As war erupted between the American colonies and Britain and the colonies declared independence, many working men and women joined the Patriot cause. Six hard years passed between the war's first shots and a decisive American victory in 1781; two more passed before Britain signed the Treaty of Paris, recognizing American independence. For the first time, overseas colonies of a European power had achieved political independence from their mother country and had gained the opportunity to set up their own form of society.

Ordinary people not only helped to achieve the military successes that secured independence, but also questioned older hierarchical assumptions and claimed for themselves a stake in political sovereignty. The Boston shoemaker George Hewes, who served as a seaman aboard Massachusetts warships, recalled an incident that illustrated his new sense of equality. One day in the street, he met an officer from the ship on which he had enlisted, who ordered Hewes to remove his hat to him. Hewes, who "refused to do [this] for any man," signed onto another vessel instead. For Hewes and for many others, the Revolution meant rejecting the deferential habits of colonial days and becoming citizens in the new republic.

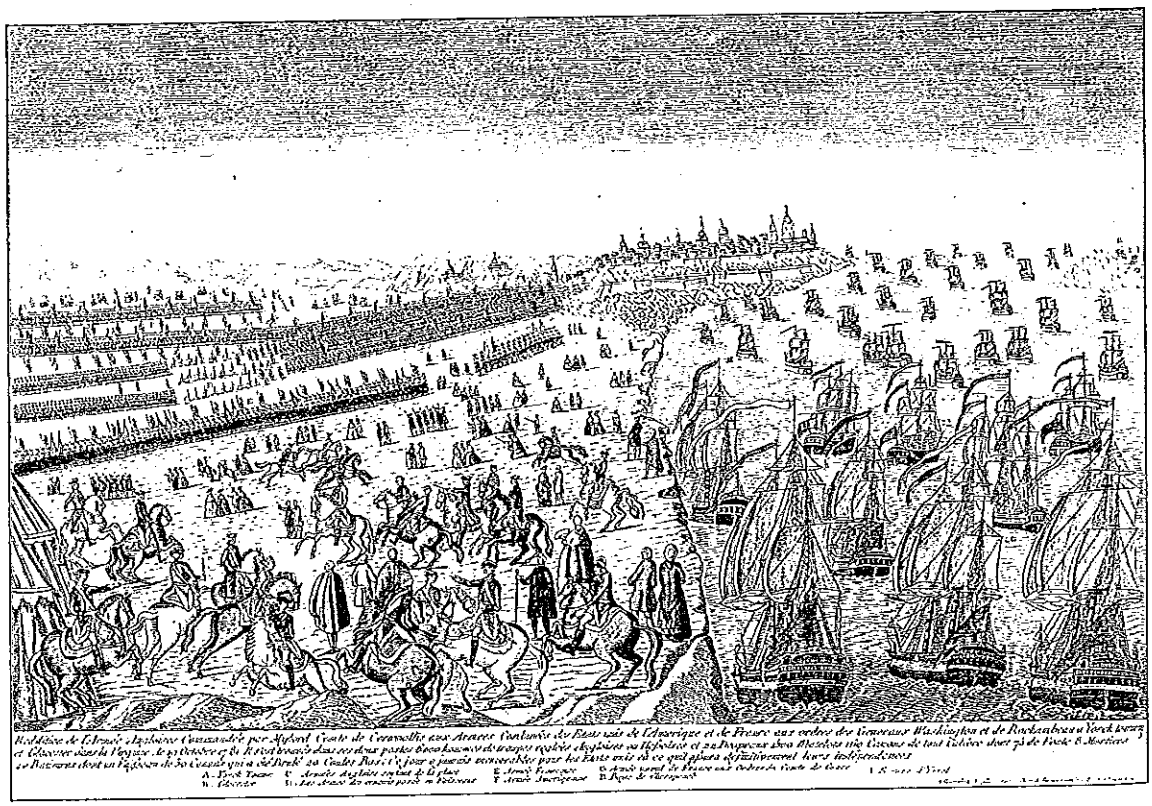
Americans had to decide how to govern themselves, who would get a say in public affairs, and how they should use the vast territory over which they now claimed control. Large groups were excluded from the aspiration for equality. Economic conditions ensured that inequalities would persist. Many among the nation's elites disagreed with popular conceptions of republican society, and their views shaped the U.S. Constitution that would be drafted and ratified in the late 1780s. Yet America was changed by the

***The American Rattle Snake***
The British political artist James Gillray's 1782 cartoon commented on the military situation the king's delegates faced at the start of peace negotiations with the United States. British forces commanded by Generals Burgoyne and Cornwallis are shown trapped within the snake's coils, while its rattle carries a placard stating, "An Apartment to Lett for Military Gentlemen." James Gillray, etching, London, April 12, 1782 — Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Revolution, and new social and political attitudes ensured that the colonial world would not be re-created.

## The Course of the War

From the British evacuation of Boston in 1776 to their surrender at Yorktown in 1781, armies campaigned in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and the South, with numerous secondary actions on the coasts and the frontier. Although the war had started in New England, its center shifted southward as the British increased their forces in an effort to recapture the colonies. Americans were able to win a notable victory in 1777 at Saratoga, New York, when they trapped a British army marching down from Canada and captured over 5,000 soldiers. This victory removed the threat of invasion from the north and convinced the French government that American success in the war was possible. France joined the war on the American side and was soon contributing military and naval assistance. Later, Spain and then Holland also declared war on Britain, forcing it to confront three of Europe's most significant powers as well as the American revolutionaries.



**Surrender of the British Army**
A French print depicted the 1781 victory of American and French armies over the British in Yorktown, Virginia. As shown here, French ships blocked the entrance of Chesapeake Bay, preventing British ships from resupplying their troops on the shore. But having no knowledge of the locale, the French artist rendered Yorktown as a European walled city. Mondhare, *Reddition de l'Armée Angloises Commandée par Mylord Comte de Cornwallis*, etching with watercolor, Paris, 1781 — Chicago Historical Society.

French help would prove critical in bringing the fighting to a close. In 1781, George Washington's Continentals, together with a French army, trapped a British force in the fortress at Yorktown, Virginia. At a crucial juncture, a French fleet evaded a British naval blockade, crossed the Atlantic, and prevented British supply ships from relieving Yorktown. Faced with starvation, the 9,500 British troops surrendered, giving the Americans a decisive victory.

**Waging War, North and South** Prior to Yorktown, dramatic military gains had been rare for the Americans. An attempt in late 1775 to invade Canada and capture Quebec ended in disaster. American success often depended less on winning battles than on avoiding losing them—on keeping armies intact and scoring minor victories when opportunity arose. Regrouping after their withdrawal from Boston, British forces returned in strength in the summer of 1776, capturing Long Island and then New York City, which remained their main base until 1783. Defeated on Long Island, Washington (aided by East River fishermen) escaped with the remains of his army and retreated, eventually crossing the Hudson River into New Jersey. The people of eastern New York and New Jersey included many Loyalists, and the British used the area to obtain supplies. By late 1776, they had driven Washington's army into Pennsylvania. Yet Washington's men avoided being crushed. After months of dodging defeat, they won small victories at Trenton and Princeton in the winter of 1776–1777, causing the British to withdraw from much of New Jersey. The following summer, however, the British attacked again and, brushing Washington aside, captured Philadelphia, which they held until the following year.

Yet the British found that they could not control New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Although they held New York City and they occupied Philadelphia for a period, they could not conquer the countryside, where the majority of the population lived. Warfare imposed a great burden on the people. As armies moved to and fro, families fled their homes for safer areas. One woman recalled "so much suffering . . . that it has always been painful for me to dwell upon." British depredations and the continued presence of an American army in the Mid-Atlantic states restrained the further growth of support for the Loyalist cause there and helped to keep the region on the revolutionary side.

Accordingly, in the late 1770s, the British embarked on a campaign in the South, aiming to use the support of the many Loyalists in the backcountry to help restore royal authority there. They captured Savannah and Charleston; defeated a Patriot army at Camden, South Carolina; and went some way toward restoring control over Georgia and South Carolina. But British efforts sparked a civil war between Patriots and Loyalists, whose armed militias waged a grim guerrilla-style struggle across the countryside.

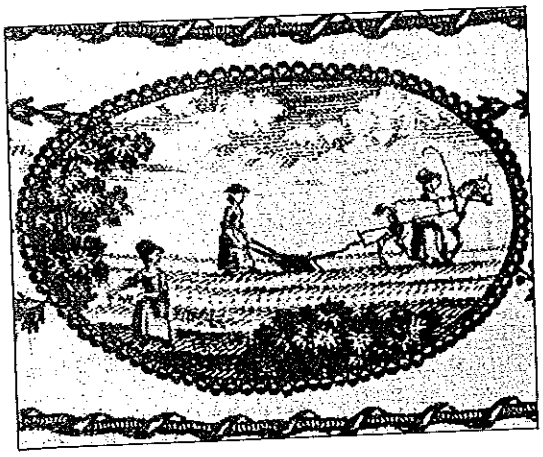

***Yankee Doodle, or the American Satan***

This print, by an American-born engraver living in London, may have mocked British characterizations of the Patriot enemy by portraying the "evil" archetypal American as a plainly dressed, serious-looking young man. After British soldiers started losing battles, their favorite song deriding colonists, "Yankee Doodle," was proudly appropriated by American forces. Joseph Wright, *Yankee Doodle, or the American Satan*, engraving, c. 1778 — Chicago Historical Society.

In October 1780 at King's Mountain, North Carolina, Patriot fighters won a battle in which almost all the participants on both sides were Americans. The following January, a Patriot force defeated a British detachment at Cowpens, South Carolina. Resentments ran high. More than one Loyalist militia leader, captured by Patriots, was seized by vigilantes and murdered. South Carolina's David Ramsay would remark that few people in his state "did not partake of the general distress."

**Fighting Forces** The American war effort relied on two distinct kinds of military force. Each province (or, after Independence, state) raised its own militia from among its citizens, often for short enlistments. Congress raised the Continental Army for longer-term service. In all, about 200,000 men served at one time or another.

The militias comprised the majority of soldiers. At first, the kinds of men who had started the fighting in Massachusetts in 1775 filled the militia



**The Home Front**
A detail from an English printed handkerchief presented the contributions of three American sisters to the struggle for independence: while their husbands fought, they ran the farm — milking, baking, and, shown here, plowing. Concord Museum, Concord, Massachusetts. www.concordmuseum.org.

units. Farmers, artisans, their sons, and apprentices, with a scattering of merchants, lawyers, and clergymen, dropped their work to fight off the invaders of their countryside. Six thousand or so militiamen rallied to help defeat the British at Saratoga. But the early enthusiasm of these units waned. Militiamen became harder to recruit, and they were reluctant to serve for extended periods or far from their homes. In a rural society, particularly outside plantation regions with their slave labor, young and able-bodied men were essential for raising crops. As a North Carolinian noted, "a soldier made is a farmer lost," and without labor available for farming, the country would have starved. Farm labor was scarce, even so. A Connecticut woman recalled that "so many [men] were gone" in the fall of 1776 "that she, her aged Father in Law . . . and such little children as could be had, dug the potatoes and husked the corn."

The Continental Army and militias began to recruit from more marginal segments of society: the young and the poor. Most Continental soldiers were young men. Jeremiah Greenman of Rhode Island was seventeen when he marched to take part in the siege of Boston in 1775. Without a trade or land to inherit, he decided to enlist in the Continental service. Captured twice and wounded three times, he was an officer by the time he left the army in 1783.

Some men, like Greenman, enlisted voluntarily; some were draftees; others served as paid substitutes for richer men. Some African Americans, such as the Connecticut slave Gad Asher, who was wounded and lost his sight at Bunker Hill, fought in place of their masters. Many other slaves, in both North and South, ran away to enlist, expecting to gain their freedom by fighting. After the British surrender at Saratoga, revolutionary leaders even tried to recruit prisoners of war. Thousands of women, too, traveled with the armies. Many were "on the ration" as cooks, nurses, laundresses, orderlies, or gravediggers. Their work was essential to the war effort. They endured all the hardships of soldiers except that of battle itself. A few women, usually disguised as men, did in fact fight.

Continentals and militia often faced worse conditions than the British soldiers they were confronting as acute shortages of supplies added to the discomforts and dangers of war. During the winter of 1777–1778, when the British occupied Philadelphia and were well supplied, Washington's army endured severe privations encamped at Valley Forge only twenty miles away. At Morristown, New Jersey, two winters later, on one-eighth rations and with pay five months in arrears, the army faced even worse

### "I Heard the Roar of the Artillery": Sarah Osborn Travels with the Continental Army

*In 1780, Sarah Matthews Read was a servant in the household of a blacksmith in Albany, New York, when she met and married Aaron Osborn, a blacksmith and Revolutionary War veteran. Without Sarah's knowledge, Aaron reenlisted in the Continental Army and insisted that his wife travel with him. Sarah ultimately agreed to "volunteer" for the duration of the war, working as a washerwoman and cook. This account comes from a deposition she filed in 1837, at the age of eighty-one, as part of a claim under the first pension act for Revolutionary War veterans and their widows.*

In about one day, we reached the place of encampment about one mile from Yorktown. I was on foot as were the other females. My attention was arrested by the appearance of a large plain between us and Yorktown and an entrenchment thrown up. I saw a number of dead Negroes lying round, whom I was told the British had driven out of the town and left to starve, or were first starved and then thrown out. I took my stand just back of the American tents, say about a mile from the town, and busied myself washing, mending, and cooking for the soldiers, in which I was assisted by the other females; some men washed their own clothing. I heard the roar of the artillery for a number of days, and the last night the Americans threw up entrenchments; it was a misty, foggy night, rather wet but not rainy. Every soldier [built] for himself, and I afterwards went into the entrenchments. My husband was there throwing up entrenchments, and I cooked and carried in beef, and bread, and coffee (in a gallon pot) to the soldiers in the entrenchment.

Record Group 15, Records of the Veterans Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

conditions. When Jeremiah Greenman's unit was finally issued clothing, he wrote that it "altered their Condition they being almost naked for nigh two Months."

Morale almost broke. A private, Joseph Plumb Martin, wrote in 1780 that soldiers cursed themselves for their "imbecility in staying there and starving . . . for an ungrateful people." At Morristown, two Connecticut regiments "paraded under arms" to demand better conditions, but Pennsylvania troops dispersed them. The next January, the Pennsylvanians themselves mutinied; 1,500 marched off toward Philadelphia to protest to Congress. Even after Yorktown, the agony continued. The Continental Army remained at Newburgh, New York, for nearly two years awaiting payment of its wages,

### "We Should Suffer Every Thing for Their Benefit": Winter at Valley Forge

*Albigence Waldo, a surgeon serving with the Continental Army, wrote this graphic description of conditions at the encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in his diary entry for December 14, 1777. Winters on campaign meant particular hardships for soldiers.*

December 14. Prisoners and deserters are continually coming in. The army, which has been surprisingly healthy hitherto, now begins to grow sickly from the continued fatigues they have suffered this campaign. Yet they still show a spirit of alacrity and contentment not to be expected from so young troops. I am sick—discontented—and out of humour. Poor food—hard lodging—cold weather—fatigue—nasty cloathes—nasty cookery—vomit half my time—smoked out of my senses—the Devil's in't—I can't endure it—Why are we sent here to starve and freeze?—What sweet felicities have I left at home: A charming wife—pretty children—good bed—good food—good cooking—all agreeable—all harmonious! Here all confusion—smoke and cold—hunger and filthyness—a pox on my bad luck! People who live at home in luxury and ease, quietly possessing their habitations, enjoying their wives and families in peace, have but a very faint idea of the unpleasing sensations and continual anxiety the man endures who is in a camp, and is the husband and parent of an agreeable family. These same people are willing we should suffer every thing for their benefit and advantage and yet are the first to condemn us for not doing more!!

Alden Vaughan, ed., *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution.*

and soldiers disbanded with only a token settlement of what they were owed.

Throughout the war, Washington knew that his task was to keep the Continental Army together, however much suffering it faced. With the mix of poor whites, slaves, foreigners, and women who composed or supported the army, he achieved this aim. Without them, the British would have triumphed. At its largest, the Continental Army numbered fewer than 20,000. But it was more than a military force; it symbolized the new American nation, and its preservation offered a political guarantee of independence. The state militias also served a vital political role. Particularly in the former Middle Colonies and the South, where many Loyalists entered the action when British armies came nearby, Patriot militias often violently restored American authority once the British had gone again.

The endurance of American forces was sufficient to prevent Britain from reconquering its colonies despite its great military and naval strength. As other European nations joined the war against them, the British had to defend other parts of their empire and guard against a French invasion

of England itself. As these pressures mounted and as serious riots in London in 1780 added the fear of domestic insurrection, the British government lost the will to fight in America. The surrender at Yorktown convinced many British officials that the war was lost and soon led to peace negotiations.

**The War and Slavery** "In every human Breast," wrote the African-born Boston slave Phillis Wheatley in 1774, "God has planted a principle which we call love of Freedom. It is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance." The inspiration of revolution and the confusion of war led thousands of slaves to seek freedom. To some white Americans, including Quakers and evangelicals, some southerners among them, slavery seemed a travesty of the principles for which Patriots were fighting. To most slaves, it was an abomination.

Many slaves ran away when opportunity arose. Runaways were often young men without family ties, but women also fled, some taking children with them. A considerable number of runaways headed for Philadelphia, where antislavery sentiment was becoming prominent.

Some slaves sought liberty by fighting for the British. In 1775, Lord Dunmore, Virginia's last royal governor, promised freedom to those who rallied to the king, and many—including several of George Washington's own slaves—escaped to serve in British or Loyalist units. A New Jersey slave named Titus became "Colonel Tye," leader of an irregular Black Brigade that harassed Patriots. Between 1779 and 1781, some 12,000 slaves escaped in South Carolina alone. One was a man called Boston, who ran from a plantation at Tranquil Hill to the British lines around Charleston in 1779.


**Wishful Thinking**
A British caricature portrayed the American soldier as disheveled and maladroit, in contrast to the reputed disciplined and orderly appearance of the British military man. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Several thousand other slaves sought freedom by fighting with the American forces. Seeing "liberty poles and the people all engaged for the support of freedom," the New England slave Jehu Grant fled his master and enlisted in the Continental Army. A few states, especially Rhode Island, solved their military-recruitment problems by promising freedom to slaves who would enlist. But in the South, slaveholders opposed recruiting slaves even when military necessity seemed to compel it.

Often enough, both British and Americans kept the promises of emancipation made to slaves who enlisted. When the British evacuated New York City in 1783, over 3,000 African Americans sailed with them to resettle in Nova Scotia. Boston from South Carolina was among them; he had married another runaway and renamed himself Boston King after his new sovereign. But some promises were broken. Besieged at Yorktown, the British expelled African Americans from the fort, leaving them to the mercy of the Ameri-

**Phillis Wheatley**
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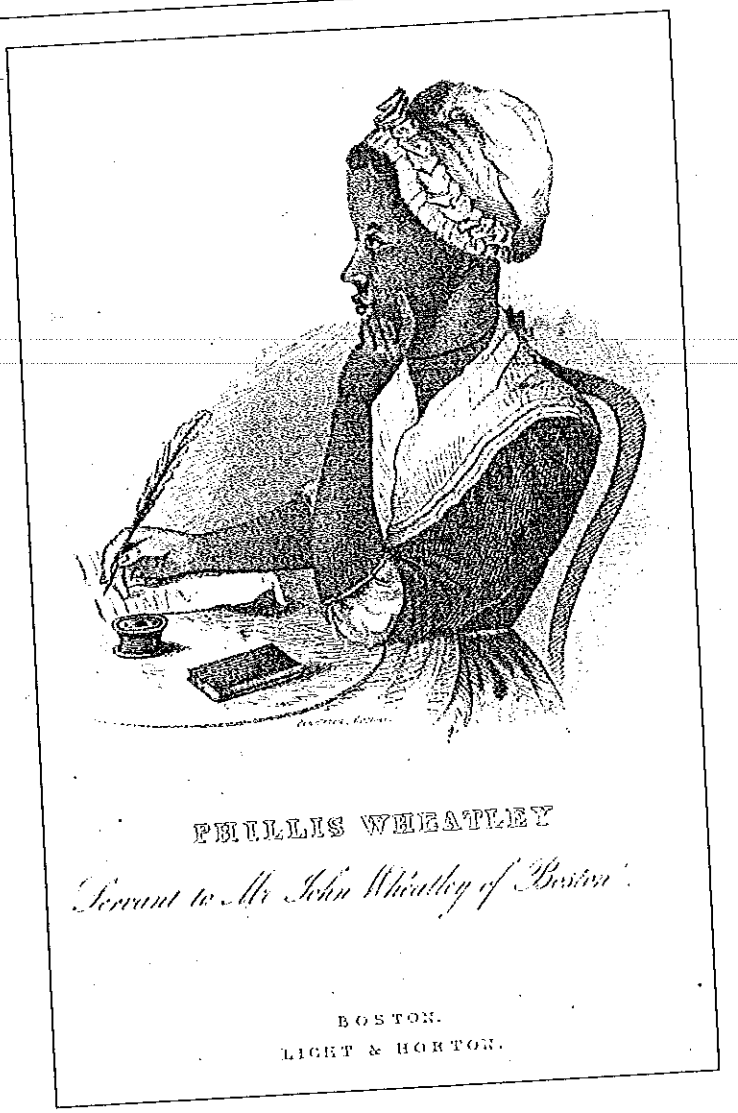
**Phillis Wheatley**
Born in 1754 in Africa, Wheatley was enslaved and transported to America, where she became the house servant of a Boston tailor. At the age of fourteen, she began to write poetry, and in 1773 she published a collection of her work in England. A year later, she was freed. *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, A Native African and a Slave* (Boston 1835) — Chicago Historical Society.




cans camped outside. Recaptured slaves faced violent punishment and the risk of being sold away. George Washington and other planters negotiated the return of their escaped slaves from the British who had harbored them.

**Native Americans and War on the Frontier** The war was not confined to contests over settled regions. Colonists' desire for frontier land had been one of the underlying sources of antagonism to British policy. Britain's purpose in establishing the unpopular Proclamation Line of 1763 had been to moderate trans-Appalachian settlement and settler-native conflict (see Chapter 4). When war broke out in 1775, fighting rapidly began in the West, as

## "A Natural and Inalienable Right to . . . Freedom": Slaves Petition the Massachusetts Legislature

*This petition to the Massachusetts legislature was drafted by Prince Hall, a free African American who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill, on behalf of the state's enslaved people. Throughout the revolutionary era, scores of slaves signed petitions that linked their demands for freedom with the cause of American independence.*

To the honorable Counsel and House of Representatives for the State of Massachusetts in General Court Assembled, January 13, 1777:

The petition of a great number of blacks detained in a state of slavery in the bowels of a free and Christian country humbly show that your petitioners [state] that they have in common with all other men a natural and inalienable right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the heavens has bestowed equally on all mankind and which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement whatever. They were unjustly dragged by the hand of cruel power from their dearest friends and some of them even torn from the embraces of their tender parents—from a populous, pleasant, and plentiful country, and in violation of laws of nature and of nations, and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity brought here to be sold like beasts of burden and like them condemned to slavery for life. . . .

Every principle from which America has acted in the course of their unhappy difficulties with Great Britain pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your petitioners, and they, therefore, humbly request that your honors give this petition its due weight and consideration and cause an act of the Legislature to be passed whereby they may be restored to the enjoyments of that which is the natural right of all men—and their children who were born in this land of liberty—not to be held as slaves.

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*Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th Series, III (Boston, 1877), 436–37.

Patriots sought to dislodge British frontier garrisons and seize land to which they had been denied access. Armed settlers and militia pushed into fresh territory, and both British and American combatants did what they had done in previous wars: they sought supporting alliances with Indians.

Indians, too, pursued familiar strategies, though under new circumstances. With the removal of the French in the early 1760s, the Iroquois had negotiated with the British to protect their lands from colonial incursions, and in the Revolutionary War, most continued to support Britain as the most likely protector against invasion. A few other tribes chose instead to ally with the revolutionaries in the hope that this could spare them from the worst depredations of white settlers. Still others sought to remain neutral, but the toll of conflict and murder drove them to resistance.

## "A Determined Resolution to Get Liberty . . .": Slaves Respond to Lord Dunmore

*After Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to slaves who would escape and serve in the British forces, newspapers printed numerous advertisements for runaways whose owners suspected them of responding to Dunmore's proclamation.*

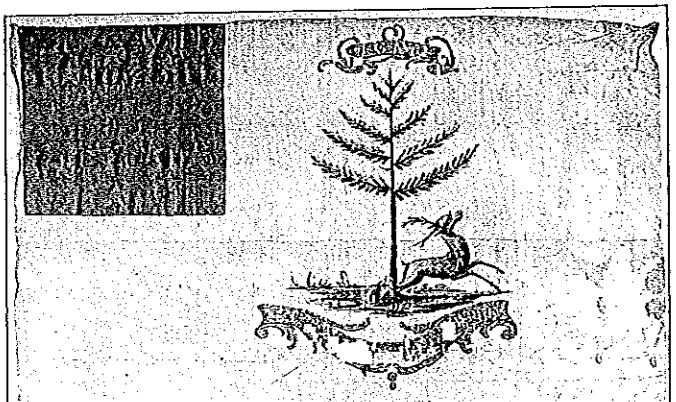
Stafford County, Aquia, Nov 3, 1775.

Run off last night from the subscriber, a negro man named CHARLES, who is a very shrewd sensible fellow, and can both read and write; and as he has always waited upon me, he must be well known through most parts of Virginia and Maryland. He is very black, has a large nose, and is about 5 feet 8 or 10 inches high. He took a variety of clothes, which I cannot well particularise, stole several of my shirts, a pair of new saddle bags, and two mares, one a darkish, the other a light bay, with a blaze and white feet, and about 3 years old. From many circumstances, there is reason to believe he intends an attempt to get to lord Dunmore; and as I have reason to believe his design of going off was long premeditated, and that he has gone off with some accomplice, I am apprehensive he may prove daring and resolute, if endeavoured to be taken. His elopement was from no cause of complaint, or dread of a whipping (for he has always been remarkably indulged, indeed too much so) but from a determined resolution to get liberty, as he conceived, by flying to lord Dunmore. I will give 51. to any person who secures him, and the mares, so that I get them again.

Robert Brent.

*Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), February 3, 1776.

Patriots attacked Indian settlements along the frontier, scattering inhabitants, destroying crops, and spreading disease. William Henry Drayton urged South Carolinians to "cut up every Indian cornfield and burn every Indian town and every Indian taken shall be the slave and property of the taker." Natives retaliated. In Kentucky, Cherokee warriors resisted an illegal land purchase by attacking settlers until white counterattacks dispersed them and destroyed their villages. Southern Patriot militias attacked Cherokees and Creeks to prevent them from assisting the British. After enduring for three centuries, the Iroquois Confederacy broke apart. Many followed the Mohawk leader Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant) in supporting the British, but a smaller number allied with the Americans, so at the battle of Oriskany in 1777, there were Iroquois fighters on both sides. Britain's Iroquois allies faced repeated attacks. In 1779, Patriot troops under General John Sullivan burned forty Iroquois settlements in western New York, destroying crops and driving the population away. Starvation and disease ravaged the refugees.



**The Bucks of America**
This flag was carried by Boston's black militia unit, one of three African American companies that served in the Continental Army. Massachusetts Historical Society.

But Patriots attacked even Indian allies whom they wanted to clear from the land. After occupying Kentucky, American forces pressed on into the Ohio country. In 1781, they raided their Delaware and Shawnee allies near Coshocton on the Muskingum River, and the next year, they attacked

## "We Are for Peace": The Oneida Indians Declare Neutrality

*Just as colonists had to choose sides between the Patriot cause and loyalty to Britain, so too did Indian groups as military conflict became imminent. In this 1776 address to Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull, the Oneida declare their neutrality and urge New England officials not to seek alliances with other Indian groups. The Oneida later allied with the American colonists against the British.*

BROTHERS—We have heard of the unhappy differences and great contention between you and Old England. We wonder greatly, and are troubled in our minds.

BROTHERS—Possess your minds in peace respecting us Indians. We cannot intermeddle in this dispute between two brothers. The quarrel seems to be unnatural. You are two brothers of one blood. We are unwilling to join on either side in such a contest, for we bear an equal affection to both you Old and New England. Should the great King of England apply to us for aid, we shall deny him; if the colonies apply, we shall refuse. The present situation of you two brothers is new and strange to us. We Indians cannot find, nor recollect in the traditions of our ancestors, the like case, or a similar instance.

BROTHERS—For these reasons possess your minds in peace, and take no umbrage that we Indians refuse joining in the contest. We are for peace.

BROTHERS—As we have declared for peace, we desire you will not apply to our Indian brethren in New-England for their assistance. Let us Indians be all of one mind, and live with one another; and you white people settle your own disputes between yourselves.

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Three Rivers, http://www.threeriversshms.com/borderwarsch3.htm.

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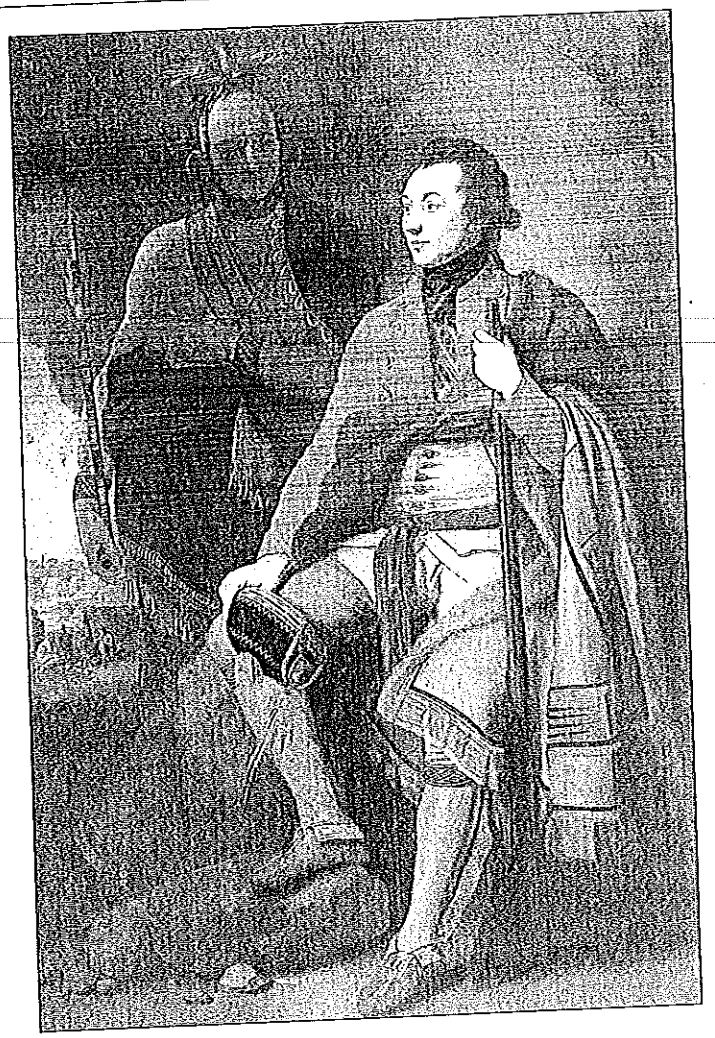

**Thayendanegea**
Guy Johnson, who succeeded his father-in-law Sir William Johnson as British superintendent of Indian affairs, was the ostensible subject of Benjamin West's painting, but it was the shadowy figure of Thayendanegea, or Joseph Brant, that characterized the picture. This Mohawk chief, educated at New Hampshire's Indian School (later Dartmouth College), saw the war as an opportunity to gain Indian independence; he sided with the British in exchange for specific concessions. After a brief visit to Great Britain in 1775–1776 (where this picture was painted), Thayendanegea returned to the colonies. Throughout the war, he led Iroquois raids on New York frontier settlements.
Benjamin West, *Colonel Guy Johnson*, 1776, oil on canvas, 79 3/4 × 54 1/2 inches — National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

a settlement of Moravian converts at Gnadenhütten, killing 96 and sending many survivors fleeing to Canada. Such attacks prompted natives to form alliances of their own against American incursions as the war drew to a close. The Shawnees and others launched counterattacks and laid the ground for further resistance in subsequent decades.

## Building a Republic

Even as fighting flared across eastern North America, Americans were forging a republican ideology of revolution. They were trying not just to free themselves from British rule, but also to build a new political order.

Affirming that "all men" were "created equal" and had "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the Declaration of

Independence suggested that proper government rested on universal truths that were apparent not just to an educated political elite, but to the common sense of all. This was not merely an abstract statement of principle; it was an instrument designed to forge unity across the revolutionary political coalition of farmers, artisans, laborers, slaveholders, merchants, and professional men. It indicated that common folk as well as the wealthy and powerful could claim a role in their own government. Conflict between elite and popular influences had been evident during the protests of the 1760s and in the period from 1774 to 1776, when the Patriot cause was in the hands of extralegal committees (see Chapter 4). These divisions persisted as the new states moved to establish their own permanent governments and constitutions. Debates about price regulation and markets, state finances and taxation, were charged by the inflation, indebtedness, and serious economic hardships many people faced. In Massachusetts these difficulties would provoke armed rebellion in 1786. The formation of new governments both opened and closed democratic possibilities. For many white men political participation offered hopeful prospects, but women and slaves gained little from the revolution's rhetoric of liberty and equality.

**The Movement for a People's Government** Most supporters of the revolution agreed that new American governments should be republican, resting not on the sovereign authority of a monarch but on "the consent of the governed." But Americans differed over how democratic their republics should be and how broadly or directly ordinary people should participate in political affairs.

In Philadelphia's radical atmosphere early in 1776, Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* sketched a vision of democratic government for the new nation. Confident that people could govern themselves without the artificial distinctions of monarchy or aristocracy, Paine advocated a simple direct democracy. Each state, and the nation as a whole, would be governed by an annually elected assembly and headed by a president. Paine's popularity among the artisans and farmers whom the revolution had aroused ensured that his pamphlet would remain a symbol of this popular democracy. When Jeremiah Greenman's Rhode Island regiment celebrated the Fourth of July in 1783, its thirteen toasts included "the Congress of 1776 and Common Sense." Paine's was the clearest argument that, as another pamphleteer put it, "the people" would make "the best governors."

The men who came to power in Pennsylvania in 1776 fashioned a state constitution that drew on Paine's ideas. They created a state legislature with a single chamber, elected annually by all taxpaying adult males, with no property requirements for officeholders. They lodged executive power not in a "governor"—connoting arbitrary, royal power—but in a president and council who served the legislature. Except on "occasions of special neces-

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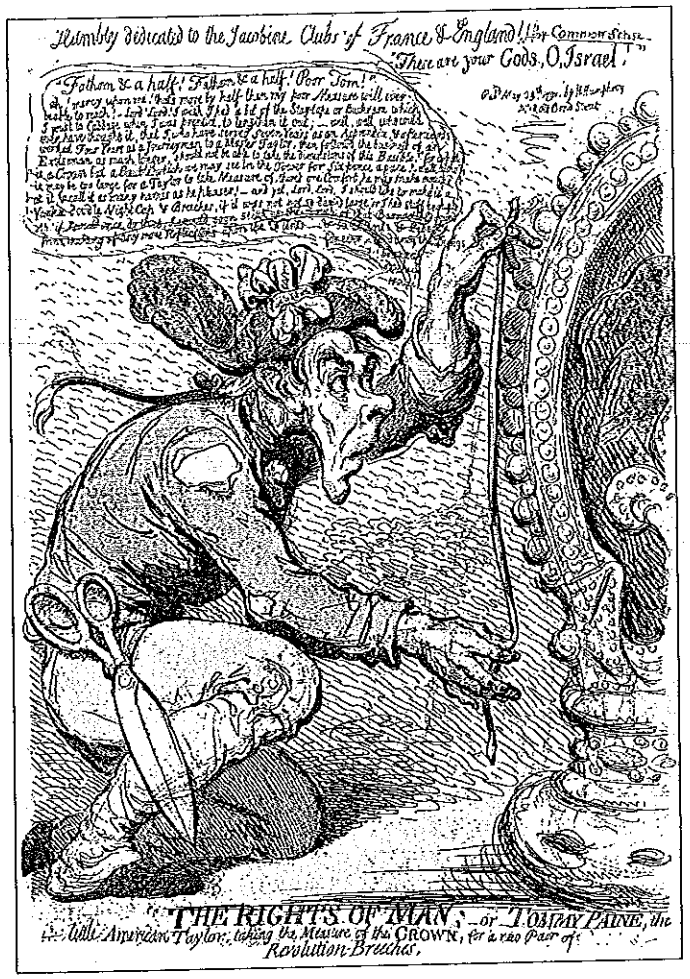



***The Rights of Man: or Tommy Paine, the Little American Taylor, Taking the Measure of the Crown, for a New Pair of Revolution Breeches.***

British conservatives had little love for the author of *Common Sense* — especially after he returned to England in 1787 and pressed for radical republican goals in the land of his birth. Caricaturist James Gillray lampooned Paine in this 1791 cartoon, which appeared soon after the publication of Paine's *The Rights of Man*. But the British establishment took Paine more seriously; within the year, he fled to revolutionary France to avoid imprisonment. James Gillray, engraving, 1791, 13 13/16 × 9 3/4 inches — American Philosophical Society Library.

sity," bills that came before the legislature would be "printed for the consideration of the people" before becoming law. Paine helped to inspire Patriots who were radical both in their support for independence and in their desire to form a democratic, egalitarian political system. From 1776 to 1790, Pennsylvanians governed themselves on these principles, designed to keep government under the close scrutiny of the people.

Elsewhere, too, people felt exhilarated by the notion of abandoning old ways. The Green Mountain Boys spearheaded their own local revolution, declaring independence from New York in 1777 and establishing Vermont as a separate republic. Their constitution, inspired by Pennsylvania's, set up a direct democracy that continued to operate after Vermont joined the United States in 1791. Georgia also established a single-chamber legislature, while Delaware, New Hampshire, and South Carolina adopted the democratic

## "Common Sense and a Plain Understanding": Drafting Pennsylvania's Constitution

*Radical patriot leader James Cannon addressed the following broadside to the members of the Philadelphia militia, setting forth the qualities—including "common Sense and a plain Understanding"—that he thought delegates to Pennsylvania's convention to frame a state constitution should possess.*

A government made for the common Good should be framed by Men who can have no Interest besides the common Interest of Mankind. It is the Happiness of America that there is no Rank above that of Freeman existing in it; and much of our future welfare and Tranquillity will depend on its remaining so forever; for this Reason, great and overgrown rich Men will be improper to be trusted, they will be too apt to be framing Distinctions in Society, because they will reap the Benefits of all such Distinctions. . . . Honesty, common Sense, and a plain Understanding, when unbiased by sinister Motives, are fully equal to the Task—Men of like Passions and Interests with ourselves are most likely to frame us a good Constitution. . . . Some who have been very backward in declaring you a free People, will be very forward in offering themselves to frame your Constitution; but trust them not, however well recommended.

Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976).

title "president" for their chief executives. Farmers and tradesmen replaced some wealthy men in the legislatures (Figure 5.1). Before 1775, only one-sixth of New Hampshire, New Jersey, and New York assemblymen were of modest means; by the 1780s, over three-fifths of them were. Even the Virginia legislature was, according to an observer, "composed of men not quite so well dressed, nor so politely educated, nor so highly born as . . . formerly."

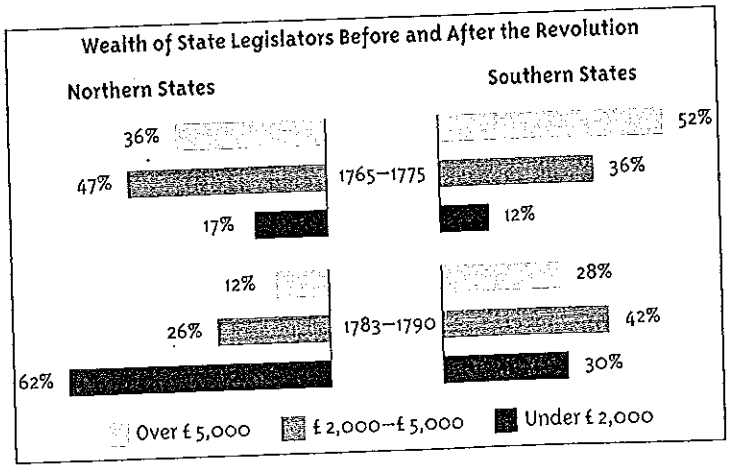



**FIGURE 5.1 Legislatures Become More Democratic, 1765–1790**
State legislatures after the Revolution were considerably less dominated by men of wealth than the colonial assemblies had been in the decade before war with Britain began. In the North, the rise in the proportion of legislators with less than 2,000 pounds' worth of property was particularly striking. From James A. Henretta et al., *America's History*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Worth Publishers, 1993); adapted from Jackson Turner Main, "Government by the People: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., vol. 23 (1966).

**The Limits to Democratization** But there were limits to this democratic thrust. Some Americans feared the possibilities of democracy. John Adams of Massachusetts was as keen as Paine for independence, but his vision of government was more conservative. Published in 1776 as a counter to Paine's *Common Sense*, Adams's *Thoughts on Government* argued that it was impossible to govern without "balanced" institutions that gave elites a voice alongside that of the people. Legislatures should have two chambers, not one, so that the elite members of the upper house could counter the influence of the citizenry represented in the lower. The issue was social as much as political. Who should rule: the "better sort," who had long held sway, or the artisans, farmers, and small traders for whom Paine had spoken? Adams was a republican, but he envisaged a republican society based on hierarchy and order.

Virginia, Maryland, New York, and Massachusetts formed governments that were closer to Adams's conception than to Paine's. The Virginia gentry adopted a constitution that preserved their political control. Maryland's planter class, frightened by the revolution's democratic implications, fashioned a constitution that put as much distance as possible between ordinary people and their rulers. It prescribed stiff property requirements for voting, stiffer ones for holding office, and long intervals between elections. The New York constitution created a state senate that was intended to represent property, not people, and a strong governor who was independent of the legislature, not its servant. Massachusetts followed suit.

**The Articles of Confederation** During the war and its aftermath, the states remained substantially independent of one another. Each sent representatives to the Continental Congress, which oversaw the war's conduct and constructed a rudimentary government for the new United States. In 1777, Congress put forward a framework for a national government: the Articles of Confederation. Many states accepted this quickly, but others were skeptical of signing away powers to a distant government. There was disagreement on whether western lands should be assigned to the federal government. Only reluctantly did some states with land claims across the Appalachian Mountains begin to give them up. As a result, it was 1781 before the Articles went into effect.

The Articles preserved the sovereignty of the states and held a tight rein on federal government. The states' annually elected delegations to Congress varied in size, but each state had only a single vote. Congress could create executive departments, but these remained under its direct control. To become law, its decisions required the support of a majority of states, but amendments to the Articles had to be unanimous. Above all, Congress had no independent power to levy taxes. For its expenditures—including financing the war—it had to rely on requisitions from the states, which

might or might not provide them. To many Americans, these provisions gave assurance that no federal government could exercise a tyranny of the sort that they had feared from Britain and that power would lie with the states and their people. To some, however, the Articles of Confederation seemed weak and ineffectual, and advocates of stronger national government soon challenged them.

**Regulated Prices or Free Markets?** In addition to debating how democratic government should be, the revolutionary coalition was also divided over economic problems. Wartime inflation, shortages, property damage, loss of life, and the disruption of farming, trade, and manufacturing created severe difficulties. The war's end brought depression and glut, as goods that people could not afford went unsold. Production declined sharply. It would be a quarter of a century before America's output per head of population regained its pre-Revolutionary level. Circumstances trapped many of the poor and middling in conditions that they could do little to influence.

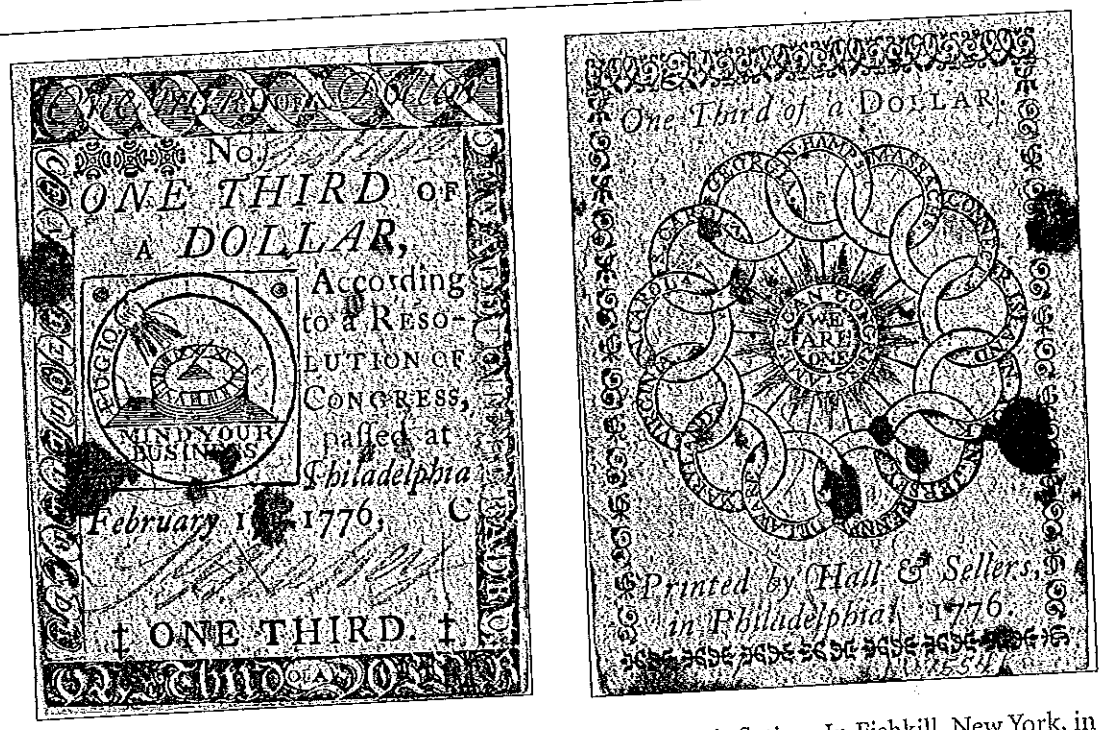
Congress and most state governments had financed their war contributions by printing ever-larger quantities of paper money. The result was the worst inflation America had ever known. Many people turned to traditional concepts of social responsibility and justice, arguing that in a good society, public interest should come before private gain. If supplies were scarce, they suspected "hoarders" of holding them back for profit. If prices rose, they blamed "speculators." Crowds, often made up of women, used the rituals of

### "We Cannot Live Without Bread": Revolutionary Food Shortages

*In December 1778, a Philadelphia resident, styling himself "Mobility," wrote the following letter to a local newspaper, attacking monopolizers and calling, in no uncertain terms, for strong measures by crowds to guarantee the distribution of bread, "the Staff of Life."*

This country has been reduced to the brink of ruin by the infamous practices of Monopolizers and Forestallers. Not satisfied with monopolizing European and West-Indian goods, they have lately monopolized the Staff of Life. Hence, the universal cry of the scarcity and high price of Flour. It has been found in Britain and France, that the People have always done themselves justice when the scarcity of bread has arisen from the avarice of forestallers. They have broken open magazines [warehouses]—appropriated stores to their own use without paying for them—and in some instances have hung up the culprits who have created their distress, without judge or jury. Hear this and tremble, ye enemies to the freedom and happiness of your country. We can live without sugar, molasses, and rum—but we cannot live without bread. Hunger will break through stone walls, and the resentment excited by it may end in your destruction.

Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976).




**Not Worth a Continental**

Taxation to finance the war effort was a limited option for the Continental Congress. Instead, it authorized the printing of paper money in 1775; state governments did so as well. These notes were known as "Continentals" and would be redeemable when the colonies achieved independence. As more money was printed, amounting to $450,000,000 between the state and continental governments, its purchasing power plummeted for consumers. In January 1777, $105 in Continentals equaled $100 in gold and silver; by April 1780, it took $4,000 worth of Continentals to equal the same amount of gold and silver. Faced with this hyperinflation, farmers balked at selling their produce to the army, and women seized overpriced goods from merchants. One-third dollar, 1776 — Smithsonian Institution.

popular price setting to fight wartime inflation. In Fishkill, New York, in August 1776, a group of women formed a committee to confront a prominent merchant who was refusing to sell from his stock of tea. Appointing a "clerk" and a "weigher," the women measured out the tea, announced that they would pay "the continental price" for it, and then gave the money to the local county committee. By the late 1770s, inflation was so severe that people revived their revolutionary committees. When the price of bread rose in Philadelphia during the winter of 1778–1779, an advocate of crowd action to regulate prices warned merchants and bakers that "Hunger will break through stone walls, and the resentment excited by it may end in your destruction."

Not everyone favored price regulation by committee. In 1776, the Scottish political economist Adam Smith had published *The Wealth of Nations*, his famous argument in favor of free markets. By 1779, American critics of regulation, including Thomas Paine himself, suggested that free markets could be liberating and need not lead to the rich trampling the poor. The city's tanners attacked the committee revival and declared that trade ought to be "as free as air, uninterrupted as the tide." At the height of the crisis in Philadelphia, a militia armed by merchants faced down crowds seeking price controls and broke the power of their movement. Knowing that to get what they wanted, they would need to be organized as a political force, Philadelphia merchants and artisans began to gather into a "Republican society" to oppose the state's radical constitution and promote free trade.

At first, advocates of free markets accomplished little, because many states followed policies dictated by popular wishes: issuing paper currency, making it legal tender for the payment of taxes and private debts, and giving debtors relief from lawsuits by their creditors. New York also confiscated the estates of Loyalists and redistributed them. Even Maryland's elite, which virtually monopolized political office, recognized "the wisdom of sacrifice" and gave in to popular demands.

**Shays's Rebellion** In Massachusetts, however, the advocates of hard currency, free trade, and balanced political institutions held sway, with disastrous results for farmers in the interior who faced heavy debts. It took the state until 1780 to adopt its constitution, and commercial men then dominated the government. They ensured that Massachusetts adopted strict policies on money and debt. Paper currency was not acknowledged as legal tender, and debtors received no protection from their creditors, regardless of whether these were Patriots, Loyalists, or British.

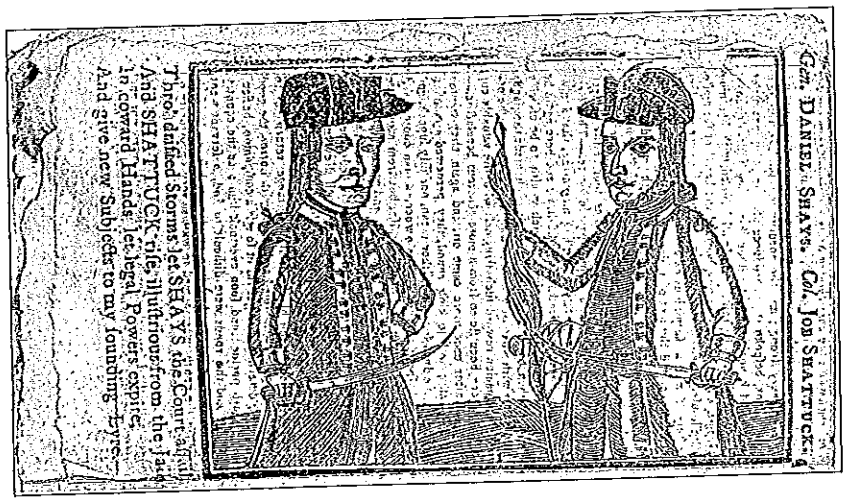
When the former colonies made peace with Britain in 1783, American ports reopened to British commerce, unleashing a burst of consumption as people with money craved goods that had been unavailable during the war. But this boom soon reversed, into a trading slump that lasted for three years. British creditors called in debts from American merchants, who in turn demanded payment from cash-poor rural traders and customers. In most states, the law would have given debtors some protection, but not in Massachusetts. There, farmers, artisans, and small traders were expected to pay both their debts and their taxes in cash, which they did not have. They believed that the public good was being sacrificed to privilege. As the people of Dracut, Massachusetts, protested, "Money . . . seems to have . . . hid itself in the secret confines of those who have a greater love to their own Interest than they have to that of their Neighbours." As in the past, the fear that they would lose their property and be reduced to the status of tenants or hired laborers haunted them. When creditors brought lawsuits and defendants began to crowd the courts and debtors' prisons, popular fears became real.

People again took traditional steps to relieve their burden, producing an uprising in interior Massachusetts in 1786 that became known as Shays's Rebellion, after one of its leaders, Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental Army. Having formed committees and conventions to oppose the government's policies, farmers gathered under arms to close the courts and prevent lawsuits being heard. In concert with Boston radicals such as Samuel Adams, they had done the same in 1774 in response to the Coercive Acts. Now they found themselves pitted against some of these same radicals, including Adams, who controlled the state government in alliance with con-

servative merchants. Adams defended the law and the courts as agents of a constitution adopted by the people and as necessary to preserve commerce.

To disperse the rebels and restore the courts, the Boston government sent General Benjamin Lincoln and a well-organized militia force to the west. When Shays and his armed farmers mounted an ill-coordinated assault on the federal armory at Springfield, the local militia scattered them. Lincoln's army then chased the rebels into the hills and captured many in a surprise attack. Shays and others fled into exile in neighboring states. Four rebel leaders were captured, tried, and condemned to death for treason. The government mounted a theatrical display of judicial terror. At the trial, Chief Justice William Cushing berated the rebels for trying "to overturn all government and order, to shake off all restraints, human and divine." Just as they were about to be hanged, the governor reprieved them in a public show of mercy. These methods worked as intended. Individuals and whole towns begged forgiveness for rebelling. "'Tis true that I have been a committeeman," wrote one, but "I am sincerely sorry . . . and hope it will be overlooked and pardoned."

This defeat at the hands of men who had been their revolutionary allies taught Shaysites and their sympathizers a lesson about the politics of the new republic. The old notion that small communities could defend themselves against outsiders no longer applied when the government itself was theoretically of the people. To overturn policies that they resented, people with common interests would have to organize themselves and formally enter the political arena. Almost immediately, Massachusetts farmers did just that. In the 1787 state elections, they unseated the hard-money governor James Bowdoin and replaced him with the popular John Hancock. New men, many from western towns that for years had not bothered to send




**Shays's Rebellion**
The portraits of Daniel Shays and Job Shattuck, leaders of the Massachusetts Regulators, appeared on the cover of *Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack* in 1787. *Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack of 1787* (c. 1787) — National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

delegates, flooded into the legislature. Symbolically, at least, the elite made concessions to ordinary peoples' demands. Never again would the state's government allow debtors to be hounded with the ruthlessness that had been evident in the mid-1780s.

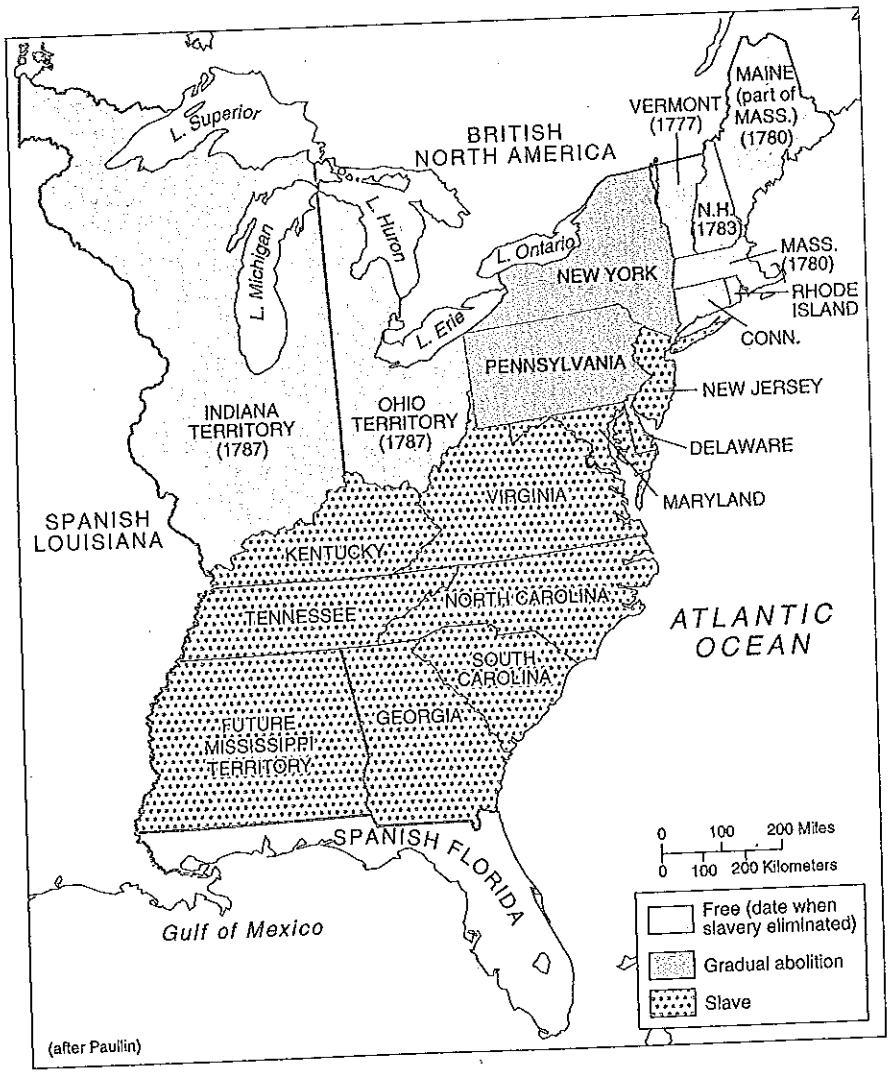
**The Limits and Possibilities of the Revolution** The revolution raised more questions about equality and human rights than it answered. Prominent among these was the issue of slavery. White colonists had proudly borne the status of "freeborn Englishmen" that distinguished them from slaves, and the Patriots' chief grievance against Britain was that the crown seemed bent on reducing them to political slavery. To many of them, there was no contradiction between the Patriot cause and ownership of slaves; having other human beings as property was simply a fact of life. But British and Loyalist commentators were quick to condemn American revolutionaries who complained of enslavement but were complicit in slavery itself. For some slave owners, including Washington and Jefferson, slavery was a problem they agonized over but could not resolve. When Jefferson included in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence a clause condemning the king for conducting the slave trade, other members of Congress struck it out as an embarrassing hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, the Revolution did alter American slavery. In the North, an increasing number of people opposed slavery on principle. The Vermont constitution outlawed it. One New Yorker condemned slavery as "cruelty in the extreme" and "the severest reproach" to the new nation. Notables such as Alexander Hamilton manumitted (released) slaves they had acquired and helped to found organizations such as the New York Manumission Society to promote the abandonment of slavery. In Massachusetts, several slaves brought lawsuits, and the case of Quok Walker struck a heavy blow against slavery. Walker had declared his own freedom in 1781 and then sued his master for wages and for damages for the assault and imprisonment he had endured when the man recaptured and beat him. Chief Justice Cushing, the judge who would later condemn the Shays rebels, ruled in 1783 that Walker's enslavement violated the declaration of Massachusetts's new constitution that "all men are born free and equal." This effectively abolished slavery in the state. New Hampshire soon followed suit.

However, abolition was embraced only where economic circumstances permitted. Although declining, slavery did remain important in other northern states and was dismantled only slowly. Starting with Pennsylvania in 1780 and ending with New Jersey in 1804, these states passed abolition laws that bound the children of existing slaves to labor until they were adults. In the resulting "gradual" abolition, New Jersey's last slave was not freed until 1846, and Pennsylvania's was not freed not until 1847. After the

Revolution, the number of slaves throughout the North fell from the 50,000 who had lived there in 1775; but in 1810, there were still 27,000 northern slaves working in craft occupations, as laborers, or as domestic servants (Map 5.1).

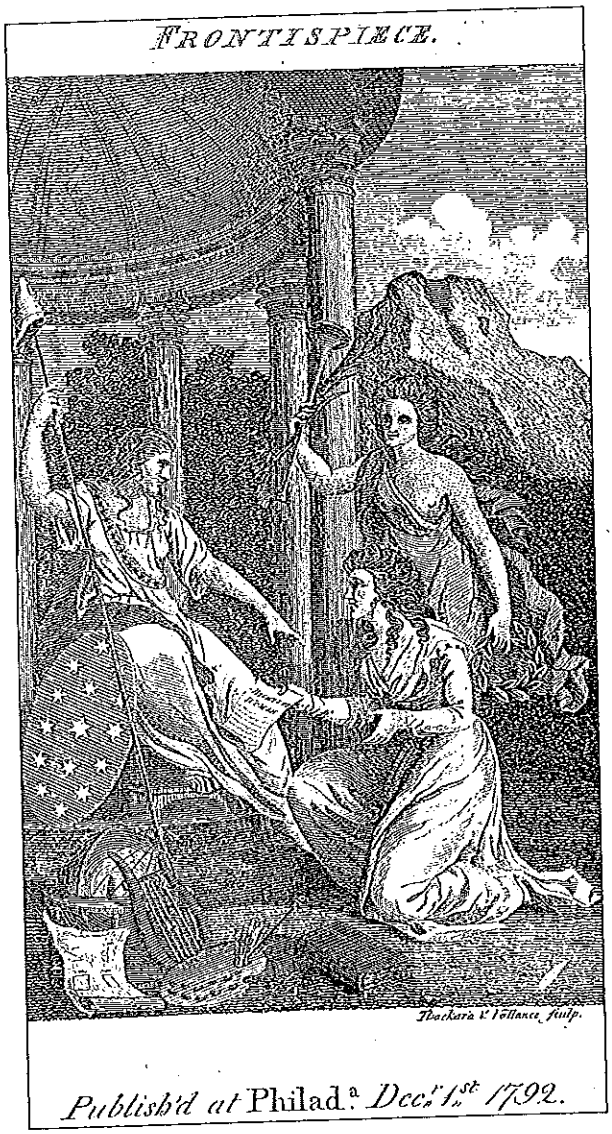
In the Upper South, a shift from tobacco to grain cultivation reduced the demand for plantation slave labor, and the number of manumissions rose. In Virginia, about 10,000 slaves obtained freedom in the decade after 1782. Some owners freed their slaves on principle because slavery violated "the inalienable rights of mankind" or was "contrary to the command of




**MAP 5.1 Slavery after the American Revolution: Emancipation and Expansion**

This map illustrates the emerging contrasts between northern and southern states. Whereas the South continued to permit slavery and carried the system into new territories in the Southwest, northern states took steps to ban slavery or gradually phase it out.

*Source:* Arwin D. Smallwood, *Atlas of African-American History and Politics* (1998).




**Opportunities and Limitations** In the frontispiece from a 1792 Philadelphia publication (left), *The Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge*, Columbia was presented with a petition for the "Rights of Woman." In contrast, an engraving published sometime after 1785 (right) offered the homily that "a virtuous woman is a Crown to her Husband" and prescribed the limits beyond which no respectable woman's aspirations should go. *The Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge* (December 1, 1792) — Library Company of Philadelphia. *Keep Within Compass*, c. 1785–1805, sepia engraving, 9 5/16 × 7 1/8 inches — Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum.

Christ." But many slaves had to purchase their freedom with their own earnings or those of relatives. Graham Bell of Petersburg, Virginia, obtained his liberty in 1792 and then spent the next thirteen years working to buy the freedom of another nine slaves. Before independence, free blacks were rare in Virginia, but by 1820, their numbers exceeded 200,000. Where plantation agriculture remained strong, however, freedom was hardest to achieve. In the Lower South, only 4 percent of African Americans were free by 1810, compared with 10 percent in the Upper South.

For women, too, the rhetoric of revolution seemed to raise new possibilities for freedom. A Rhode Island woman declared that "The Women of


this State are Animated with the Liveliest Sentiments of Liberty." Women had been heavily involved in the war effort; had run farms, shops, and businesses when men went to fight or were killed; and had undertaken extra manufacturing work that helped America to achieve a degree of economic autonomy. In protest movements and food riots, women carried forward the campaigns for price regulation that dominated wartime politics. For perhaps the first time, women had formed public organizations, to raise funds for soldiers and similar purposes. "America will not wear chains," wrote Abigail Adams, "while her daughters are virtuous."

Revolutionary ideals led some women to question the subordination that their mothers and grandmothers had taken for granted. Elite women discussed politics and called for improved education. In parts of the North, the proportion of women who could read and write rose toward the high level already attained by men. A small number of women used more liberal divorce statutes to free themselves from oppressive marriages. In 1788, Abigail Strong of Connecticut noted in her divorce petition that if "even Kings may forfeit . . . the allegiance of their subjects," husbands could not command unconditional control over their wives.

In practice, however, the Revolution little altered women's social position. Many people regarded women's proper role in the new republic as raising and educating good republican citizens. Abigail Adams could urge her husband and his colleagues to "remember the ladies" in their political deliberations (see p. 201), but men were not prepared to overturn institutions that served their interests. "We know better," John Adams replied to his wife, "than to repeal our masculine systems." In only one state, New Jersey, did any women achieve political rights. Free, propertied women could vote in local elections there in the 1780s, and a 1790 state election law referred to voters as "he or she." These rights would soon be abolished, however.

Nevertheless, although the actual opportunities available to them were often restricted, the Revolution encouraged many people—men and

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women; rich, middling, and poor; black and white—to think it possible to take greater control of their circumstances. Merchants and some farmers gained greater access to commercial markets. The confiscation of Loyalists' property and the opening of vast new western territories gave more farmers access to land. This vision of taking control further undermined older colonial concepts of deference. In 1788, an elderly New Hampshire congressman complained that now "young and old all mix together, & talk & joke alike so that you cannot discover any distinction made or any respect shewn to one more than to another." Some Americans saw the possibility of taking control of their societies, even at the risk of conflict with those whose interests differed from their own.

## Creating a National Government

Members of the elite saw too much democracy as dangerous. In 1787, only months after the suppression of Shays's Rebellion, a group of delegates drawn from the elites of the thirteen states met in a special convention at Philadelphia. Its ostensible purpose was to revise the Articles of Confederation, but it quickly resolved to scrap them altogether and to draw up a new framework for government. After vigorous argument and numerous compromises over such issues as the balance of federal and state power and the nature of representation, the result was the U.S. Constitution, which sought to put a conservative curb on America's political development. The decision to ratify this framework for a new, stronger national government was hotly debated, and in several states ratification was contingent on the addition of amendments that would specify the rights guaranteed to citizens. After special conventions in nine states had ratified it, this Constitution went into effect in 1788, and the remaining four states joined the union within two years. The adoption of the Constitution marked the completion of the political revolution and took a step away from the Revolution's most radical possibilities.

**The Constitution's Framers** Most members of the Philadelphia convention were merchants, lawyers, landholders, or southern planters. They included Robert Morris of Philadelphia, the "financier" of the Revolution, whose land speculations would soon make him America's richest man; New York's Alexander Hamilton, who had risen from obscurity to be George Washington's aide-de-camp, marry into the New York landed elite, and wield influence as a lawyer, essayist, and politician; and James Madison of Virginia, who had already written a private essay on "The Vices of the Political System of the United States," which outlined many of the changes that the Constitution would make. George Washington himself chaired the convention.