

# Did Land Speculation Lose England Her American Colonies?

**W**E glorify the American Revolution—and properly so. It was no small incident in American history that the Western continent from Maine to California became detached from the old world, and that a Republic was begun with all its possibilities of human progress.

But so far as the facts of history as currently taught reveal, it must seem to many a reflective mind that the causes justifying a war for separation were after all inconsiderable.

We are just finding out that the causes of the American Revolution lay deeper than this. The causes of this war, as of most wars, were economic, and not economic in the narrow sense. The taxed tea thrown into the Boston Harbor was an incident and a trivial incident at that.

The economic causes at work concerned the land of the Colonies. It was the same old Question, the Question

denied, derided, concealed, thrust into the background by every voice of privilege and by nearly all the stupid pedants who write history.

Some day some historian will trace the history of land ownership and land speculation as a provocative of wars, the influence which has caused most all the human conflicts, foreign and internecine, moulded the destiny of nations and sometimes ending by destroying them.

Commenting on a work by James Truslow Adams, the *New York Times*, in issue of July 22 says editorially:

"The soil was wearing out. The old land policy had been given up. Land was sold to speculators instead of being granted to individual settlers in new towns. There was a good deal of swindling by the speculators. The pioneer in the wilderness felt that the capitalists in the older settlements were robbing him. In some cases the absentee speculators kept the right to vote on town matters, paying no taxes, contributing nothing toward the building and maintenance of roads and bridges. It is notable that the Assemblies of the Charter Colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island quarreled with the local Governors, just as the Assemblies of the Royal Colonies quarreled over the Royal Governors. The "feelings of resentment of the frontier element against the *capitalists of the settlements* and of the poor against the rich easily merged into a resentment against the Colonial Governments, and through that channel into one against England."

The italics are ours. The capitalists of the settlements means the landlords, of course.

Now let us hear what Mr. Adams himself has to say. "The growing influence of wealth on the Legislatures and courts is indicated in many ways. The means by which grants of new townships were obtained will bear much investigation. We can see the influence of the speculators growing until the orgy following the Seven Years' War, when complete ascendancy was gained over the Legislature of Connecticut by the Susquehanna stockholders. Dr. Gipson has worked out the story of how the group interested in lumber speculation got the same Legislature to petition for an appointment in that Colony of a Judge of Vice Admiralty perhaps the most hated of all royal officials. The same thing, however, was brought about for their own particular purposes by the shipping group in Rhode Island. In each case it was hoped that the royal official might favor the pecuniary interests of a small number of individuals, although the scheme may be presumed to have run counter to the general wishes of the Colonies."

And then the *Times* comments:

"In short, "big business" on a small scale was at work. Its ramifications were beginning to be felt throughout the entire range of Colonial life, by the courts, the Legislatures, the small business men, even the itinerant peddler and the poorest settler on the "farthest frontier." Later these and other grievances increased radical sentiment and caused the organization of a revolutionary party."

Both Prof. Adams and the *Times* are at fault in their use of the words "capitalists" and "big business." There was no big business at the time save the one described and the influence of the "wealth" spoken of by the author of "The Founding of New England" was, as he tells us, its power exercised from the mother country and in the Colonial Legislatures to monopolize the land of the Colonies.