

The Boston Tea Party: A Loyalist's View A letter from
Boston written by Ann Hulton, 1774

Ann Hulton was a Loyalist, the sister of Henry Hulton, the commissioner of customs in Boston from 1767 to 1776. During those years, Ann Hulton wrote a number of letters to a friend in Liverpool, England, Mrs. Adam Lightbody. The following letter, written six weeks after the Boston Tea Party, describes some of the brutality directed toward government officials at that time. To present day readers, looking at an old drawing, tarring and feathering seems like a prank. Actually, it was a cruel and sometimes fatal punishment. Though Ann Hulton's righteous anger is obvious in this letter, she hoped that everything would turn out all right. In another letter to her friend, written six months later, she stated, "I don't despair of seeing peace and tranquility in America, though they talk very high and furious at present."

January 31st, 1774

You will perhaps expect me to give you some account of the state of Boston and late proceedings here, but really the times are too bad and the scenes too shocking for me to describe.

After the destruction of the tea, my brother returned home, and the other Commissioners [customs officers] left the Castle [a fort protecting Boston harbor], the violent fury of the people having subsided a little. One would have thought before that all the malice that earth and Hell could raise were pointed against the Governor.

But the most shocking cruelty was exercised a few nights ago upon a poor old man, a customs inspector named Malcolm. A quarrel was picked with him. He was afterwards taken and tarred and feathered. There's no law that knows a punishment for the greatest crimes beyond what this is, of cruel torture. And this instance exceeds any other before it.

He was stripped stark naked, one of the severest cold nights this winter, his body covered all over with tar, then with feathers, his arm dislocated in tearing off his clothes. He was dragged in a cart with thousands attending, some beating him with clubs and knocking him out of the cart, then in again. They gave him several severe whippings, at different parts of the town. This spectacle of horror and sportive cruelty was exhibited for about five hours.

The unhappy wretch they say behaved with the greatest courage all the while before he was taken. He defended himself a long time against numbers, and afterwards, when under torture they demanded that he curse his masters, the King and the Governor, which they could not make him do, he still cried, "Curse all traitors."

The doctors say that it is impossible this poor creature can live. They say his flesh comes off his back in strips.

The Boston Tea Party: A Patriot's View A letter from John
Adams, 1773

John Adams greeted news of the Boston Tea Party with joy. Yet, as this letter shows, even he underestimated the significance of the event. He believed this act of defiance would bring England to its senses, forcing repeal of the Tea Act. Instead, Parliament passed the Coercive Acts to punish Boston.

To James Warren

Boston, December 17, 1773

Dear Sir,

The die is cast: the people have passed the river and cut away the bridge. Last night three cargoes of tea were emptied into the harbor. This is the grandest event which has ever yet happened since the controversy with Britain opened!

The sublimity [grandness] of it charms me!

For my own part, I cannot express my own sentiments of it better than in the words of Colonel Doane [a wealthy merchant] to me, last evening. . . . The worst that can happen, I think, says he, in consequence of it, will be that the province must pay for it. . . . However, he agreed with me that the province would never pay for it. And also in this, that the final ruin of our Constitution of government, and of all American liberties, would be the certain consequence of suffering it to be landed.

Governor Hutchinson and his family and friends will never have done with their good services to Great Britain and the colonies! But for him, this tea might have been saved to the East India Company. Whereas this loss, if the rest of the colonies should follow our example, will in the opinion of many persons bankrupt the company. However, I dare say that the Governors and consignees [tea buyers] and Custom House officers in the other colonies will have more wisdom than ours have had and take effectual care that their tea shall be sent back to England untouched. If not, it will as surely be destroyed there as it has been here.

Threats, phantoms, bugbears by the million will be invented and propagated [spread] among the people upon this occasion. Individuals will be threatened with suits and prosecutions. Armies and navies will be talked of-military executions-charters annulled-treason-trials in England and all that. But these terrors are all but imaginations. Yet, if they should become realities, they had better he suffered than the great principle of parliamentary taxation given up.

The town of Boston was never more still and calm of a Saturday night than it was last night. All things were conducted with great order, decency, and perfect submission to government. No doubt we all thought the administration in better hands than it had been.