

### Portrait of a Smuggler

Smuggling is the activity of bringing goods into a country or taking goods out of a country illegally. Smugglers may be trying to avoid paying a tax on imports or they may be trading items that are prohibited, such as weapons. Smuggling has been around for ages, and the motivation for this crime has remained the same throughout the centuries: to make money!

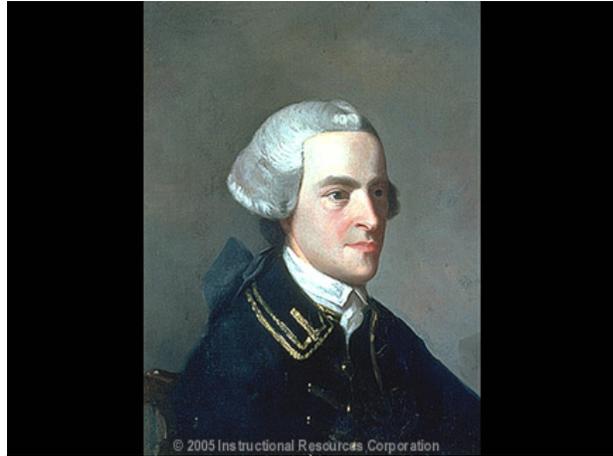
Because smuggling is a crime, you might think of a smuggler as a rough character, armed and dangerous. This is the idea that most people have, but it is not always the truth. In fact, during colonial days, smugglers were usually well-respected members of their communities. Some say, for example, that John Hancock, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a smuggler.

There is a reason that smugglers were not outcasts of society. Smuggling was very widespread. Laws existed to prohibit smuggling, but British officials often looked the other way. They knew the activities of certain shipping merchants were illegal, but they did nothing to stop them. Why did prominent members of colonial society engage in illegal trading? Let's take a look at the reasons behind the development of this practice in the colonies.

### Restrictive English Policies

To the British king and government, the North American colonies existed to benefit England. British laws often restricted the colonists in many ways. For example, in 1650 a law called the Navigation Acts made it illegal for the colonies to trade directly with any country but England. Any goods coming to or from the colonies first had to pass through England. There a tariff, or tax, was paid. The extra voyage and the tariff greatly increased the cost of these items back in the colonies.

The colonists thought these restrictions were unfair. In fact, they regularly ignored them. One British observer at the time, Lord Sheffield, noted that "nothing was easier to the Americans than to evade them and they uniformly



Was Patriot John Hancock (1737–1793) a smuggler? British officials certainly thought so. They confiscated one of his ships in 1768 and charged Hancock with smuggling.

did evade them whenever they found it to their interest.” Colonial traders engaged in illegal trade with the French, Spanish, and Dutch. Much of this trade occurred in the West Indies. It involved goods such as sugar, molasses, and tea. These goods were smuggled into the colonies by shipping merchants. The merchants obtained them from ship captains who had become skilled at avoiding the British navy.

### **Open American Defiance**

Most of this illegal trade was carried on with the full knowledge of British customs officers. Those officials were sometimes bribed to ignore the illegal activities going on right under their noses. Other customs officers simply did not examine the actual cargo in a ship’s hold. Even those who were arrested for smuggling were rarely convicted by colonial juries. Those juries usually included sympathetic local citizens who often benefited from the illegal trade.

Colonial smugglers became creative in thinking up ways to move illegal goods. They might declare only part of their actual cargo on the invoice presented to customs officials or mislabel their packages so that the actual contents were not evident. They might also unload their cargo on a bay or an island, report to customs, and then return for their smuggled goods. At one point, it was estimated that of the 37,500 pounds of molasses brought into the colonies each year, colonists paid taxes on only 2,000 pounds. By the 1760s, the illegal trade had become so extensive that one British sea captain estimated that 36 of 50 ships in port in the Spanish settlement of Monte Christi in the Caribbean were American ships engaged in smuggling.



The British ship *Gaspée* was attacked and burned by Rhode Island colonists in 1772, after it ran aground while chasing smugglers.

### **Turning the Tide of History**

After the French and Indian War of 1754–1763, England had huge debts and needed money. In addition, the British were deeply frustrated with smuggling in the colonies. They believed that the colonists had gone too far when they continued to trade illegally with France throughout the war. This was treason in the eyes of the British. These two factors set in motion a series of events that led directly to the American Revolution.

In 1764, Parliament passed the Sugar Act. The act was meant to raise money to help pay for the French and Indian War. It was also designed to squash the smuggling trade. Following passage of this law, British customs officials greatly increased the frequency and thoroughness of their inspections of American cargo ships. Any goods on which duties had not been paid were confiscated. In 1768 John Hancock's ship, the *Liberty*, was seized in Boston Harbor by British officials. The officers claimed that Hancock had brought goods into the colony without paying the required duties. Enraged citizens rioted. Five years later, the Boston Tea Party announced to the world what the colonists thought about British taxes.

The British crackdown on smuggling fueled the fire in the colonies. The colonists's resentment would soon explode into full-scale war. Despite strict British laws, the colonists were determined to find ways to get the goods they needed. As the colonists became more frustrated with the British, they became increasingly self-reliant. Smuggling in the colonies was a turning point in history because it helped lead the colonies down the path to independence. Although smuggling is an illegal activity, it also helped shape the course of the United States.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1. Why were accused smugglers rarely found guilty by colonial juries?**
  - A.** Most smuggling took place outside of the colonies.
  - B.** Some colonists who served on juries were involved in smuggling.
  - C.** American colonists had no sympathy for smugglers.
  - D.** The customs officials themselves were smugglers.
  
- 2. Smuggling in the American colonies was**
  - A.** rare.
  - B.** practiced occasionally.
  - C.** never seen.
  - D.** widespread.
  
- 3. The seizing of John Hancock's ship**
  - A.** was the start of the American Revolution.
  - B.** caused the British to repeal the Sugar Act.
  - C.** led to colonial riots in Boston.
  - D.** led to the passage of the Navigation Acts.
  
- 4. It is clear that smuggling was a part of life in colonial America. For what reasons can smuggling be considered a turning point in American history? Support your answer with evidence from the reading passage.**