Although specific individuals are sometimes given credit for what eventually came to be known as the Edenton Tea Party, the true strength of the event came from the solidarity of the women of Edenton and its surrounding areas. These women set aside their usual duties as wives and mothers to come together and proclaim their opposition to the Tea Act of 1773 with a bold and perhaps treasonous written declaration of their intent to boycott all British goods. Thus began a long tradition of female firsts for the nation, credited to the state of North Carolina.

On October 25, 1774, Penelope Barker and 50 other women from this Inner Banks town (which at the time was North Carolina’s capital city) signed a resolution to join the boycott called for by the North Carolina Provincial Deputies in protest of the 1773 Tea Act which gave the British East India Tea Company a monopoly in the colonies (Carney). They agreed to use the power of their purse strings to stop buying and using British goods to protest “all acts which tend to enslave our Native country” (Wegner). It shows that these women were literate, politically well informed and were willing to brave social and legal repercussions for their patriotic assertions. Given that the town had only about 600 inhabitants at the time, this group of women likely represented virtually all the adult women in the area (Cummins). It’s unclear whether the women actually gathered together in one home to sign their names, although the lore suggests they met at the home of either Elizabeth King or Penelope Barker (Staples). Nonetheless, it has been credited as being the “earliest recorded political activity by a group of women in any of the original 13 colonies” (Waldrup 118).

At the time, Edenton was a relatively large, prosperous and politically active town. Its residents included lawyers, politicians, tradesmen, farmers and their families. Like many North Carolinians who embody the most fundamental principle of our democracy--speaking out against injustice--these women did so during the course of their otherwise ordinary lives. In particular, one Edenton woman, Penelope Barker, has been written into history books as the leader of this initiative. The Edenton Tea Party may have languished in relative obscurity if Ms. Barker hadn’t boldly mailed the resolution to colonial and British papers.

Unlike the men who remained anonymous at the Boston Tea Party some months earlier, Ms. Barker noted that:

Maybe it has only been men who have protested the king up to now. That only means we women have taken too long to let our voices be heard. We are signing our names to a document, not hiding ourselves behind costumes like the men in Boston did at their tea party.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the act of political resistance, Ms. Barker and the women of Edenton summoned the courage to speak up against an unfair practice, make their voices known, and set the stage for other American women to become political agitators.

Their actions, however, did not go without criticism. England papers carried news and cartoons of the protest. One now famous and unflattering caricature of the tea party by Phillip Dawes displayed the women as inept and even depicted a dog urinating on one of their dresses (Edenton Historical Commission). Despite, this public ridicule, the Edenton pioneers stood up for their liberty and their economic and political rights (despite lacking the right to vote at the time).

These women inspired future generations of North Carolina men and women to challenge social norms and demand equal rights. For example, women in the late nineteenth century used the model of the Edenton Tea Party to argue for their right to vote. Later, after the successful campaign for the 19th Amendment, a North Carolina woman, Lillian Exum, became the first woman to serve any state legislature in the South. Many more strong women have gone on to change American history. These ordinary--and yet extraordinary--women helped change the course of the nation with their willingness to speak up for their beliefs and then stand behind them with unyielding resolve.

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1. *Penelope Barker*, Visit Edenton, www.visitedenton.com/edenton-pages.php?id=63. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)