

First Continental Congress, 1774

The Declaration of Rights and Grievances

In March, 1774, the British Parliament passed a series of laws they referred to as the Coercive Acts. The Americans called them the Intolerable Acts. The Acts were primarily designed to punish the colony of Massachusetts for defying British policies; specifically, for the Boston Tea Party. Outrage in the Americas over the Intolerable Acts led to the calling of the First Continental Congress in September, 1774. During the First Congress, which included representatives from all of the colonies except Georgia, the delegates decided to take several actions, including a boycott of British goods. It also drafted a declaration to the King and Parliament, outlining the position of the Congress. This work is the Declaration of Rights and Grievances.

The Intolerable Acts, called "impolitic, unjust, and cruel," included the Boston Port Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, the Quartering Act, and the Administration of Justice Act. The Boston Port Act closed the port of Boston to trade; the Massachusetts Government Act significantly changed the colony's charter and forbade town meetings; the Quartering Act required colonists to house British soldiers on demand without compensation; and the Administration of Justice Act removed British officials from the jurisdiction of Massachusetts courts. Another act, the Quebec Act, established Roman Catholicism and a new system of government in the newly acquired colony of Quebec, and played on widespread distrust and even hatred of the Catholic Church.

On Wednesday, September 7, 1774, Congress appointed a committee, consisting of two delegates from each colony in attendance. The committee's duty was defined in this resolution: "That a Committee be appointed to state the rights of the Colonies in general, the several instances in which these rights are violated or infringed, and the means most proper to be pursued for obtaining a restoration of them." The committee read its draft of the rights of the colonies on Thursday the 22nd and a draft of the grievances on the 24th. Congress debated the drafts on October 12 and 13, and a final draft was agreed on Friday, October 14, 1774.

Later in the session, the Articles of Association were drafted - where the Declaration was addressed to the King, the Articles were a plan of agreement between the colonies themselves, a union of protest and boycott.

The source for this text is the Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, Volume 1. The text is as presented in that volume, but has been modified slightly to expand abbreviations and modernize spelling. Footnotes explain arcane language and illuminate some points.

Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, October 1774

Whereas, since the close of the last war, the British parliament, claiming a power of right to bind the people of America by statute in all cases whatsoever, hath, in some acts expressly imposed taxes on them, and in others, under various pretenses, but in fact for the purpose of raising a revenue, hath imposed rates and duties payable in these colonies, established a board of commissioners with unconstitutional powers, and extended the jurisdiction of courts of Admiralty not only for collecting the said duties, but for the trial of causes merely arising within the body of a county.

And whereas, in consequence of other statutes, judges who before held only estates at will in their offices, have been made dependent on the Crown alone for their salaries, and standing armies kept in times of peace. And it has lately been resolved in Parliament, that by force of a statute made in the 35th year of the reign of king Henry the Eighth, ^[1] colonists may be transported to England, and tried there

upon accusations for treasons and misprisions, or concealments of treasons committed in the colonies; and by a late statute, such trials have been directed in cases therein mentioned.

And whereas, in the last session of Parliament, three statutes were made; one entitled "An act to discontinue, in such manner and for such time as are therein mentioned, the landing and discharging, lading, or shipping of goods, wares and merchandise, at the town, and within the harbor of Boston in the province of Massachusetts-bay, in North America;" ^[2] another, entitled "An act for the better regulating the government of the province of the Massachusetts-bay in New England;" ^[3] and another, entitled "An act for the impartial administration of justice, in the cases of persons questioned for any act done by them in the execution of the law, or for the suppression of riots and tumults, in the province of the Massachusetts-bay, in New England." ^[4] And another statute was then made, "for making more effectual provision for the government of the province of Quebec, etc." ^[5] All which statutes are impolitic, unjust, and cruel, as well as unconstitutional, and most dangerous and destructive of American rights.

And whereas, Assemblies have been frequently dissolved, contrary to the rights of the people, when they attempted to deliberate on grievances; and their dutiful, humble, loyal, and reasonable petitions to the crown for redress, have been repeatedly treated with contempt, by His Majesty's ministers of state:

The good people of the several Colonies of New Hampshire, Massachusetts bay, Rhode Island and Providence plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Newcastle, Kent and Sussex on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, justly alarmed at these arbitrary proceedings of parliament and administration, have severally elected, constituted, and appointed deputies to meet, and sit in general Congress, in the city of Philadelphia, in order to obtain such establishment, as that their religion, laws, and liberties, may not be subverted:

Whereupon the deputies so appointed being now assembled, in a full and free representation of these Colonies, taking into their most serious consideration the best means of attaining the ends aforesaid, do in the first place, as Englishmen their ancestors in like cases have usually done, for asserting and vindicating their rights and liberties, declare,

That the inhabitants of the English Colonies in North America, by the immutable laws of nature, the principles of the English constitution, and the several charters or compacts, have the following Rights:

1. That they are entitled to life, liberty, and property, and they have never ceded to any sovereign power whatever, a right to dispose of either without their consent.
2. That our ancestors, who first settled these colonies, were at the time of their emigration from the mother country, entitled to all the rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural born subjects within the realm of England.
3. That by such emigration they by no means forfeited, surrendered, or lost any of those rights, but that they were, and their descendants now are entitled to the exercise and enjoyment of all such of them, as their local and other circumstances enable them to exercise and enjoy.
4. That the foundation of English liberty, and of all free government, is a right in the people to participate in their legislative council: and as the English colonists are not represented, and from their local and other circumstances, cannot properly be represented in the British parliament, they are entitled to a free and exclusive power of legislation in their several provincial legislatures, where their right of representation can alone be preserved, in all cases of taxation and internal polity, subject only to the

negative of their sovereign, in such manner as has been heretofore used and accustomed. But, from the necessity of the case, and a regard to the mutual interest of both countries, we cheerfully consent to the operation of such acts of the British parliament, as are bona fide restrained to the regulation of our external commerce, for the purpose of securing the commercial advantages of the whole empire to the mother country, and the commercial benefits of its respective members excluding every idea of taxation, internal or external, for raising a revenue on the subjects in America without their consent.

5. That the respective colonies are entitled to the common law of England, and more especially to the great and inestimable privilege of being tried by their peers of the vicinage, ^[6] according to the course of that law.
6. That they are entitled to the benefit of such of the English statutes, as existed at the time of their colonization; and which they have, by experience, respectively found to be applicable to their several local and other circumstances.
7. That these, his majesty's colonies, are likewise entitled to all the immunities and privileges granted and confirmed to them by royal charters, or secured by their several codes of provincial laws.
8. That they have a right peaceably to assemble, consider of their grievances, and petition the King; and that all prosecutions, prohibitory proclamations, and commitments for the same, are illegal.
9. That the keeping a Standing army in these colonies, in times of peace, without the consent of the legislature of that colony in which such army is kept, is against law.
10. It is indispensably necessary to good government, and rendered essential by the English constitution, that the constituent branches of the legislature be independent of each other; that, therefore, the exercise of legislative power in several colonies, by a council appointed during pleasure, by the crown, is unconstitutional, dangerous, and destructive to the freedom of American legislation.

All and each of which the aforesaid deputies, in behalf of themselves, and their constituents, do claim, demand, and insist on, as their indubitable rights and liberties; which cannot be legally taken from them, altered or abridged by any power whatever, without their own consent, by their representatives in their several provincial legislatures.

In the course of our inquiry, we find many infringements and violations of the foregoing rights, which, from an ardent desire that harmony and mutual intercourse of affection and interest may be restored, we pass over for the present, and proceed to state such acts and measures as have been adopted since the last war, which demonstrate a system formed to enslave America.

Resolved, That the following acts of Parliament are infringements and violations of the rights of the colonists; and that the repeal of them is essentially necessary, in order to restore harmony between Great Britain and the American colonies, viz:

The several Acts of 4 Geo. 3, chapter 15 and chapter 34; 5 Geo. 3, chapter 25; 6 Geo. 3, chapter 52; 7 Geo. 3, chapter 41 and 46; 8 Geo. 3, chapter 22; which impose duties for the purpose of raising a revenue in America, extend the powers of the admiralty courts beyond their ancient limits, deprive the American subject of trial by jury, authorize the judges' certificate to indemnify the prosecutor from damages that he might otherwise be liable to, requiring oppressive security from a claimant of ships and goods seized before he shall be allowed to defend his property; and are subversive of American rights.

Also the 12 Geo. 3, chapter 24, entitled "An act for the better preserving his Majesty's dockyards, magazines, ships, ammunition, and stores," ^[7] which declares a new offense in America, and deprives the American subject of a constitutional trial by jury of the vicinage, by authorizing the trial of any person charged with the committing any offense described in the said act, out of the realm, to be indicted and tried for the same in any shire or county within the realm.

Also the three acts passed in the last session of parliament, for stopping the port and blocking up the harbor of Boston, for altering the charter and government of the Massachusetts bay, and that which is entitled "An Act for the better administration of Justice," etc.

Also the act passed the same session for establishing the Roman Catholic Religion in the province of Quebec, abolishing the equitable system of English laws, and erecting a tyranny there, to the great danger, from so great a dissimilarity of Religion, law, and government, of the neighboring British colonies by the assistance of whose blood and treasure the said country was conquered from France.

Also the act passed the same session for the better providing suitable quarters for officers and soldiers in his Majesty's service in North America. ^[8]

Also, that the keeping a standing army in several of these colonies, in time of peace, without the consent of the legislature of that colony in which the army is kept, is against law.

To these grievous acts and measures Americans cannot submit, but in hopes that their fellow subjects in Great Britain will, on a revision of them, restore us to that state in which both countries found happiness and prosperity, we have for the present only resolved to pursue the following peaceable measures:

1. To enter into a non-importation, non-consumption, and non-exportation agreement or association.
2. To prepare an address to the people of Great Britain, and a memorial to the inhabitants of British America, and
3. To prepare a loyal address to his Majesty, agreeable to resolutions already entered into.

Footnotes

1. The 35th year of the reign of Henry the 8th was 1544.
2. The Boston Port Act.
3. The Massachusetts Government Act.
4. The Administration of Justice Act.
5. The Quebec Act.
6. "Vicinage" means a limited area around a point; in this context, it refers to the Administration of Justice Act, which allowed a trial to be moved from Massachusetts to another colony or to England.
7. The Dockyards Act, passed on April 16, 1772.
8. The Quartering Act.

Source: <http://www.usconstitution.net/intol.html>.