

## The Greenwich Tea Party: How it has been remembered

The Boston Tea Party was not the only tea party to take place in Revolutionary America. According to Joseph Cummins in *Ten Tea Parties: Patriotic Protests That History Forgot*, there were ten tea parties in all. The last of these occurred on December 22, 1774, in the village of Greenwich, Cumberland County, New Jersey, but instead of dumping the tea into water, the participants burned the tea.

At the time, Greenwich was one of the principal ports of South Jersey, located along the Cohansey River—a navigable waterway flowing into the Delaware Bay. The British brig *Greyhound* docked at Greenwich and secretly stored the controversial cargo in the cellar of a local British sympathizer. The tea was later confiscated and destroyed in a nearby field. This article explores how the Greenwich Tea Party, also known as the Greenwich Tea Burning, has been remembered in history.

There are only four primary sources about this event. The first record of the tea burning was made by Philip Vickers Fithian in an entry in his journal dated December 23. He wrote: “Last night the Tea was, by a number of persons in disguise, taken out of the house and consumed with fire.”<sup>i</sup> The second record of the event was made in Dunlap’s *Pennsylvania Packet*; or, the *General Advertiser*, January 9, 1775. The packet described how a committee of local residents was formed to discuss how to respond to the arrival of tea in Greenwich, who were later informed of the tea’s destruction.<sup>ii</sup>

The third and fourth sources of the tea burning are from a civil case docket and a criminal case docket. As Robert Williams wrote for the *Morning Examiner* and Edgar Williams wrote for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*,

Grand Jury action was demanded by the tea merchants,<sup>iii</sup> and the “Greenwich Indians” were hauled into court on charges of illegal trespass. Civil suits were also brought against them for destruction of property. But none of the raiders were ever found guilty of anything. By the time their cases came up, the courts were in the hands of judges and prosecutors sympathetic to the American cause, and all charges were eventually dismissed.<sup>iv</sup>

These four sources are the direct factual evidence of the event. There are also two books on the histories of Salem and Cumberland Counties that describe the tea party, but these were written decades later, and both accounts got the date wrong. In all accounts of this event published previous to 1874, the date was given as Nov. 22, 1774, instead of Dec. 22 of that year. This is because Fithian only wrote the date as “Fryday 23” in his journal, which followed several entries dated in November, so it was assumed that “Fryday 23” referred to November 23, but November 23 was a Wednesday, not a Friday.<sup>v</sup> And even as late as the 1970s, the wrong date was still given by some newspapers.<sup>vi</sup>

Unlike the date, there are other details of the event that we cannot know for certain. For example, we do not know how the tea burners were dressed. What we know from Fithian’s journal is that the tea burners were “disguised,” but he does not say how.<sup>vii</sup> This detail has evolved over the years with some accounts claiming the participants were disguised like

Mohawk Indians.<sup>viii</sup> Another detail that has conflicting accounts is where the tea was stored. In his journal, Fithian claims the tea was stored at Dan Bowen's house.<sup>ix</sup> However, in a letter from 1930, Charles Ewing describes how his grandfather, Wm. B. Ewing, heard from his father, Thomas Ewing, one of the participants, that the tea was stored at David Sutton's house.<sup>x</sup>

Despite the conflicting accounts, the patriotic pride of Greenwich would see to it that a monument gets erected in honor of the tea party participants. On September 30, 1908, over 8,000 people gathered to take part in the ceremony of the unveiling of the Greenwich Tea Burning Monument on Ye Greate Street<sup>xi</sup>. And this patriotic fervor continues to this day with many local residents commemorating the event through plays, celebrations, newspaper articles, and even historical tours of the sites.

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<sup>i</sup> Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*

<sup>ii</sup> Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet; or, the General Advertiser, 1775-01-09

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Williams, *The Morning Call*, 1950-08-12

<sup>iv</sup> Edgar Williams, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1973-09-29

<sup>v</sup> *The Daily Journal*, 1982-12-22, and *The Millville Daily*, 1982-12-23

<sup>vi</sup> *The Courier-News*, 1976-06-07

<sup>vii</sup> Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*

<sup>viii</sup> *The Courier-Post*, 2002-12-26, and 2003-05-26

<sup>ix</sup> Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*

<sup>x</sup> Letter from Charles Ewing, 1930-04-19

<sup>xi</sup> *The Millville Daily*, and *The Daily Journal*, 1982-03-31