

Review of the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum

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On the night of December 16, 1773, American colonists demonstrated their opposition to the British Tea Act by storming ships carrying East India Company tea and dumping hundreds of tea crates into the Boston Harbor, earning the name the Boston Tea Party. Since then, this event has become one of, if not, the most memorable acts of protest that led to the outbreak of the American Revolution. With that status comes public inquiry into the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the event and its role in setting independence in motion. The Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum provides the answers to these questions and allows the public to step back in time and witness this historic event. The museum is informative and entertaining for all ages no matter their familiarity with the Boston Tea Party and its impact on American history.

Located on the water, the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum is a floating museum situated near Griffin's Wharf, the actual location of the Boston Tea Party, which was unfortunately destroyed in the city's expansion during the 1800s. Getting to the museum requires walking on the Congress Street Bridge, which can get crowded with pedestrians and vehicles at some points during the day. Visitors may have to walk a long distance to get to the museum because it does not have its own designated parking lot.

The museum contains two distinct sections: first, a highly interactive area that includes actors and role play and second, a self-guided gallery tour. In the first part of the museum tour, visitors are issued character cards at the ticket booth before entering the building. These cards list the name, occupation, and a statement of an actual participant in the Boston Tea Party to simulate the night of the event. An actor encourages everyone to participate by verbally and non-verbally reacting to the reenactment and its dialogue. For example, if you agree with a statement you can shout "hear hear," "well said," "huzzah," or bang on the pews with your hands or stomp your feet. If you disagree with a statement, you can boo, hiss, or shout "fie" while placing your thumb to your nose and spreading and wiggling five of your fingers. This kind of interaction would appeal to an audience of children by immediately enveloping them in a world-crafted scenario. It would also likely appeal to both the expert and non-expert audience by revealing how active and verbal the proceedings were and how

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closely tied this behavior is to modern British parliamentary procedure. The historical details woven into costumes, backstories, and the overall performance of each actor are far more engaging than reading them in a history textbook and would also be attractive to a wide range of audiences, though the spoken elements may pose a problem for non-native speakers. However, the use of visuals could be a form of non-written information and education and enable visitors to be part of the action.

After the actor provided a rundown of all the meeting expressions and actions, another actor portraying Samuel Adams stepped into the meeting. Adams summarized what had happened in response to British colonial laws and actions leading up to the night of the Boston Tea Party. He mentioned events like the 1765 Stamp Act and the 1770 Boston Massacre, to which the whole room reacted using the meeting expressions. Adams called upon two museum visitors to share their thoughts on the events that had occurred based on their character cards. Those called on read aloud the statement made by the character and became a part of the show. While transforming a visitor into a participant could create an exciting and meaningful level of engagement, it could be problematic for non-English speakers and those who have sight limitations, learning disabilities, social anxiety, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The museum should consider asking someone to volunteer rather than choosing participants at random to avoid these issues.

In our last moments in the meeting house, we were told to dress up as “Mohawk Indians,” so our characters’ identities would not be found out by the redcoats. Following that instruction, museumgoers raised feathers in the air and shouted “huzzah” to symbolize our unity in the treason we were about to commit in the name of independence. The museum’s goals may have been to provide a native presence in the story or even to show how the colonists contributed to violence and suspicion of Native peoples. But engaging in criminal activities while impersonating Native peoples is deeply problematic. Adopting the culture, clothing, and identity of a Native group as a costume is dehumanizing; the use of sacred objects like feathers as props displays serious racial and cultural insensitivity. The inclusion of the Native peoples was tokenistic and in need of re-evaluation. As it is currently enacted, the visitors gain no actual knowledge of the role of Native Americans in the revolution or in Massachusetts’ history. After this sequence of the museum tour, visitors were asked to leave the meeting and go to Griffin’s Wharf to protest the Tea Act.

Visitors were then guided onto the ship *Eleanor*, which was docked next to the museum, for the second part of the museum experience. The *Eleanor* is a replica of one of three ships that were taken over by the patriots on the night of the Boston Tea Party. The entrance to the ship has a ramp to make it more

accessible to the public. Depending on the size of the group, there might not be a lot of space to stand comfortably, which could create issues for those with mobility or sight limitations. Once the group boarded, we were greeted by another actor who provided background on the ship, the night of the Tea Party, and the working conditions on a ship like the *Eleanor*. Our attention was then directed to the three mock crates of tea that were tied with ropes. The tea crates were made of Styrofoam but looked identical to East India Tea Company tea crates from 1773. We were permitted to throw the tea overboard just like the patriots on the night of the Boston Tea Party. We also were allowed to explore the interior of the ship, where the tea would have been stored and where the crew would have eaten, slept, and congregated. This part of the tour is not accessible to those who require assistive devices like wheelchairs or who cannot climb a ladder, which is the only means to access areas below deck. The ship's interior was decorated with barrels and crates of tea, and included a section dedicated to what the sailors' and captain's quarters looked like at the time. Again, space was limited when going into the interior so a visitor might have to wait to go down or squeeze down with others. This can create issues for those with ASD, and I would advise the museum to be mindful of the triggers that this part of the tour includes. Going back onto the main deck, visitors could continue to explore the ship. Those who had not yet done so could throw the tea crates overboard and take pictures. The group was then escorted off the ship. We were told to look at a sign on the museum's outside wall that displays a list of names of Boston Tea Party participants. Each person who had a character card could match their character with a name on the wall.

The last portion of the museum involved going back indoors and walking through a gallery and watching a 3D projection show. This part of the tour is what many museumgoers would usually expect, perusing through quiet rooms filled with objects and documents protected by glass cases. This segment of the museum was dedicated to the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party and the impact it has had on subsequent history. The projection that displayed a conversation among three women with differing opinions about the Boston Tea Party. The women were speaking English, which poses another problem for non-native speakers. The transition from an actor-led experience to a video show felt abrupt and could have been done with live, in-person actors to continue the theme. This was one of the only inclusions of women's history in the museum and like the Native American scene earlier, felt tacked on. Women's history should be better infused throughout the museum.

After the show ended, we were led into another room where an actor told us how the Boston Tea Party sparked the American Revolution. The actor spoke about leading figures such as John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and

Benjamin Franklin, whose portraits were hung around the room. In this same room, the last surviving tea crate and a vial containing tea from the Boston Tea Party were on display. These objects were found in private collections and donated to the museum. The group was shown another video on the history of tea as a beverage and as a valuable good in the 18th-century world market. Again, the video diminished the purpose of the actors, who had been relaying information about the Boston Tea Party and its historical context while provoking public engagement. It felt repetitive and awkward, as it harshly conjoined the two parts of the tour and the overall museum experience. After the museum tour concluded, all museum guests were invited to Abigail's Tea Room for food and drinks, which of course included tea. One could even sample the five teas that were thrown into Boston Harbor during the Tea Party. The gift shop is in the front of the museum near the entrance and had colonial souvenirs for sale as well as typical museum knick-knacks like keychains, Christmas ornaments, and pins.

The Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum utilizes the modern methods that museums are using to draw in visitors: high interaction. The museum's interpretation of the Boston Tea Party reaches greater heights by including some new information about the event and its participants. The majority of the history presented, however, can be found in a textbook. The museum does not expand beyond a simple elementary-level knowledge or use its position to include the histories of women and Native peoples. The heart of the museum's mission and its central theme is interaction and participation from the public. I found this museum better for children than adults because children learn more when using their five senses than they do when reading a label card. With a growing understanding of the impact of overstimulation, the museum might wish to consider days of low-stimuli activities for museumgoers who would prefer them. The museum has great potential and the tour is an enjoyable activity, but as an educational experience, it does not consider the histories of women and Native people. The museum benefits from its location, its superb collection of artifacts, and a strong link to other historical sites in the area, such as the Freedom Trail. It could be an extraordinary part of public education, but more attention to the needs of various visitors as well as historically ethical reinterpretation is required.

About the author: Renata Palladino is from Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and is currently a sophomore at SUNY Oneonta. She is majoring in History, and she is hoping to work in public history in the future.