CERTAIN implications of the Stamp Act are often overlooked, especially its implications for an agricultural society. When historians describe the Stamp Act crisis, they tend to rely on vivid descriptions of mob and committee action and of high-level politics, descriptions that are ready at hand, culled from newspapers and letters emanating from a few important Eastern towns. After all, it was at the ports of entry that the distribution of stamps was interdicted. There the more articulate men, the commercial and professional men, were concentrated. There apprentices, bond-servants, and slaves were always numerous, often bored and ready for a lark: particularly ready for action when they might safely help to deflate persons of importance.

However, nine out of ten Americans lived outside the busy towns. They were inarticulate. A key for interpretation of their reactions is given us by the Reverend Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. “Had fresh work to do,” he wrote on September 23, 1765, “as naturalization papers are to be granted at the Supreme Court tomorrow and may still be obtained for two thalers, whereas after the Stamp Act goes into effect it will probably cost £9 or £10, and this has been announced in the newspapers throughout the country. . . . We have about a hundred of our Philadelphia congregation who desire to be naturalized and an equal number from the Lutheran congregation in the country who applied to me for certificates.”

The pastor’s “fresh work,” of which he complained on several occasions, was that of certifying that each of his applicants was a Protestant communicant in good standing. No doubt there were many pastors holding special communion services and writing such certificates at the time, for in the months of September and

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October, just before the Stamp Act took effect, 2,644 Germans and Swiss, from all counties, appeared before the supreme court to be naturalized. Of all the persons naturalized in Pennsylvania from 1740 to 1776, this increment constituted forty-one percent.\(^2\) Certain trifling naturalization fees were a perquisite of the provincial secretary, who annually transmitted lists of naturalized persons to the Board of Trade in London; that happy man received so great a windfall that he cheerfully forgave the fees of those who could not pay.\(^3\) It seems that both political parties, Proprietary and Antiproprietary, alleged that year that their opponents got people naturalized in order to secure their votes.\(^4\) The provincial secretary's receipt for part of his fees, dated October 6, encourages, however, the inference that about half of the year's naturalizations took place after October 1, the day of the annual election; and the fact that many aliens made the necessary communion in October confirms that interpretation.\(^5\) The men whose fees the secretary forgave were among those naturalized on October 4 and 5.

In the long view, the strong reaction against the Stamp Act was a godsend to the Proprietary party, fighting as that party was to keep the province free of royal government. As a reinforcement for Pennsylvania's loyalty to the Crown, the procession of immigrants left much to be desired. The Germans, practical folk, were hastening to anticipate the tax provisions of the Stamp Act. Rumor had told them that the act would increase the fee for naturalization at least twentyfold. What they heard may have been exaggerations: apparently a naturalization was to be taxed as a franchise, at £6 sterling per certificate. Far more important than the actual provisions, however, were the fears suddenly...

\(^2\) Under the Naturalization Act (of Parliament) of 13 Geo. II c. 7, and its supplements, 6,331 residents of Pennsylvania were naturalized: 4,288 communicants of Protestant churches, 2,024 members of Protestant sects, and 19 Jews. Pa. Arch., 2d Series, II (1896 ed.), 293-415; Naturalizations of Foreign Protestants in the American and West Indian Colonies . . . ., ed. M. S. Giuseppi (Publications of the Huguenot Society of London, XXIV, year 1921); MS Naturalization Book, 1764-1771, Papers of the Provincial Secretary, at the Division of Public Records, Harrisburg.


\(^5\) The date of receiving the Sacrament is usually given in the naturalization rolls for Lutherans, Reformed, and Moravians.
aroused in a normally quiescent section of the population. Some Germans may have desired naturalization as a prerequisite to voting and officeholding, but naturalization was actually of more fundamental importance than that to them, because it facilitated all their transactions regarding land. Supposedly an alien could not obtain a patent or devise his lands. As a matter of policy, the Penns had never made a pressing demand for escheats; neither had the imperial government ever made a pressing demand for naturalization. But now, to all prudent and foresighted men, whether alien or British born, the possibility of changes of policy was evident. Land titles must be cleared, and without delay.

The rush to clear titles by purchase, although not clearly a sequel, can be documented almost as definitely as can the rush to secure naturalization. The records of the provincial land office, and the series of deed books located in the offices of the recorders of the respective counties, show it unmistakably. Under the Stamp Act, land papers of every sort were to be taxed, and although the taxes were by no means ruinous, their tendency was alarming. For tracts of less than 320 acres, the tax in sterling imposed on land warrants was to range from 6d. to 1s. 6d., and on deeds (including land patents issued by the Proprietaries, the fullest title papers that a landowner could acquire) from 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. Each newspaper advertisement was to be taxed 2s.

Thomas Penn, governor and landlord of the province, had tried to prevent passage of the act. Yet he apparently foresaw, after it was passed, that it might work to his advantage. First, it could create a "land-office business." Second, it could make the existing Proprietary government, by the heirs of William Penn, seem more desirable than royal government, which the Antiproprietary party wished to introduce. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, but beginning on July 6, 1765, Penn reduced the purchase price of millions of acres of his unreserved lands by almost fifty percent, at the same time discreetly raising the irredeemable quitrent.


Johannes Ruby, an alien, left a will dated May 5, 1763, but his estate escheated to the Proprietaries; Papers of the Provincial Secretary. Andrew Fleckinger alleged in 1753 that two ironmasters had compelled him to give up his land (including an iron mine), arguing that as he was an un-naturalized alien he could not keep it; ibid.
which discouraged speculation) and the interest rate on arrears. Very soon, transactions in land rose to the highest point in the decade: in October, 120 patents were issued, as against a monthly average for the decade of 27; then, on November 1, the act went into effect, and all land transactions ceased until word of its repeal arrived in May of 1766. It is entirely possible that the October peak in land transfers would appear to us as spectacular as the parallel and simultaneous boom in naturalizations, but for one limiting factor: the physical impossibility for the hard-worked corps of surveyors to run lines with sufficient speed to meet the demand. After repeal, a new boom in land patents began, very strong in 1767 (the best year of the decade), and continuing strong until the middle of 1768.

Another rise in naturalization coincided with this new land boom, but it was an extremely modest one. In 1767, 59 were naturalized, the highest yearly total between 1765 and the Revolution, and in 1768, the next best year in the period, 38. By contrast, an average of 400 aliens had been naturalized annually in the years 1760-1764. For some unknown reason, naturalization ceased to be urgent or attractive after the period of the Stamp Act.


Naturalizations, 1760-1773, are respectively: 248, 834 (in 1761), 396, 249, 273, 2,745 (in 1765), 26, 59, 34, 29 (in 1769), 24, 24, 12, 4. Nobody was naturalized after 1773.
In 1765, a great increase in the number of naturalizations accompanied a great increase in the number of land patents issued, but the relationship was not simply a chain of cause and effect. Rather, the astonishing increases were parallel symptoms of the Stamp Act crisis. Almost certainly, a majority of the patentees were British or colonial born. Moreover, we may assume that aliens often sought naturalization in order to protect lesser tenurial advantages, since they were not yet ready to pay for a full title. Most of the tilled land in the province was still held by warrant right or by mere improvement, and at least among British subjects such rights were negotiable and inheritable.

Other symptoms of the crisis must have been felt sharply at the county level. It is difficult for us to understand how certain kinds of business could be ignored, which quite evidently were ignored, in the interregnum of more than six months that began on November 1. Fortunately the courts of quarter sessions required no stamped paper for their proceedings; crime took no holiday, but the king’s peace was kept, constables did their duty or were fined for neglect. Otherwise all was uncertain. For lack of stamps, no will could be probated, no letter of administration could be granted, no orphans’ court could sit, no deed could be delivered or recorded. Lancaster County proved exceptional, resuming probate on January 27, 1766, but keeping the office of recorder of deeds closed until at least June 10. Generally the offices in the county seats were closed until May but restored to full functioning by the end of that month. Although it is difficult to find evidence of the accumulation of business that one would expect, it is impossible to believe that in that agrarian society, the long and uncertain suspension of land transactions inconvenienced only prothonotaries and lawyers.

In short, virtually all Pennsylvanians were stirred by the economic implications of the Stamp Act, and many must have suspected that undesirable political action would follow. Although they paid never a farthing of the short-lived tax, the implications of the measure, its demonstration of the insensitive character of British leadership, stirred doubts and provoked questions. The Stamp Act rendered politically impossible the dream of Benjamin Franklin and his friends, to take Pennsylvania away from the Proprietaries and make it a royal colony, if indeed that project
had even been a possibility. The Stamp Act crisis also prepared Pennsylvania's yeomanry for a second and worse interregnum, the interval between May 15, 1776, when Congress suspended the entire legal system of the province, and January 27, 1777, when the Commonwealth under a constitution restored it.