

On Liberty

John Adams



OVERVIEW

In 1765 John Adams wrote a series of articles in the Boston *Gazette* attacking the Stamp Act, a law passed by the British Parliament that imposed a tax on printed documents. The tax fell on all Americans. At the year's end, he reflected on the events in his diary.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why do you think this particular tax was felt to be so unjust?
 - Why would even the “lower ranks” be so affected by the tax?
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Braintree, December 18, Wednesday. . . . The year 1765 has been the most remarkable year of my life. That enormous engine, fabricated by the British Parliament, for battering down all the rights and liberties of America, I mean the Stamp Act, has raised and spread through the whole continent a spirit that will be recorded to our honor with all future generations. In every colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire inclusively, the stamp distributors and inspectors have been compelled by the unconquerable rage of the people to renounce their offices. Such and so universal has been the resentment of the people, that every man who has dared to speak in favor of the stamps, or to soften the detestation in which they are held, how great soever his abilities and virtues had been esteemed before, or whatever his fortune, connections, and influence had been, has been seen to sink into universal contempt and ignominy.

The people, even to the lowest ranks, have become more attentive to their liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be; innumerable have been the monuments of wit, humor, sense, learning, spirit, patriotism, and heroism, erected in the several colonies and provinces in the course of this year. Our presses have groaned, our pulpits have thundered, our legislatures have resolved, our towns have voted; the crown officers have everywhere trembled, and all their little tools and creatures been afraid to speak and ashamed to be seen. . . .

[January 2, 1766.] At Philadelphia, the Heart-and-Hand Fire Company has expelled Mr. Hughes, the stamp man for that colony. The freemen of Talbot county, in Maryland, have erected a gibbet before the door of the court-house, twenty feet high, and have hanged on it the effigies of a stamp informer in chains, *in terrorem* till the Stamp Act shall be repealed; and have resolved, unanimously, to hold in utter contempt and abhorrence every stamp

officer, and every favorer of the Stamp Act, and to "have no communication with any such person, not even to speak to him, unless to upbraid him with his baseness." So triumphant is the spirit of liberty everywhere. Such a union was never before known in America.