act led to the first concerted effort by the American colonists to resist the British Parliament and the authority of Great Britain.
The high taxes on lawyers and college students were designed to limit the growth of a professional class in the American colonies.
The Stamp Act was viewed by the American colonists as a means of censorship, or a "knowledge tax," on the rights of the colonists to write and read freely.
The opposition to the Act was led by the most influential segments of colonial society. These men were most affected by the Act and included lawyers, clergymen, journalists, publishers, land owners, ship builders and merchants.
The Act led to the doctrine of 'consent by the governed'.
The Stamp Act of 1765 led to the creation of resistance groups such as the Sons of Liberty.
The Stamp Act crisis led the colonists to perceive themselves as American rather than British.

Protesting against the Stamp Act - Crisis in the Colonies

The colonists started protesting against the Stamp Act and the situation turned into a crisis. There were meetings, demonstrations, boycotts, circulars and petitions. Some Colonists began protesting against the Stamp Act of 1765 by burning Stamp Act papers. Others refused to pay the Stamp Taxes. Pillars of the community such as lawyers and clergymen were highly vocal in their protests. Young hot-headed students felt particularly aggrieved by the Act. Protesting against the Stamp Act escalated even further and the crisis became worse - colonists started to turn to violence. Officials were harassed and verbally abused. Protestors turned into mobs and property was damaged. Stamp Agents were burnt in effigy - dummies dressed to resemble stamp agents were hanged or burned during some of the protests. As the crisis and protests gained momentum the verbal abuse turned into physical abuse. The strength and violence of the opposition to the Stamp Act surprised the colonists as much as the British government. If the crisis escalated further it would become impossible to maintain order and the very idea of using troops against their own people was unthinkable...

The Repeal of the Stamp Act

Steps had to be taken before full scale rebellion broke out in the colonies. Concerned parties were agitating for the Repeal of the Stamp Act. Benjamin Franklin, who was the colonial agent for Pennsylvania, spoke before the House of Commons in early 1766 about the Stamp Act. He clearly stated that any attempt to enforce the Stamp Act by the use of troops might bring on rebellion and called for the repeal of the Act. Arguments against the Stamp Act were distributed from assembly to
assembly in the form of "circulars" and Patrick Henry introduced seven resolutions against the Stamp Act in the Virginia House of Burgesses. The Repeal of the Stamp Act is approved by the House of Commons in February 1766. The repeal of the Stamp Act was then approved by the House of Lords in May 1766. The British Parliament repealed the Stamp Act because boycotts were damaging British trade but at the same time they used the Declaratory Act to save face. The declaration stated that Parliament's authority was the same in America as in Britain and asserted Parliament's authority to pass laws that were binding on the American colonies - the passage of the Declaratory Act was the beginning of more trouble...

**Stamp Act - British Laws and Taxes**

Discover interesting facts and information about the Taxes in the 13 Colonies, including the Stamp Act, which was imposed on the colonists of Colonial America by the British government via parliament. The Stamp Act was one of a series of taxes that divided Great Britain and its colonies in America. Despite the threat of rebellion and the intensity of the protests against the Stamp Act in the American colonies additional acts were passed in the British parliament which were deemed to be detrimental to the colonies. The Stamp Act led to outrage, anger, resentment, dissension and ultimately revolution in Colonial America - the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain.

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**Stamp Act**

- Meaning and Definition of the Stamp Act
- History of the Stamp Act of 1765
- Fast Facts and info about Stamp Act timeline
- The Stamp Act article is a great history resource for kids
- Social Studies Homework help for kids on the Stamp Act of 1765

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**Taxes in the Colonies - The Declaration of Independence**