

Committees of Correspondence

The First Continental Congress ended with the Continental Association. This association promoted the creation of local committees to police the enforcement of nonimportation and nonexportation agreements. Though there was extensive local variation, in several places committees of correspondence took on the extra duty of enforcing the Association. In other places, new committees of safety or inspection were created to enforce the Association, and these worked alongside committees of correspondence in the resistance effort. Following the Declaration of Independence and subsequent creation of state governments, most committees of correspondence faded out of existence in the later 1770s.

Though George Washington was never a member of a committee of correspondence, he did interact with them regularly. In 1774 he signed the House of Burgesses' statement ordering their committee of correspondence to call for the First Continental Congress. When he was the head of the Continental Army, Washington regularly received military intelligence from committees of correspondence. The committees were never an official part of the military intelligence infrastructure, but rather were comprised of voluntary civilian informants and conscientious citizens.

Written By: Catherine Treesh—Yale University

Sources

Ammerman, David. *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974.

Brown, Richard D. *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

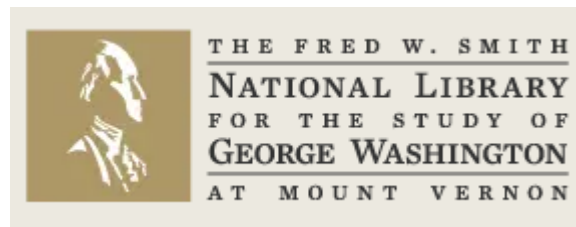
Collins, Edward D. "Committees of Correspondence of the American Revolution." *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association* 1 (1901): 245-271.

Maier, Pauline. *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968.

Marston, Jerrilyn Greene. *King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy, 1774-1776*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Warner, William B. "The Invention of a Public Machine for Revolutionary Sentiment: The Boston Committee of Correspondence." *The Eighteenth Century* vol. 50, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2009): 145-164.

The largest collection of committee of correspondence records (those of the Boston Committee of Correspondence) has been digitized by the New York Public Library, and can be accessed through their website.



An example of the type of publication used by the Sons of Liberty to publicize resistance before the Revolution. This 1766 cartoon by Paul Revere suggests an obelisk commemorating the repeal of the Stamp Act. Library of Congress control number 2003690787.

Committees of correspondence were longstanding institutions that became a key communications system during the early years of the American Revolution (1772-1776). Towns, counties, and colonies from Nova Scotia to Georgia had their own committees of correspondence. Men on these committees wrote to each other to express ideas, to confirm mutual assistance, and to debate and coordinate resistance to British imperial policy. The network created by committees of correspondence organized and mobilized hundreds of communities across the British North American colonies.

Committees of correspondence had existed since the early eighteenth century as a way for colonial legislatures to communicate with their agents in London. In the 1760s, the Sons of Liberty used committees of correspondence to organize resistance between cities. The most famous and influential committees of correspondence, however, operated in the 1770s.

In this decade there were three consecutive systems of committees of correspondence: the Boston-Massachusetts system, the inter-colonial system, and the post-Coercive Acts system. Each system was organized and worked in slightly different ways. Even within systems there was great variety between committees in function and form.

The Boston-Massachusetts system began with the creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence in November 1772.

Samuel Adams and other Boston radicals were furious over proposed changes to who paid the governor's and judiciary's salaries in Massachusetts. Adams pushed the Boston Town Meeting to form the Boston Committee of Correspondence in order to rally opposition to the changes. The Boston Committee of Correspondence wrote a letter to every town in the province, sharing the news and encouraging towns to create their own committees of correspondence. Within six months, 118 outlying towns created committees and responded to Boston. These lines of communication connected Boston's radical leaders to the towns and were used regularly for two years.

Boston's radical leaders used this system to spread the alarm about various imperial policies, while the towns used it to share their experiences and voice their approval or disapproval of Boston's actions. Though the Boston Committee of Correspondence was tied to their (completely legal) town meeting, as were many of the other town committees of correspondence, the opponents of the Boston-Massachusetts system saw it as a dangerous and illegal usurpation of political power.

The inter-colonial system of committees of correspondence originated farther south, in Virginia's House of Burgesses. The burgesses were alarmed by the Crown's response to the Gaspee affair, where a group of Rhode Islanders burned a customs ship. In response, the imperial government created a commission to investigate the incident and to send any potential perpetrators to England for trial. It was this last act that the House of Burgesses considered unconstitutional, and that caused them to establish a committee of correspondence in March 1773. They wanted the committee to discuss possible forms of resistance with the other colonial legislatures. They also wanted to open a permanent network of communication between the colonies, so that they could respond collectively to any future imperial incursions on the rights and liberties of American colonists. By early 1774 all of the thirteen colonies except Pennsylvania had an inter-colonial committee of correspondence.

These committees were formed within the representative body of imperial government in each colony, which significantly limited their ability to organize resistance to Crown policies. They did not meet when the representative bodies were not in session. In addition, their direct connection with imperial government made committees in the inter-colonial system much more cautious than the radical-leaning committees in the Boston-Massachusetts system. As a result, the inter-colonial committees of correspondence did not accomplish much in the single year that they operated. If nothing else, the existence of the inter-colonial system was evidence of a shared desire to communicate with disparate Americans.

The third committee system was established in the spring of 1774, in response to the Coercive Acts. Parliament had passed a series of acts punishing Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party and, upon hearing the news, the Boston Committee of Correspondence quickly spread the word and asked for help resisting the acts. Several inter-colonial committees of correspondence simultaneously called for a general congress of the North American colonies to address and combat the Coercive Acts.

The First Continental Congress met from September to October of 1774. In the three months leading up to the Congress, Americans formed committees of correspondence at the town, county, and colony levels to choose their delegates. Many of these committees continued to meet after they chose delegates, and worked to resist the Coercive Acts in other ways. This committee system absorbed the Boston-Massachusetts system and completely overtook and radicalized the inter-colonial system.