THE RADICAL LADIES OF WILMINGTON AND THEIR TEA PARTY

BY VERNON O. STUMPF

As we begin our series of celebrations to commemorate the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in the United States of America and North Carolina, it would seem fitting that we should recognize the radical ladies of colonial Wilmington and their tea party. Like some of their present day sisters in America the colonial dames of Wilmington participated in a demonstration procession against the authority of the government. In protest to the British Crown and Parliament’s taxing tea, the colonial dames of Wilmington burnt their tea.

The Wilmington Tea Party is relatively unknown whereas the Edenton Tea Party has received enough attention to be immediately recognized by many North Carolinians, young and old. The Edenton Tea Party was a declaration against the use of East India Tea and it occurred on October 25, 1774, whereas the Wilmington Tea Party was a demonstration procession that happened sometime in early April, 1775. Both of these protests grew out of the Boston Tea Party of December 17, 1773, and Parliament’s punitive reaction to it, the Boston Port Bill, which was one of the Intolerable Acts. Why the difference in time between the Boston Tea Party and the two tea parties in North Carolina? Present day Americans are conditioned to almost immediate communication because of the remarkable development in communication media. Americans in the eighteenth century were dependent upon newspapers, letters, and word-of-mouth communication. Geographical distance and lack of instant communication kept the colonists from learning about the tea party protests to the northward until much later. Consideration of the time factor together with the comprehension of the importance of the tea protests delayed the coalescing of consensus until it was promoted by the local patriot committees in the southern provinces.

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It may not be remiss to review briefly the development of the tea protests to the northward before we examine the protests in North Carolina. The tea party protests developed out of the British Crown’s attempts to tax the colonists. When Lord Frederick North became the Crown’s chief minister on January 31, 1770, he believed that a complete repeal of the Townshend Duties might be interpreted by the colonists as a sign of the Crown’s weakness. Early in March North proposed to the House of Commons a bill for the withdrawal of all the Townshend Duties except that on tea. He also pledged that his ministry would levy no new taxes upon the colonists. This bill received the King’s consent on April 12. Early in 1773 the East India Company was about to go bankrupt. It had 17 million pounds of tea stored in its warehouses in England. The royalty chartered corporation sought relief from the Crown who was friendly to it because the East India Company had control of most of India. A bill was passed in the House of Commons on April 27 that allowed the East India Company to sell its tea directly to agents or merchants in the colonies. The company was able to cut the price of its tea and undersell its competitors as well as those American merchants who smuggled tea from Holland. Lord North had killed two birds with one stone: he had helped find a way to save his friends in the East India Company from certain bankruptcy, and he could dangle the bait of tea, cheap but taxed, before the American colonists. The business agents of the thirteen colonies sounded the alarm by notifying their respective colonies of Lord North’s trap. The northern patriots were quick to respond because they could use their quasi-political party organizations, the Sons of Liberty, to stir up opposition to the new Tea Act. The Sons of Liberty in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and other northern cities proceeded to terrorize the tea signees.

Many people know about the famous Boston Tea Party which occurred on December 16, 1773, in which

(Continued on Page 2)
Latimer House Committee

The Federal bedroom is being decorated and furnished and it is hoped that it will be possible to open it in the near future with a pre-view for the membership of the Society. The bed, dressing table and chest of drawers are the gift of the late Miss Annette Lewis. They are the work of Honoré Lanuerman, a New York cabinet maker of the early nineteenth century. These pieces of furniture were among the first gifts to the Society to be received for The Latimer House.

The Society is deeply grateful for the following gifts for the Federal bedroom:

A wallpaper reproduction of a design (circa 1810) called Madame Recamier given by Brunschwig et Fils of New York.

An antique gilded arrow cornice (circa 1810) given by Mr. Samuel H. Hughes.

A Federal period chimney piece of Lower Cape Fear origin formerly in the collection of Colonel Owen Kenan given by Mr. Henry Jay MacMillan.

A Federal period Girandole mirror with convex glass formerly in the collection of Mrs. William L. Moore and given by her heirs.

The Latimer House committee wishes to make known to the Society its desire to have furnishings and objects of art of the period of 1850 or earlier to add to the collection. Suitable gifts for memorials are welcome and the appraised value of the gift is tax-deductible. Anyone wishing to make such gifts is asked to notify any officer or member of the board of the Society.

FORM OF BEQUEST

The great need of the Association, in order to render broader and more effective service, is to have funds available for historical research, publications, and restoration of historic sites. For those purposes, it is hoped that interested persons will bequeath to the Association whatever sum or sums of money may be available. The following form is suggested:

To the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc., a nonprofit corporation organized under the laws of the State of North Carolina, I give and bequeath the sum of $ ________________.

This bequest is unrestricted, and the Board of Directors or other governing body may use and expend the same for the benefit of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc., in any manner it deems appropriate.

The Radical Ladies of Wilmington

(Continued from Page 1)

the Sons of Liberty under the guidance of Samuel Adams dumped the tea chests on board the Dartmouth into Boston harbor. With this act the Boston patriots destroyed British property and defied British authority, and started a series of events that eventually led to the Lexington Alarm and our independence. In New York City a similar tea party was held on April 22, 1774, when the Sons of
Liberty dumped the taxed tea into the harbor. The patriots in Annapolis, Maryland, apparently used fire to destroy both the tea and the ship carrying it. In Greenwich, New Jersey, the tea was mysteriously destroyed by fire in the warehouse where it had been temporarily stored.

As early as July, 1774, North Carolina merchants began to have second thoughts about using taxed tea because of the emotions aroused by the Boston Tea Party. William Hill in Brunswick wrote to his suppliers, the British firm of Kelly and Company in London, on July 26. Hill remarked that though the tea had been repeatedly written for, he now had no complaints for the delay in its delivery because the thirteen colonies were aflame in response to the Boston Port Bill. Hill reported on December 1 to his British suppliers that the tea ordered by Hewes & Smith and by his firm, Ancrum & Company, had been inadvertently landed, but it had been delivered to the collector for the duties and it was then stored in the custom house.

A decision by the royal governor of North Carolina acted as a catalyst in moving the local patriots to protest against taxed tea. Governor Josiah Martin had refused to call the assembly because he realized that some of the patriot leaders in the assembly wanted to send delegates to the first Continental Congress. John Harvey assumed leadership and sent out a call for the first Provincial Convention or Congress of North Carolina. The Congress met in New Bern on August 23, 1774, right under the nose of the royal governor, Josiah Martin. This convention of patriots resolved, among other things, against the use of East India Tea by their families and themselves. The convention would consider all users to be enemies of their country. Furthermore, they declared that the East India Tea was not to be used after September 10, 1774.

On November 23, 1774, the Safety Committee of Wilmington began to assume control of the lower Cape Fear valley, particularly mercantile transactions and the implementation of the association boycott instituted by the northern patriots against the British merchants and the Crown. This committee, which had taken over the Sons of Liberty apparatus, met at the courthouse in Wilmington. It elected another committee “to carry more effectually into execution the Resolves of the late Congress held at Philadelphia.” The following members were elected: John Ancrum, Francis Clayton, Cornelius Harnett, Robert Hogg, William Hooper, Archibald McLain, John Quince, John Robinson, and James Walker. When Captain Forster advised the committee that tea was being imported in the brig Sally by himself and Ancrum & Company, he prudently asked for the advice of the committee as to the proper disposition of the tea. The committee, dominated by Cornelius Harnett, sent a letter to William Hill asking whether the tea might not be re-exported in the same ship. Hill replied that since both the collector and the controller were absent he could not answer for them. He knew that both officers would be in Wilmington on the next day and he believed that they should determine this question. Hill added that he thought the safety of the people should be their chief concern and that every tea importer would cheerfully submit to the committee’s decision.

While Mr. Hill was prudent in his correspondence with the Safety Committee of Wilmington, the radical ladies of Edenton entered into the spirit of the Boston Tea Party and the other tea protests. On October 25, 1774, over fifty Edenton ladies held a meeting and declared that they could not be indifferent to whatever affected the peace and happiness of the country. Already aware of the resolution passed by the first provincial convention, the Edenton ladies subscribed to an association dated Edenton, North Carolina, October 25, declaring their patriotism and their boycott of taxed tea.

A few weeks later James Iredell, the head of the customs in North Carolina, received a teasing letter from his sophisticated brother Arthur in London: “Pray are you become Patriotic? I see by the News Papers the Edenton Ladies have signalized themselves, by their protest agst. Tea Drinking.” We do not know what James Iredell’s reaction to his Anglophile brother’s comments were, but undoubtedly today brother Arthur’s comments might have been branded as a form of male chauvinism, if not a sympathetic support of the Tories.

A Scottish lady of Tory persuasion, Janet Schaw, was visiting her brother Robert, a merchant-planter in the Wilmington area in 1775. Robert Schaw had once been a partner in Anerum & Company, and he was a favored supporter of royal governors William Tryon and Josiah Martin. Miss Schaw kept a journal of her travels in the Caribbean, North Carolina, and Portugal during the years of 1774-1776. Her journal was composed of a series of letters she wrote to an unknown correspondent in Scotland while she visited friends and relatives in the West Indies and North Carolina. Janet Schaw was a mature gentlewoman who had insight and intuition that made some of her judgments in her letters incisive. Moreover, she was a lady of firm opinions, high morals, and an outspoken critic with a charm and a tartness to her comments.

When Janet Schaw and her party arrived at the port of Brunswick on the lower Cape Fear on February 14, 1775, they stayed in the home of the owner of the ship they travelled on, Richard Quince. Janet soon discovered that Quince was sympathetic to the patriots, and during her stay in the Quince home she met other patriots. Miss Schaw thought that the collector of customs at Brunswick, William Dry, was “most zealous and talks treason by the hour.” During her month’s stay, Janet has recorded that she had not had a dish of tea, which seems to indicate that the merchants of Brunswick were enforcing the boycott of the North Carolina Congress. Janet Schaw’s party left Brunswick on March 17, 1775, for her brother Robert’s plantation, Schawfield.

Joseph Eagles, the ward of her brother Robert, agreed to guide them to Schawfield. Janet’s party included her brother, Alexander, the three Rutherford children (Frances, John, Jr., and William Gordon), and her maid, Mrs. Mary Miller. Traveling by night through the alien dark forests frightened the ladies because their vivid imaginations conjured up all sorts of fierce beasts that might attack them. Their young guide, Joseph Eagles, arranged that they should stay overnight at his plantation called “The Forks,” a short distance above Old Town Creek on the Brunswick road, and a little below Eagles Island opposite Wilmington. Happy to find themselves safe from the unseen terrors of the forest, Janet was delighted to find that the tea table had been laid. For the first time since her arrival in America, Janet Schaw had a comforting dish of tea.

After spending a few days at Schawfield, Janet Schaw visited her brother’s friends in Wilmington. Because of
her brother's eminence in the lower Cape Fear, Miss Schaw was invited to the homes of many of the prosperous and influential merchants and doctors in Wilmington. She had written her correspondent from Schawfield on March 22, 1775, and so it was a few days later that she visited Wilmington. While in Wilmington she wrote her friend again and commented on the colonial dames there: "The Ladies have burnt their tea in a solemn procession, but they had delayed however until the sacrifice was not very considerable, as I do not think any one offered above a quarter of a pound." Her entry suggests that she witnessed the actual demonstration procession of the radical but frugal ladies of Wilmington rather than that she was repeating some gossip she had heard about the Edenton ladies. Unfortunately, Janet's letter from Wilmington has no date, but some interior evidence in her letter together with a letter published in the South Carolina Gazette may narrow the time span down to the period from March 23rd to April 5th, 1775.10

An unknown Wilmington correspondent wrote a letter dated March 22, 1775 that was published by the Charleston South Carolina Gazette on April 3, 1775. In this letter the correspondent described how a patriotic Wilmington merchant had thrown a half-chest of tea into the river rather than keep it in his store. He also referred to a Brunswick merchant refusing to unload the tea sent him with other goods via ship. This is probably a reference to William Hill mentioned above. The unknown Wilmington correspondent reported that the tea in both Brunswick and Wilmington was locked up "never to be offered for sale, till American measures are changed."11

The Wilmington correspondent to the Charleston newspaper paid tribute to the Edenton ladies with the idea of urging all colonial dames to emulate them. "It would be injustice to the Ladies, not to add, that they have entirely declined the use of Tea. Such a sacrifice by the fair sex, should inspire ours with that firmness and public virtue, so necessary to preserve these privileges, indisputably our rights, as British subjects, which are likely to be wrested from us by the artifice of designing men." The italics are the present writer's, and they have been used to indicate that when the correspondent wrote the letter on March 22 the Wilmington ladies had not yet burnt their tea. When Miss Schaw recorded the Wilmington Tea Party in her letter she also mentioned that the "ports are soon to be shut up" which indicated that it was generally expected that the North Carolina Convention would adopt the Continental Association, the non-importation agreement. The second Provincial Convention of North Carolina approved the association on April 5, 1775, while sitting in New Bern. News of the adoption of the association would have been sent at once to the lower Cape Fear. It would seem reasonable then that the Wilmington Tea Party must have occurred sometime between March 23 and April 4, 1775, which is less than two weeks.12

While the South Carolina Gazette referred indirectly to the Edenton Tea Party, Miss Schaw recorded that the Wilmington ladies "burnt their tea in a solemn procession." It could be argued that Janet Schaw was not repeating gossip about the Edenton ladies, but that she was an eyewitness to the actual tea burning procession. Furthermore, the Edenton ladies did not burn their tea. Miss Schaw's veracity as an eyewitness seems to be sound if one tests other observations she made in her journal. She has recorded the possibility of the closing of the ports by the adoption of the Continental Association, and she referred to the Restraining Acts that allowed North Carolina, New York, and Georgia to profit from the distress of their sister colonies. She thought North Carolin foolish for not taking advantage of the Restraining Acts "by which means they would have . . . made great fortunes themselves." Furthermore, she recorded her judgment about the characters of Cornelius Harnett, Robert Howe, and James Moore. Later historians have generally agreed in her analysis of these men. Schaw's accuracy is further reflected in her comments about the meeting of the last royal assembly in New Bern and the activities of the provincial assembly that was meeting simultaneously. She was sympathetic to Governor Martin and Thomas MacKnight and their problems with the patriots. She also recorded Robert Howe's attempt to capture Governor Martin at Ft. Johnston, near Wilmington. She knew about the visit of the Scots Highlander officer, Captain Alexander McLeod, stopping off in Wilmington, on his way to visit Governor Martin on board the Cruizer, in the Cape Fear river. There McLeod and Martin would make plans for the recruiting of Highlanders to defend the royal government in North Carolina that would eventually lead to the battle of Moore's Creek.13

Because Janet Schaw was of decided Tory views, it is doubtful if she fantasized about the Wilmington Tea Party. She was pragmatic and objective from her experience and viewpoint. She knew that the Scots in 1745 had tried to rebel against the Hanoverian dynasty and they had failed. Thus, she could be amused at the colonial dames of Wilmington and their demonstration procession against taxed tea. Moreover, she did have a tart tongue, by her own admission, and she did have a sense of humor and an ability to laugh at herself if one considers her description of herself dressed in a ball gown and being lighted through the muddy streets of Wilmington by "a half-naked wench" as she gingerly stepped carefully so that she would not soil her silk ballroom slippers.14

It would appear then that Janet Schaw, the Tory lady of quality, recorded what seems to be the only extant account of the brave but frugal colonial dames of Wilmington who may have followed the suggestion of the patriot correspondent in the South Carolina Gazette when he wrote that the Edenton ladies "should inspire ours." Whether this unknown Wilmington man (it may have been Cornelius Harnett) urged the Wilmington ladies to their protest is not known. It is doubtful that an argument can be made for "Women's Liberation" for the colonial dames of Wilmington, but it does indicate that the good Wilmington ladies, watching their menfolk hustle around organizing the safety committee, drilling raw recruits, and forcing their fellow merchants to conform to the association boycott, wished to participate in the revolutionary movement too. They chose to march in demonstration and burn their tea which may have been more of a sacrifice than Miss Schaw realized. Nevertheless, those of us who love our country will no doubt revere the revolutionary ladies of Wilmington for their brave procession demonstration. To emulate the unknown correspondent in the South Carolina Gazette, the present writer suggests that the Wilmington ladies of the past "should inspire ours" to recreate this event as part of our celebration of the American Bicentennial of the American Revolution.
FOOTNOTES

1. The general background for the tea protests can be found in any good general history of the American Revolution. For those readers who wish to examine the protests in more detail, they are referred to John Richard Alden, *The American Revolution, 1775-1783*, (New York, 1954), and Oscar Theodore Barck, Jr., and Hugh Talmage Lefter, *Colonial America*, (New York, 1968).


6. Arthur Iredell to James Iredell, London, Queen's Square, January 31, 1775, Charles E. Johnson Papers Collection, P.C. 67.1, microfilm in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


8. *JLQ*, 146.


11. Charleston *South Carolina Gazette*, April 3, 1775. The Cape Fear Mercury was not being published in Wilmington at this time.

12. Charleston *South Carolina Gazette*, April 3, 1775; *Colonial Records*, IX, 1180-1181.

