

THE AMERICAN YAWP

4. Colonial Society



Charles Willson Peale, *The Peale Family*, c. 1771–1773. Collection of the [New-York Historical Society](#), object #1867.298.

The American Yawp is an evolving, collaborative text. Please click [here](#) to improve this chapter.

I. Introduction | II. Consumption and Trade in the British Atlantic | III. Slavery, Anti-Slavery and Atlantic Exchange | IV. Pursuing Political, Religious and Individual Freedom | V. Seven Years' War | VI. Pontiac's War | VII. Conclusion | VIII. Primary Sources | IX. Reference Material

I. Introduction

Eighteenth-century American culture moved in competing directions. Commercial, military, and cultural ties between Great Britain and the North American colonies tightened while a new distinctly American culture began to form and bind together colonists from New Hampshire to

Georgia. Immigrants from other European nations meanwhile combined with Native Americans and enslaved Africans to create an increasingly diverse colonial population. All—men and women, European, Native American, and African—led distinct lives and wrought new distinct societies. While life in the thirteen colonies was shaped in part by English practices and participation in the larger Atlantic World, emerging cultural patterns increasingly transformed North America into something wholly different.

II. Consumption and Trade in the British Atlantic

Transatlantic trade greatly enriched Britain, but it also created high standards of living for many North American colonists. This two-way relationship reinforced the colonial feeling of commonality with British culture. It was not until trade relations, disturbed by political changes and the demands of warfare, became strained in the 1760s that colonists began to question these ties.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, improvements in manufacturing, transportation, and the availability of credit increased the opportunity for colonists to purchase consumer goods. Instead of making their own tools, clothes, and utensils, colonists increasingly purchased luxury items made by specialized artisans and manufacturers. As the incomes of Americans rose and the prices of these commodities fell, these items shifted from luxuries to common goods. The average person's ability to spend money on consumer goods became a sign of their respectability. Historians have called this process the “consumer revolution.”¹



Joseph Highmore, *The Harlowe Family*, from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, 1745–1747. [Wikimedia](#).

Britain relied on the colonies as a source of raw materials, such as lumber and tobacco. Americans engaged with new forms of trade and financing that increased their ability to buy British-made goods. But the ways in which colonists paid for these goods varied sharply from those in Britain. When settlers first arrived in North America, they typically carried very little hard or metallic British money with them. Discovering no precious metals (and lacking the Crown's authority to mint coins), colonists relied on barter and nontraditional forms of exchange, including everything from nails to the wampum used by Native American groups in the Northeast. To deal with the lack of currency, many colonies resorted to "commodity money," which varied from place to place. In Virginia, for example, the colonial legislature stipulated a rate of exchange for tobacco, standardizing it as a form of money in the colony. Commodities could be cumbersome and difficult to transport, so a system of notes developed. These notes allowed individuals to deposit a certain amount of tobacco in a warehouse and receive a note bearing the value of the deposit that

could be traded as money. In 1690, colonial Massachusetts became the first place in the Western world to issue paper bills to be used as money.² These notes, called bills of credit, were issued for finite periods of time on the colony's credit and varied in denomination.

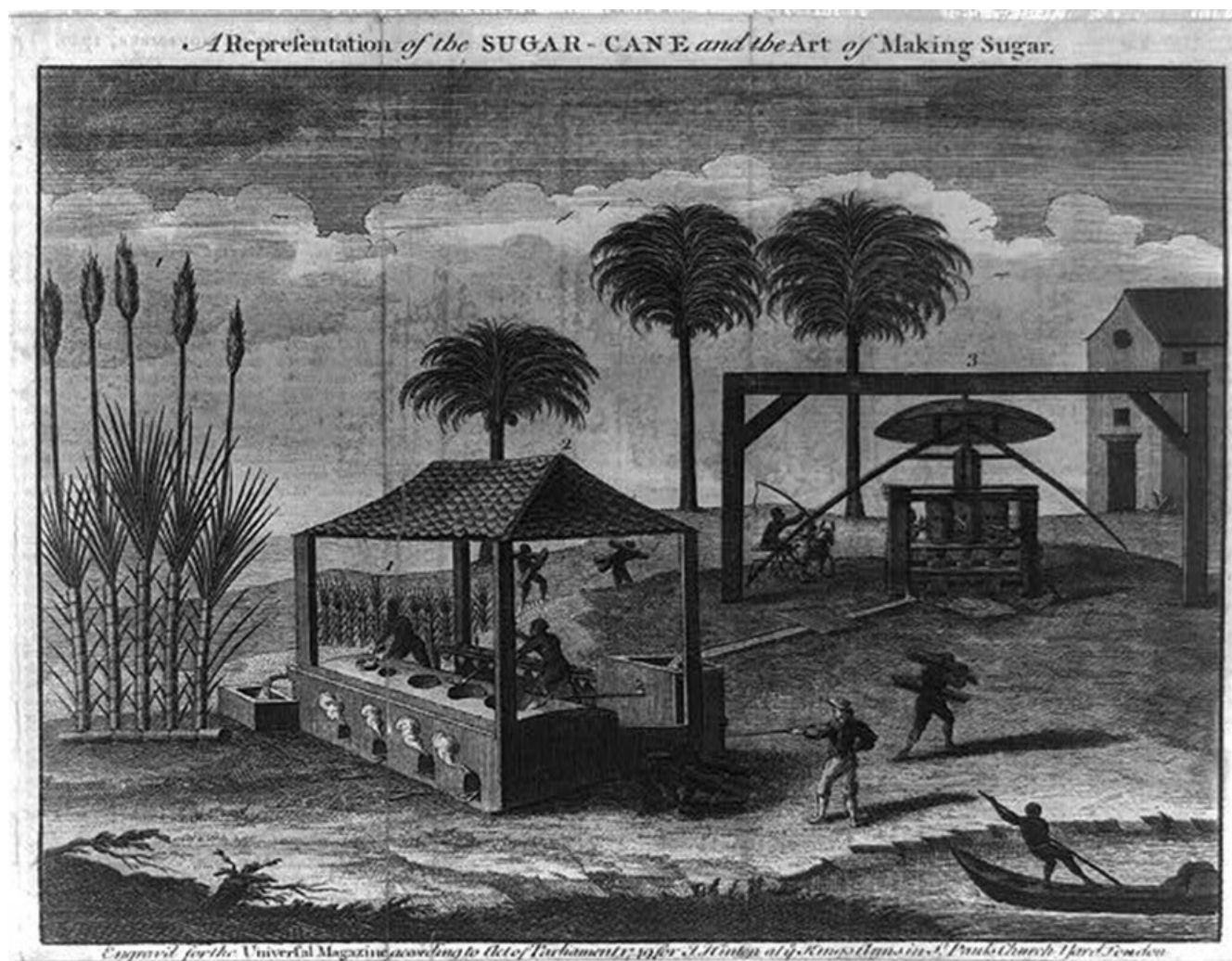
While these notes provided colonists with a much-needed medium for exchange, it was not without its problems. Currency that worked in Virginia might be worthless in Pennsylvania. Colonists and officials in Britain debated whether it was right or desirable to use mere paper, as opposed to gold or silver, as a medium of exchange. Paper money tended to lose value quicker than coins and was often counterfeited. These problems, as well as British merchants' reluctance to accept depreciated paper notes, caused the Board of Trade to restrict the uses of paper money in the Currency Acts of 1751 and 1763. Paper money was not the only medium of exchange, however. Colonists also used metal coins. Barter and the extension of credit—which could take the form of bills of exchange, akin to modern-day personal checks—remained important forces throughout the colonial period. Still, trade between colonies was greatly hampered by the lack of standardized money.

Businesses on both sides of the Atlantic advertised both their goods and promises of obtaining credit. The consistent availability of credit allowed families of modest means to buy consumer items previously available only to elites. Cheap consumption allowed middle-class Americans to match many of the trends in clothing, food, and household décor that traditionally marked the wealthiest, aristocratic classes. Provincial Americans, often seen by their London peers as less cultivated or “backwater,” could present themselves as lords and ladies of their own communities by purchasing and displaying British-made goods. Visiting the home of a successful businessman in Boston, John Adams described “the Furniture, which alone cost a thousand Pounds sterling. A seat it is for a noble Man, a Prince. The Turkey Carpets, the painted Hangings, the Marble Table, the rich Beds with crimson Damask Curtains and Counterpins, the beautiful Chimney Clock, the Spacious Garden, are the most magnificent of any thing I have seen.”³ But many Americans worried about the consequences of rising consumerism. A writer for the *Boston Evening Post* remarked on this new practice of purchasing status: “For 'tis well known how Credit is a mighty inducement with many People to purchase this and the other Thing which they may well enough do without.”⁴ Americans became more likely to find themselves in debt, whether to their local shopkeeper or a prominent London merchant, creating new feelings of dependence.

Of course, the thirteen continental colonies were not the only British colonies in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, they were considerably less important to the Crown than the sugar-

producing islands of the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Barbados, the Leeward Islands, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Dominica. These British colonies were also inextricably connected to the continental colonies. Caribbean plantations dedicated nearly all of their land to the wildly profitable crop of sugarcane, so North American colonies sold surplus food and raw materials to these wealthy island colonies. Lumber was in high demand, especially in Barbados, where planters nearly deforested the island to make room for sugar plantations. To compensate for a lack of lumber, Barbadian colonists ordered house frames from New England. These prefabricated frames were sent via ships from which planters transported them to their plantations. Caribbean colonists also relied on the continental colonies for livestock, purchasing cattle and horses. The most lucrative exchange was the slave trade.

Connections between the Caribbean and North America benefited both sides. Those living on the continent relied on the Caribbean colonists to satisfy their craving for sugar and other goods like mahogany. British colonists in the Caribbean began cultivating sugar in the 1640s, and sugar took the Atlantic World by storm. In fact, by 1680, sugar exports from the tiny island of Barbados valued more than the total exports of all the continental colonies.⁵ Jamaica, acquired by the Crown in 1655, surpassed Barbados in sugar production toward the end of the seventeenth century. North American colonists, like Britons around the world, craved sugar to sweeten their tea and food. Colonial elites also sought to decorate their parlors and dining rooms with the silky, polished surfaces of rare mahogany as opposed to local wood. While the bulk of this in-demand material went to Britain and Europe, New England merchants imported the wood from the Caribbean, where it was then transformed into exquisite furniture for those who could afford it.



John Hinton, "A representation of the sugar-cane and the art of making sugar," 1749. [Library of Congress](#).

These systems of trade all existed with the purpose of enriching Great Britain. To ensure that profits ended up in Britain, Parliament issued taxes on trade under the Navigation Acts. These taxes intertwined consumption with politics. Prior to 1763, Britain found that enforcing the regulatory laws they passed was difficult and often cost them more than the duty revenue they would bring in. As a result, colonists found it relatively easy to violate the law and trade with foreign nations, pirates, or smugglers. Customs officials were easily bribed and it was not uncommon to see Dutch, French, or West Indies ships laden with prohibited goods in American ports. When smugglers were caught, their American peers often acquitted them. British officials estimated that nearly £700,000 worth of illicit goods was brought into the American colonies annually.⁶ Pirates also helped to perpetuate the illegal trading activities by providing a buffer between merchants and foreign ships.

Beginning with the Sugar Act in 1764, and continuing with the Stamp Act and the Townshend

Acts, Parliament levied taxes on sugar, paper, lead, glass, and tea, all products that contributed to colonists' sense of gentility. In response, patriots organized nonimportation agreements and reverted to domestic products. Homespun cloth became a political statement. A writer in the *Essex Gazette* in 1769 proclaimed, "I presume there never was a Time when, or a Place where, the Spinning Wheel could more influence the Affairs of Men, than at present."⁷

The consumer revolution fueled the growth of colonial cities. Cities in colonial America were crossroads for the movement of people and goods. One in twenty colonists lived in cities by 1775.⁸ Some cities grew organically over time, while others were planned from the start. New York's and Boston's seventeenth-century street plans reflected the haphazard arrangement of medieval cities in Europe. In other cities like Philadelphia and Charleston, civic leaders laid out urban plans according to calculated systems of regular blocks and squares. Planners in Annapolis and Williamsburg also imposed regularity and order over their city streets through the placement of government, civic, and educational buildings.

By 1775, Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston were the five largest cities in British North America. Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Charleston had populations of approximately 40,000, 25,000, 16,000, and 12,000 people, respectively.⁹ Urban society was highly stratified. At the base of the social ladder were the laboring classes, which included both enslaved and free people ranging from apprentices to master craftsmen. Next came the middling sort: shopkeepers, artisans, and skilled mariners. Above them stood the merchant elites, who tended to be actively involved in the city's social and political affairs, as well as in the buying, selling, and trading of goods. Enslaved men and women had a visible presence in both northern and southern cities.

The bulk of the enslaved population lived in rural areas and performed agricultural labor. In port cities, enslaved laborers often worked as domestic servants and in skilled trades: distilleries, shipyards, lumberyards, and ropewalks. Between 1725 and 1775, slavery became increasingly significant in the northern colonies as urban residents sought greater participation in the maritime economy. Massachusetts was the first slave-holding colony in New England. New York traced its connections to slavery and the slave trade back to the Dutch settlers of New Netherland in the seventeenth century. Philadelphia also became an active site of the Atlantic slave trade, and enslaved people accounted for nearly 8 percent of the city's population in 1770.¹⁰ In southern cities, including Charleston, urban slavery played an important role in the market economy. Enslaved

people, both rural and urban, made up the majority of the laboring population on the eve of the American Revolution.

III. Slavery, Anti-Slavery and Atlantic Exchange

Slavery was a transatlantic institution, but it developed distinct characteristics in British North America. By 1750, slavery was legal in every North American colony, but local economic imperatives, demographic trends, and cultural practices all contributed to distinct colonial variants of slavery.

Virginia, the oldest of the English mainland colonies, imported its first enslaved laborers in 1619. Virginia planters built larger and larger estates and guaranteed that these estates would remain intact through the use of primogeniture (in which a family's estate would descend to the eldest male heir) and the entail (a legal procedure that prevented the breakup and sale of estates). This distribution of property, which kept wealth and property consolidated, guaranteed that the great planters would dominate social and economic life in the Chesapeake. This system also fostered an economy dominated by tobacco. By 1750, there were approximately one hundred thousand enslaved Africans in Virginia, at least 40 percent of the colony's total population.¹¹ Most of these enslaved people worked on large estates under the gang system of labor, working from dawn to dusk in groups with close supervision by a white overseer or enslaved "driver" who could use physical force to compel labor.

Virginians used the law to protect the interests of enslavers. In 1705 the House of Burgesses passed its first comprehensive slave code. Earlier laws had already guaranteed that the children of enslaved women would be born enslaved, conversion to Christianity would not lead to freedom, and enslavers could not free their enslaved laborers unless they transported them out of the colony. Enslavers could not be convicted of murder for killing an enslaved person; conversely, any Black Virginian who struck a white colonist would be severely whipped. Virginia planters used the law to maximize the profitability of their enslaved laborers and closely regulate every aspect of their daily lives.

In South Carolina and Georgia, slavery was also central to colonial life, but specific local condi-

tions created a very different system. Georgia was founded a philanthropic group that included James Oglethorpe. The trustees originally banned slavery from the colony. But by 1750, slavery was legal throughout the region. South Carolina had been a slave colony from its founding and, by 1750, was the only mainland colony with a majority enslaved African population. The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, coauthored by the philosopher John Locke in 1669, explicitly legalized slavery from the very beginning. Many early settlers in Carolina were enslavers from British Caribbean sugar islands, and they brought their brutal slave codes with them. Defiant enslaved people could legally be beaten, branded, mutilated, even castrated. In 1740 a new law stated that killing a rebellious enslaved person was not a crime and even the murder of an enslaved person was treated as a minor misdemeanor. South Carolina also banned the freeing of enslaved laborers unless the freed person left the colony.¹²

Despite this brutal regime, a number of factors combined to give enslaved people in South Carolina more independence in their daily lives. Rice, the staple crop underpinning the early Carolina economy, was widely cultivated in West Africa, and planters commonly requested that merchants sell them enslaved laborers skilled in the complex process of rice cultivation. Enslaved people from Senegambia were particularly prized.¹³ The expertise of these enslaved people contributed to one of the most lucrative economies in the colonies. The swampy conditions of rice plantations, however, fostered dangerous diseases. Malaria and other tropical diseases spread and caused many enslavers to live away from their plantations. These elites, who commonly owned a number of plantations, typically lived in Charleston town houses to avoid the diseases of the rice fields. West Africans, however, were far more likely to have a level of immunity to malaria (due to a genetic trait that also contributes to higher levels of sickle cell anemia), reinforcing planters' racial belief that Africans were particularly suited to labor in tropical environments.

With plantation owners often far from home, Carolina enslaved laborers had less direct oversight than those in the Chesapeake. Furthermore, many Carolina rice plantations used the task system to organize enslaved laborers. Under this system, enslaved laborers were given a number of specific tasks to complete in a day. Once those tasks were complete, enslaved people often had time to grow their own crops on garden plots allotted by their enslavers. Thriving underground markets allowed enslaved people here a degree of economic autonomy. Enslaved people in Carolina also had an unparalleled degree of cultural autonomy. This autonomy coupled with the frequent arrival of new Africans enabled a culture that retained many African practices.¹⁴ Syncretic languages like Gullah and Geechee contained many borrowed African terms, and traditional African

basket weaving (often combined with Native American techniques) survives in the region to this day.

This unique Lowcountry culture contributed to the Stono Rebellion in September 1739. On a Sunday morning while planters attended church, a group of about eighty enslaved people set out for Spanish Florida under a banner that read “Liberty!,” burning plantations and killing at least twenty white settlers as they marched. They were headed for Fort Mose, a free Black settlement on the Georgia-Florida border, emboldened by the Spanish Empire’s offer of freedom to anyone enslaved by the English. The local militia defeated the rebels in battle, captured and executed many of the enslaved people, and sold others to the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Though the rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it was a violent reminder that enslaved people would fight for freedom.

Slavery was also an important institution in the mid-Atlantic colonies. While New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania never developed plantation economies, enslaved laborers were often employed on larger farms growing cereal grains. Enslaved Africans worked alongside European tenant farmers on New York’s Hudson Valley “patroonships,” huge tracts of land granted to a few early Dutch families. As previously mentioned, enslaved people were also a common sight in Philadelphia, New York City, and other ports where they worked in the maritime trades and domestic service. New York City’s economy was so reliant on slavery that over 40 percent of its population was enslaved by 1700, while 15 to 20 percent of Pennsylvania’s colonial population was enslaved by 1750.¹⁵ In New York, the high density of enslaved people and a particularly diverse European population increased the threat of rebellion. A 1712 slave rebellion in New York City resulted in the deaths of nine white colonists. In retribution, twenty-one enslaved people were executed and six others died by suicide before they could be burned alive. In 1741, authorities uncovered another planned rebellion by enslaved Africans and poor Black and white men. Panic unleashed a witch hunt that only stopped after thirty-two Black men, both enslaved and free, were executed alongside five poor white men. Another seventy were deported, likely to the sugarcane fields of the West Indies.¹⁶

Increasingly uneasy about the growth of slavery in the region, Quakers were the first group to turn against slavery. Quaker beliefs in radical nonviolence and the fundamental equality of all human souls made slavery hard to justify. Most commentators argued that slavery originated in war, where captives were enslaved rather than executed. To pacifist Quakers, then, the very foundation

of slavery was illegitimate. Furthermore, Quaker belief in the equality of souls challenged the racial basis of slavery. By 1758, Quakers in Pennsylvania disowned members who engaged in the slave trade, and by 1772 slave-owning Quakers could be expelled from their meetings. These local activities in Pennsylvania had broad implications as the decision to ban slavery and slave trading was debated in Quaker meetings throughout the English-speaking world. The free Black population in Philadelphia and other northern cities also continually agitated against slavery.

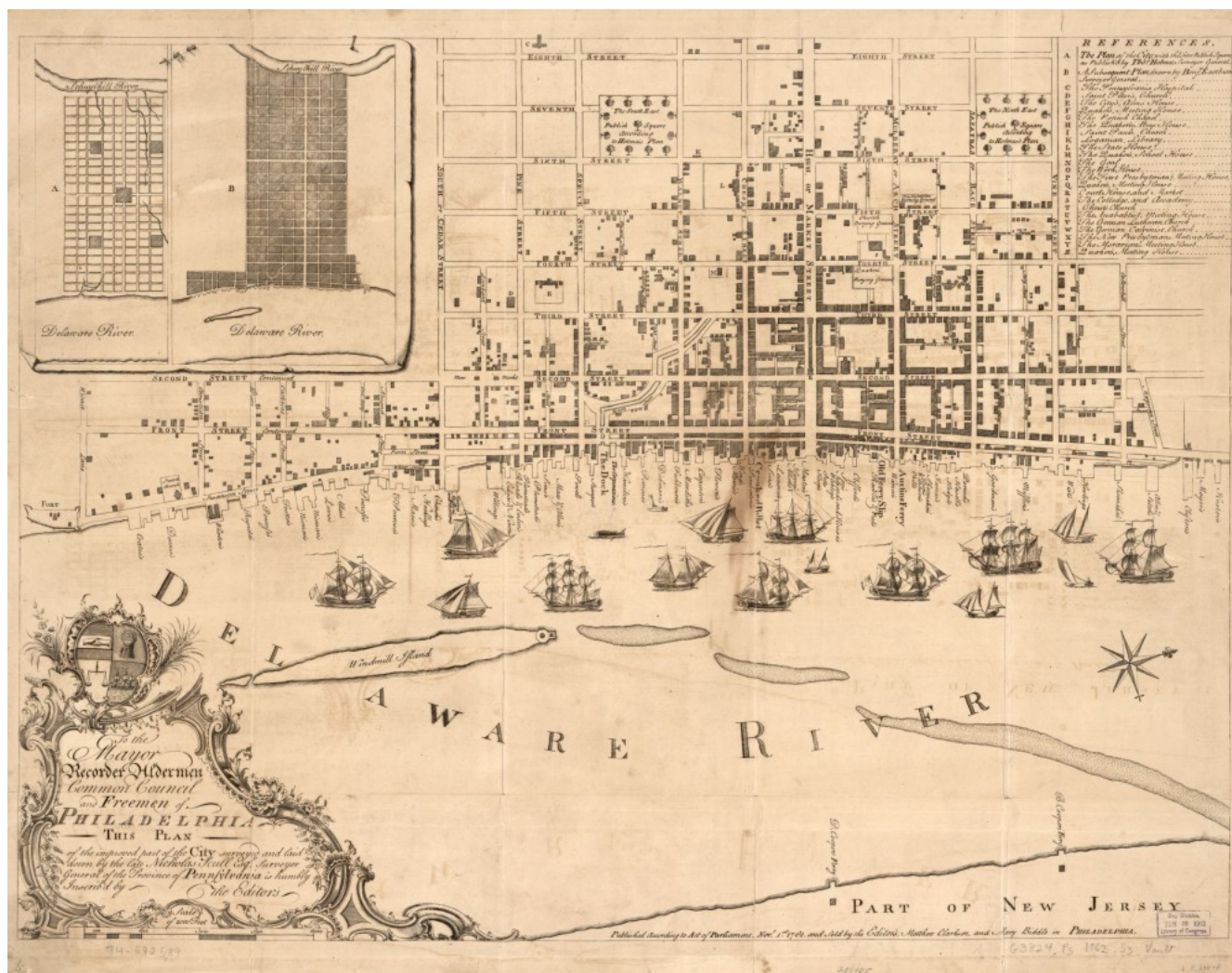
Slavery as a system of labor never took off in Massachusetts, Connecticut, or New Hampshire, though it was legal throughout the region. The absence of cash crops like tobacco or rice minimized the economic use of slavery. In Massachusetts, only about 2 percent of the population was enslaved as late as the 1760s. The few enslaved people in the colony were concentrated in Boston along with a sizable free Black community that made up about 10 percent of the city's population.¹⁷ While slavery itself never really took root in New England, the slave trade was a central element of the region's economy. Every major port in the region participated to some extent in the transatlantic trade—Newport, Rhode Island, alone had at least 150 ships active in the trade by 1740—and New England also provided foodstuffs and manufactured goods to West Indian plantations.¹⁸

IV. Pursuing Political, Religious and Individual Freedom

Consumption, trade, and slavery drew the colonies closer to Great Britain, but politics and government split them further apart. Democracy in Europe more closely resembled oligarchies rather than republics, with only elite members of society eligible to serve in elected positions. Most European states did not hold regular elections, with Britain and the Dutch Republic being the two major exceptions. However, even in these countries, only a tiny portion of males could vote. In the North American colonies, by contrast, white male suffrage was far more widespread. In addition to having greater popular involvement, colonial government also had more power in a variety of areas. Assemblies and legislatures regulated businesses, imposed new taxes, cared for the poor in their communities, built roads and bridges, and made most decisions concerning education. Colonial Americans sued often, which in turn led to more power for local judges and more prestige in jury service. Thus, lawyers became extremely important in American society and in turn played a greater role in American politics.

American society was less tightly controlled than European society. This led to the rise of various interest groups, each at odds with the other. These various interest groups arose based on commonalities in various areas. Some commonalities arose over class-based distinctions, while others were due to ethnic or religious ties. One of the major differences between modern politics and colonial political culture was the lack of distinct, stable political parties. The most common disagreement in colonial politics was between the elected assemblies and the royal governor. Generally, the various colonial legislatures were divided into factions who either supported or opposed the current governor's political ideology.

Political structures in the colonies fell under one of three main categories: provincial (New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia), proprietary (Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland), and charter (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut). Provincial colonies were the most tightly controlled by the Crown. The British king appointed all provincial governors and these Crown governors could veto any decision made by their colony's legislative assemblies. Proprietary colonies had a similar structure, with one important difference: governors were appointed by a lord proprietor, an individual who had purchased or received the rights to the colony from the Crown. Proprietary colonies therefore often had more freedoms and liberties than other North American colonies. Charter colonies had the most complex system of government: they were formed by political corporations or interest groups that drew up a charter clearly delineating powers between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government. Rather than having appointed governors, charter colonies elected their own from among property-owning men in the colony.



Nicholas Scull, "To the mayor, recorder, aldermen, common council, and freemen of Philadelphia this plan of the improved part of the city surveyed and laid down by the late Nicholas Scull," Philadelphia, 1762. [Library of Congress](#).

After the governor, colonial government was broken down into two main divisions: the council and the assembly. The council was essentially the governor's cabinet, often composed of prominent individuals within the colony, such as the head of the militia or the attorney general. The governor appointed these men, although the appointments were often subject to approval from Parliament. The assembly was composed of elected, property-owning men whose official goal was to ensure that colonial law conformed to English law. The colonial assemblies approved new taxes and the colonial budgets. However, many of these assemblies saw it as their duty to check the power of the governor and ensure that he did not take too much power within colonial government. Unlike Parliament, most of the men who were elected to an assembly came from local districts, with their constituency able to hold their elected officials accountable to promises made.

An elected assembly was an offshoot of the idea of civic duty, the notion that men had a responsibility to support and uphold the government through voting, paying taxes, and service in the

militia. Americans firmly accepted the idea of a social contract, the idea that government was put in place by the people. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke pioneered this idea, and there is evidence to suggest that these writers influenced the colonists. While in practice elites controlled colonial politics, in theory many colonists believed in the notion of equality before the law and opposed special treatment for any members of colonial society.

Whether African Americans, Native Americans, and women would be included in this notion of equality before the law was far less clear. Women's role in the family became particularly complicated. Many historians view this period as a significant time of transition.¹⁹ Anglo-American families during the colonial period differed from their European counterparts. Widely available land and plentiful natural resources allowed for greater fertility and thus encouraged more people to marry earlier in life. Yet while young marriages and large families were common throughout the colonial period, family sizes started to shrink by the end of the 1700s as wives asserted more control over their own bodies.

New ideas governing romantic love helped change the nature of husband-wife relationships. Deriving from sentimentalism, a contemporary literary movement, many Americans began to view marriage as an emotionally fulfilling relationship rather than a strictly economic partnership. Referring to one another as "Beloved of my Soul" or "My More Than Friend," newspaper editor John Fenno and his wife Mary Curtis Fenno illustrate what some historians refer to as the "companionate ideal."²⁰ While away from his wife, John felt a "vacuum in my existence," a sentiment returned by Mary's "Doting Heart."²¹ Indeed, after independence, wives began to not only provide emotional sustenance to their husbands but inculcate the principles of republican citizenship as "republican wives."²²

Marriage opened up new emotional realms for some but remained oppressive for others. For the millions of Americans bound in chattel slavery, marriage remained an informal arrangement rather than a codified legal relationship. For white women, the legal practice of coverture meant that women lost all their political and economic rights to their husband. Divorce rates rose throughout the 1790s, as did less formal cases of abandonment. Newspapers published advertisements by deserted men and women denouncing their partners. Known as "elopement notices," they cataloged the misbehaviors of deviant spouses, such as wives' "indecent manner," a way of implying sexual impropriety. As violence and inequality continued in many American marriages, wives in return highlighted their husbands' "drunken fits" and violent rages. One woman noted

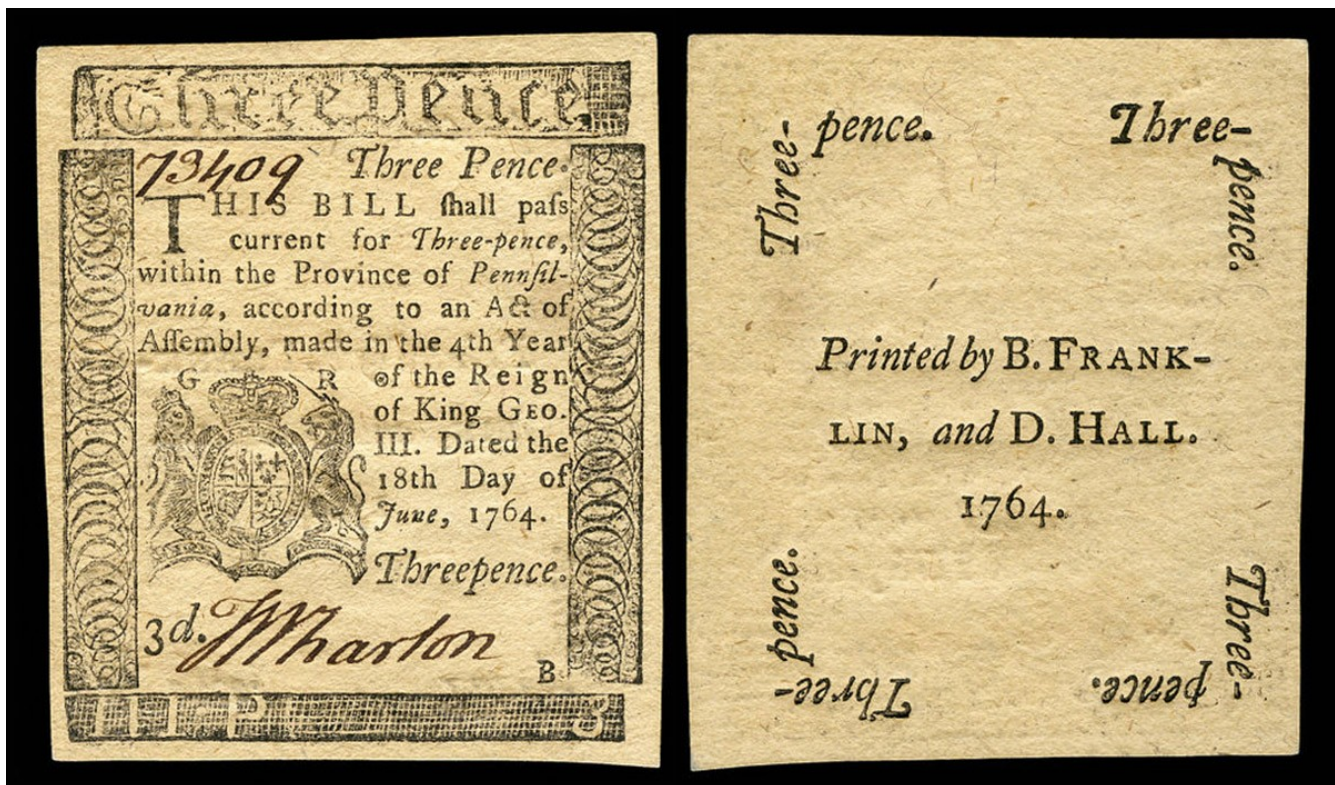
that her partner “presented his gun at my breast . . . and swore he would kill me.”²³

That couples would turn to newspapers as a source of expression illustrates the importance of what historians call print culture.²⁴ Print culture includes the wide range of factors contributing to how books and other printed objects are made, including the relationship between the author and the publisher, the technical constraints of the printer, and the tastes of readers. In colonial America, regional differences in daily life impacted the way colonists made and used printed matter. However, all the colonies dealt with threats of censorship and control from imperial supervision. In particular, political content stirred the most controversy.

From the establishment of Virginia in 1607, printing was either regarded as unnecessary given such harsh living conditions or actively discouraged. The governor of Virginia, Sir William Berkeley, summed up the attitude of the ruling class in 1671: “I thank God there are no free schools nor printing . . . for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy . . . and printing has divulged them.”²⁵ Ironically, the circulation of handwritten tracts contributed to Berkeley’s undoing. The popularity of Nathaniel Bacon’s uprising was in part due to widely circulated tracts questioning Berkeley’s competence. Berkeley’s harsh repression of Bacon’s Rebellion was equally well documented. It was only after Berkeley’s death in 1677 that the idea of printing in the southern colonies was revived. William Nuthead, an experienced English printer, set up shop in 1682, although the next governor of the colony, Thomas Culpeper, forbade Nuthead from completing a single project. It wasn’t until William Parks set up his printing shop in Annapolis in 1726 that the Chesapeake had a stable local trade in printing and books.

Print culture was very different in New England. Puritans had a respect for print from the beginning. Unfortunately, New England’s authors were content to publish in London, making the foundations of Stephen Daye’s first print shop in 1639 very shaky. Typically, printers made their money from printing sheets, not books to be bound. The case was similar in Massachusetts, where the first printed work was a *Freeman’s Oath*.²⁶ The first book was not issued until 1640, the *Bay Psalm Book*, of which eleven known copies survive. Daye’s contemporaries recognized the significance of his printing, and he was awarded 140 acres of land. The next large project, the first Bible to be printed in America, was undertaken by Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson and published in 1660. That same year, the Eliot Bible, named for its translator John Eliot, was printed in the Natick dialect of the local Algonquin tribes.

Massachusetts remained the center of colonial printing for a hundred years, until Philadelphia overtook Boston in 1770. Philadelphia's rise as the printing capital of the colonies began with two important features: first, the arrival of Benjamin Franklin, a scholar and businessman, in 1723, and second, waves of German immigrants who created a demand for a German-language press. From the mid-1730s, Christopher Sauer, and later his son, met the demand for German-language newspapers and religious texts. Nevertheless, Franklin was a one-man culture of print, revolutionizing the book trade in addition to creating public learning initiatives such as the Library Company and the Academy of Philadelphia. His *Autobiography* offers one of the most detailed glimpses of life in an eighteenth-century print shop. Franklin's Philadelphia enjoyed a flurry of newspapers, pamphlets, and books for sale. The flurry would only grow in 1776 when the Philadelphia printer Robert Bell issued hundreds of thousands of copies of Thomas Paine's revolutionary *Common Sense*.



Benjamin Franklin and David Hall, printers, Pennsylvania Currency, 1764. [Wikimedia](#).

Debates on religious expression continued throughout the eighteenth century. In 1711, a group of New England ministers published a collection of sermons titled *Early Piety*. The most famous minister, Increase Mather, wrote the preface. In it he asked the question, "What did our forefathers come into this wilderness for?"²⁷ His answer was simple: to test their faith against the challenges of America and win. The grandchildren of the first settlers had been born into the comfort

of well-established colonies and worried that their faith had suffered. This sense of inferiority sent colonists looking for a reinvigorated religious experience. The result came to be known as the Great Awakening.

Only with hindsight does the Great Awakening look like a unified movement. The first revivals began unexpectedly in the Congregational churches of New England in the 1730s and then spread through the 1740s and 1750s to Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists in the rest of the thirteen colonies. Different places at different times experienced revivals of different intensities. Yet in all of these communities, colonists discussed the same need to strip their lives of worldly concerns and return to a more pious lifestyle. The form it took was something of a contradiction. Preachers became key figures in encouraging individuals to find a personal relationship with God.

The first signs of religious revival appeared in Jonathan Edwards' congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards was a theologian who shared the faith of the early Puritan settlers. In particular, he believed in the idea of predestination, in which God had long ago decided who was damned and who was saved. However, Edwards worried that his congregation had stopped searching their souls and were merely doing good works to prove they were saved. With a missionary zeal, Edwards preached against worldly sins and called for his congregation to look inward for signs of God's saving grace. His most famous sermon was "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Suddenly, in the winter of 1734, these sermons sent his congregation into violent convulsions. The spasms first appeared among known sinners in the community. Over the next six months the physical symptoms spread to half of the six hundred-person congregation. Edwards shared the work of his revival in a widely circulated pamphlet.

Over the next decade itinerant preachers were more successful in spreading the spirit of revival around America. These preachers had the same spiritual goal as Edwards but brought with them a new religious experience. They abandoned traditional sermons in favor of outside meetings where they could whip the congregation into an emotional frenzy to reveal evidence of saving grace. Many religious leaders were suspicious of the enthusiasm and message of these revivals, but colonists flocked to the spectacle.



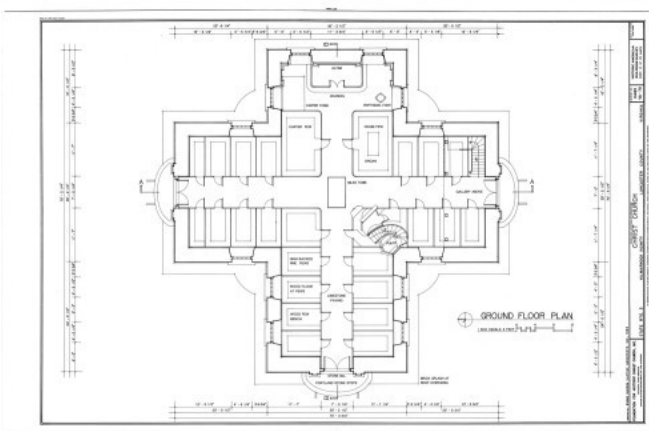
George Whitefield is shown supported by two women, “Hypocrisy” and “Deceit”. The image also includes other visual indications of the engraver’s disapproval of Whitefield, including a monkey and jester’s staff in the right-hand corner. C. Corbett, publisher, “Enthusiasm display’d: or, the Moor Fields congregation,” 1739. [Library of Congress](#).

The most famous itinerant preacher was George Whitefield. According to Whitefield, the only type of faith that pleased God was heartfelt. The established churches too often only encouraged apathy. “The Christian World is dead asleep,” Whitefield explained. “Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it.”²⁸ He would be that voice. Whitefield was a former actor with a dramatic style of preaching and a simple message. Thundering against sin and for Jesus Christ, Whitefield invited everyone to be born again. It worked. Through the 1730s he traveled from New York to South Carolina converting ordinary men, women, and children. “I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence,” wrote a socialite in Philadelphia, “broken only by an occasional half suppressed sob.”²⁹ A farmer recorded the powerful impact this rhetoric could have: “And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound; by God’s blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save

me.”³⁰ The number of people trying to hear Whitefield’s message was so large that he preached in the meadows at the edges of cities. Contemporaries regularly testified to crowds of thousands and in one case over twenty thousand in Philadelphia. Whitefield and the other itinerant preachers had achieved what Edwards could not: making the revivals popular.

Ultimately the religious revivals became a victim of the preachers’ success. As itinerant preachers became more experimental, they alienated as many people as they converted. In 1742, one preacher from Connecticut, James Davenport, persuaded his congregation that he had special knowledge from God. To be saved they had to dance naked in circles at night while screaming and laughing. Or they could burn the books he disapproved of. Either way, such extremism demonstrated for many that revivalism had gone wrong.³¹ A divide appeared by the 1740s and 1750s between “New Lights,” who still believed in a revived faith, and “Old Lights,” who thought it was deluded nonsense.

By the 1760s, the religious revivals had petered out; however, they left a profound impact on America. Leaders like Edwards and Whitefield encouraged individuals to question the world around them. This idea reformed religion in America and created a language of individualism that promised to change everything else. If you challenged the Church, what other authority figures might you question? The Great Awakening provided a language of individualism, reinforced in print culture, which reappeared in the call for independence. While prerevolutionary America had profoundly oligarchical qualities, the groundwork was laid for a more republican society. However, society did not transform easily overnight. It would take intense, often physical, conflict to change colonial life.

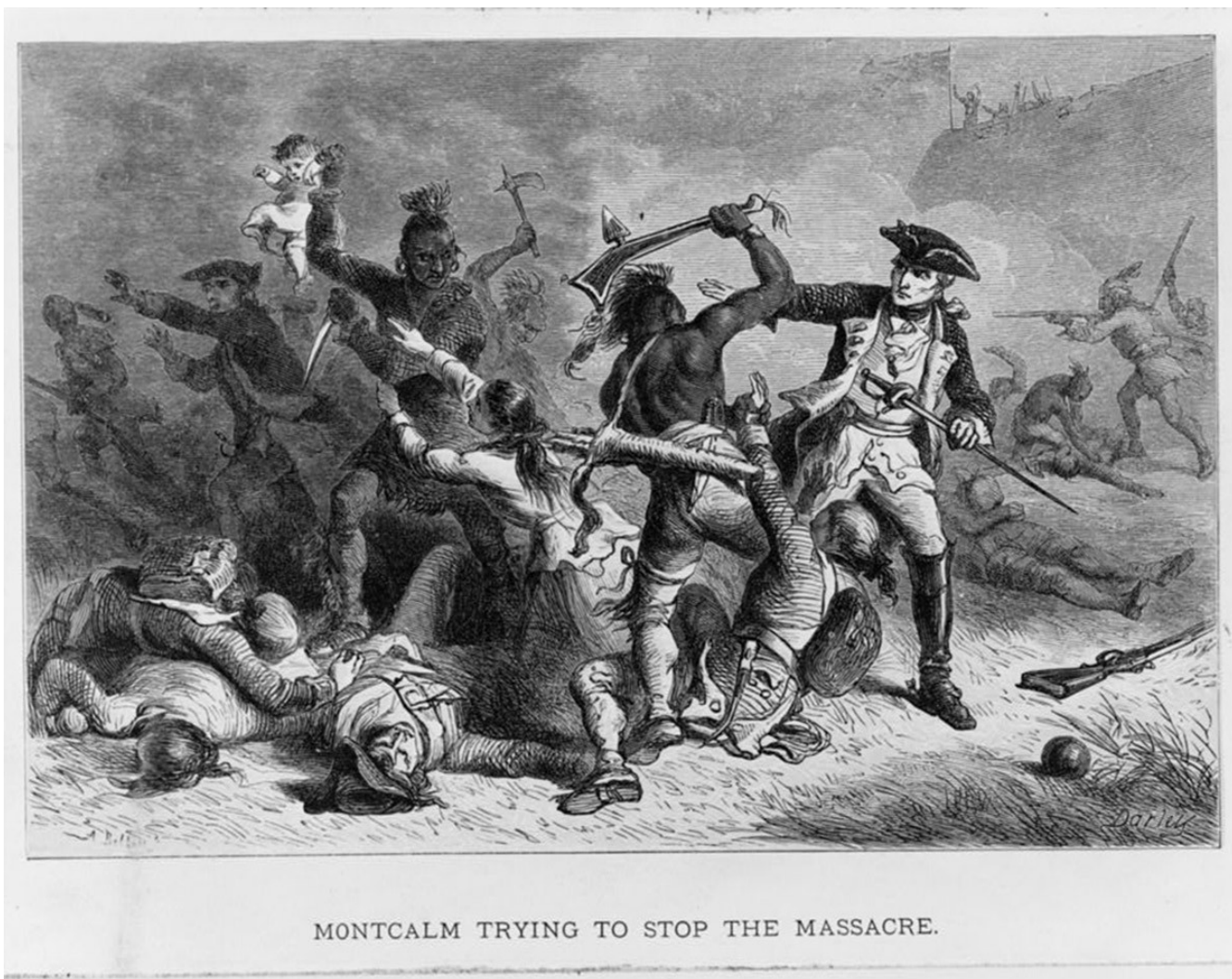


Christ Church, Virginia. [Library of Congress](#).

V. Seven Years' War

Of the eighty-seven years between the Glorious Revolution (1688) and the American Revolution (1775), Britain was at war with France and French-allied Native Americans for thirty-seven of them. These were not wars in which European soldiers fought other European soldiers. American militiamen fought for the British against French Catholics and their Native American allies in all of these engagements. Warfare took a physical and spiritual toll on British colonists. British towns located on the border between New England and New France experienced intermittent raiding by French-allied Native Americans. Raiding parties destroyed houses and burned crops, but they also took captives. They brought these captives to French Quebec, where some were ransomed back to their families in New England and others converted to Catholicism and remained in New France. In this sense, Catholicism threatened to capture Protestant lands and souls.

France and Britain feuded over the boundaries of their respective North American empires. The feud turned bloody in 1754 when a force of British colonists and Native American allies, led by young George Washington, killed a French diplomat. This incident led to a war, which would become known as the Seven Years' War or the French and Indian War. In North America, the French achieved victory in the early portion of this war. They attacked and burned multiple British outposts, such as Fort William Henry in 1757. In addition, the French seemed to easily defeat British attacks, such as General Braddock's attack on Fort Duquesne, and General Abercrombie's attack on Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga) in 1758. These victories were often the result of alliances with Native Americans.



MONTCALM TRYING TO STOP THE MASSACRE.

Albert Bobbett, engraver, "Montcalm trying to stop the massacre," c. 1870-1880. [Library of Congress](#).

In Europe, the war did not fully begin until 1756, when British-allied Frederick II of Prussia invaded the neutral state of Saxony. As a result of this invasion, a massive coalition of France, Austria, Russia, and Sweden attacked Prussia and the few German states allied with Prussia. The ruler of Austria, Maria Theresa, hoped to conquer the province of Silesia, which had been lost to Prussia in a previous war. In the European war, the British monetarily supported the Prussians, as well as the minor western German states of Hesse-Kassel and Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. These subsidy payments enabled the smaller German states to fight France and allowed the excellent Prussian army to fight against the large enemy alliance.

However, as in North America, the early part of the war went against the British. The French defeated Britain's German allies and forced them to surrender after the Battle of Hastenbeck in 1757. That same year, the Austrians defeated the Prussians in the Battle of Kolín and Frederick of Prussia defeated the French at the Battle of Rossbach. The latter battle allowed the British to re-

join the war in Europe. Just a month later, in December 1757, Frederick's army defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Leuthen, reclaiming the vital province of Silesia. In India and throughout the world's oceans, the British and their fleet consistently defeated the French. In June, for instance, Robert Clive and his Indian allies had defeated the French at the Battle of Plassey. With the sea firmly in their control, the British could send additional troops to North America.

These newly arrived soldiers allowed the British to launch new offensives. The large French port and fortress of Louisbourg, in present-day Nova Scotia, fell to the British in 1758. In 1759, British general James Wolfe defeated French general Louis-Joseph de Montcalm in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, outside Quebec City. In Europe, 1759 saw the British defeat the French at the Battle of Minden and destroy large portions of the French fleet. The British referred to 1759 as the *annus mirabilis* or the year of miracles. These victories brought about the fall of French Canada, and war in North America ended in 1760 with the British capture of Montreal. The British continued to fight against the Spanish, who entered the war in 1762. In this war, the Spanish successfully defended Nicaragua against British attacks but were unable to prevent the conquest of Cuba and the Philippines.

The Seven Years' War ended with the peace treaties of Paris and Hubertusburg in 1763. The British received much of Canada and North America from the French, while the Prussians retained the important province of Silesia. This gave the British a larger empire than they could control, which contributed to tensions that would lead to revolution. In particular, it exposed divisions within the newly expanded empire, including language, national affiliation, and religious views. When the British captured Quebec in 1760, a newspaper distributed in the colonies to celebrate the event boasted: "The time will come, when Pope and Friar/Shall both be roasted in the fire/When the proud Antichristian whore/will sink, and never rise more."³²

American colonists rejoiced over the defeat of Catholic France and felt secure that the Catholics in Quebec could no longer threaten them. Of course, some American colonies had been a haven for religious minorities since the seventeenth century. Catholic Maryland, for example, evidenced early religious pluralism. But practical toleration of Catholics existed alongside virulent anti-Catholicism in public and political arenas. It was a powerful and enduring rhetorical tool borne out of warfare and competition between Britain and France.

In part because of constant conflict with Catholic France, Britons on either side of the Atlantic

rallied around Protestantism. British ministers in England called for a coalition to fight French and Catholic empires. Missionary organizations such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel were founded at the turn of the eighteenth century to evangelize Native Americans and limit Jesuit conversions. The Protestant revivals of the so-called Great Awakening crisscrossed the Atlantic and founded a participatory religious movement during the 1730s and 1740s that united British Protestant churches. Preachers and merchants alike urged greater Atlantic trade to bind the Anglophone Protestant Atlantic through commerce and religion.

VI. Pontiac's War

Relationships between colonists and Native Americans were complex and often violent. In 1761, Neolin, a prophet, received a vision from his religion's main deity, known as the Master of Life. The Master of Life told Neolin that the only way to enter heaven would be to cast off the corrupting influence of Europeans by expelling the British: "This land where ye dwell I have made for you and not for others. Whence comes it that ye permit the Whites upon your lands. . . . Drive them out, make war upon them."³³ Neolin preached the avoidance of alcohol, a return to traditional rituals, and unity among Indigenous people to his disciples, including Pontiac, an Ottawa leader.

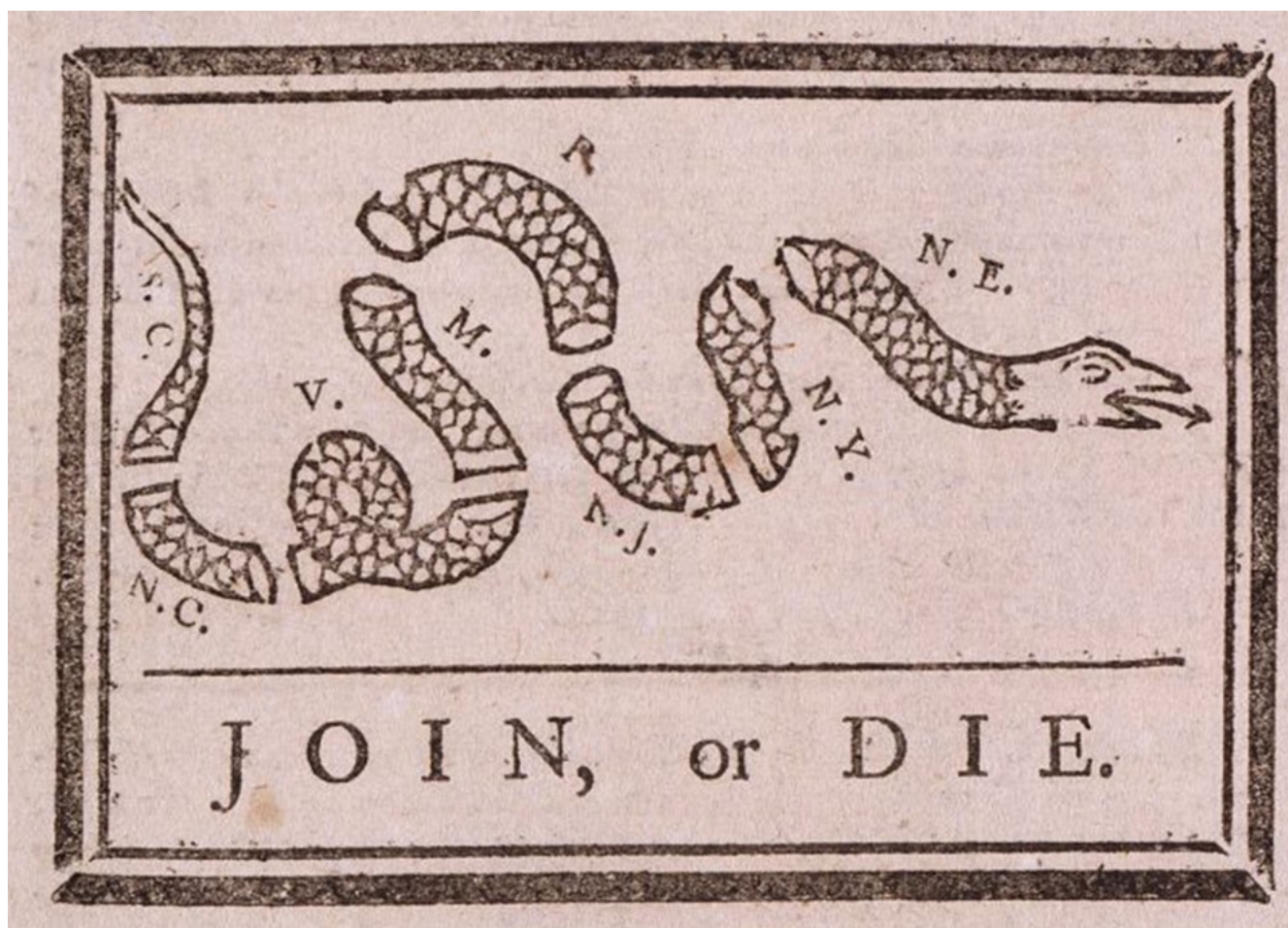
Pontiac took Neolin's words to heart and sparked the beginning of what would become known as Pontiac's War. At its height, the uprising included Native peoples from the territory between the Great Lakes, the Appalachians, and the Mississippi River. Though Pontiac did not command all of those participating in the war, his actions were influential in its development. Pontiac and three hundred warriors sought to take Fort Detroit by surprise in May 1763, but the plan was foiled, resulting in a six-month siege of the British fort. News of the siege quickly spread and inspired more attacks on British forts and settlers. In May, Native Americans captured Forts Sandusky, St. Joseph, and Miami. In June, a coalition of Ottawas and Ojibwes captured Fort Michilimackinac by staging a game of stickball (lacrosse) outside the fort. They chased the ball into the fort, gathered arms that had been smuggled in by a group of Native American women, and killed almost half of the fort's British soldiers.

Though these Native Americans were indeed responding to Neolin's religious message, there were many other practical reasons for waging war on the British. After the Seven Years' War, Britain gained control of formerly French territory as a result of the Treaty of Paris. Whereas the French had maintained a peaceful and relatively equal relationship with their Native American allies through trade, the British hoped to profit from and impose "order." For example, the French often engaged in the Indigenous practice of diplomatic gift giving. However, British general Jeffrey Amherst discouraged this practice and regulated the trade or sale of firearms and ammunition to Indigenous people. Most Native Americans, including Pontiac, saw this not as frugal imperial policy but preparation for war.

Pontiac's War lasted until 1766. Native American warriors attacked British forts and frontier settlements, killing as many as four hundred soldiers and two thousand settlers.³⁴ Disease and a shortage of supplies ultimately undermined the war effort, and in July 1766 Pontiac met with British official and diplomat William Johnson at Fort Ontario and settled for peace. Though they did not win Pontiac's War, Native Americans succeeded in fundamentally altering the British government's policy. The war made British officials recognize that peace in the West would require royal protection of Native American lands and heavy-handed regulation of Anglo-American trade activity in territory controlled by Native Americans. During the war, the British Crown issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which created the proclamation line marking the Appalachian Mountains as the boundary between the British colonies and land held controlled by Native Americans.

The effects of Pontiac's War were substantial and widespread. The war proved that coercion was not an effective strategy for imperial control, though the British government would continue to employ this strategy to consolidate their power in North America, most notably through the various acts imposed on their colonies. Additionally, the prohibition of Anglo-American settlement in Native American territory, especially the Ohio River Valley, sparked discontent. The French immigrant Michel-Guillaume-Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur articulated this discontent most clearly in his 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* when he asked, "What then is the American, this new man?" In other words, why did colonists start thinking of themselves as Americans, not Britons? Crèvecoeur suggested that America was a melting pot of self-reliant individual landholders, fiercely independent in pursuit of their own interests, and free from the burdens of European class systems. It was an answer many wanted to hear and fit with self-conceptions of the new nation, albeit one that imagined itself as white, male, and generally Protestant.³⁵ The Seven Years'

War pushed the thirteen American colonies closer together politically and culturally than ever before. In 1754, at the Albany Congress, Benjamin Franklin suggested a plan of union to coordinate defenses across the continent. Tens of thousands of colonials fought during the war. At the French surrender in 1760, 11,000 British soldiers joined 6,500 militia members drawn from every colony north of Pennsylvania.³⁶ At home, many heard or read sermons that portrayed the war as a struggle between civilizations with liberty-loving Britons arrayed against tyrannical Frenchmen and savage Indigenous people. American colonists rejoiced in their collective victory as a moment of newfound peace and prosperity. After nearly seven decades of warfare they looked to the newly acquired lands west of the Appalachian Mountains as their reward.



Benjamin Franklin, *Join or Die*, May 9, 1754. [Library of Congress](#).

The Seven Years' War was tremendously expensive and precipitated imperial reforms on taxation, commerce, and politics. Britain spent over £140 million, an astronomical figure for the day, and the expenses kept coming as new territory required new security obligations. Britain wanted to recoup some of its expenses and looked to the colonies to share the costs of their own security. To do this, Parliament started legislating over all the colonies in a way rarely done before. As a result,

the colonies began seeing themselves as a collective group, rather than just distinct entities. Different taxation schemes implemented across the colonies between 1763 and 1774 placed duties on items like tea, paper, molasses, and stamps for almost every kind of document. Consumption and trade, an important bond between Britain and the colonies, was being threatened. To enforce these unpopular measures, Britain implemented increasingly restrictive policies that eroded civil liberties like protection from unlawful searches and jury trials. The rise of an antislavery movement made many colonists worry that slavery would soon be attacked. The moratorium on new settlements in the West after Pontiac's War was yet another disappointment.

VII. Conclusion

By 1763, Americans had never been more united. They fought and they celebrated together. But they also recognized that they were not considered full British subjects, that they were considered something else. Americans across the colonies viewed imperial reforms as threats to the British liberties they saw as their birthright. The Stamp Act Congress of 1765 brought colonial leaders together in an unprecedented show of cooperation against taxes imposed by Parliament, and popular boycotts of British goods created a common narrative of sacrifice, resistance, and shared political identity. A rebellion loomed.

VIII. Primary Sources

1. Boston trader Sarah Knight on her travels in Connecticut, 1704

Sarah Knight traveled from her home in Massachusetts to trade goods. Through her diary, we can get a sense of life during the consumer revolution, as well as some of the prejudices and inequalities that shaped life in eighteenth-century New England.

2. Eliza Lucas letters, 1740-1741

THE AMERICAN YAWP

5. The American Revolution



Paul Revere, Landing of the Troops, c. 1770. Courtesy [American Antiquarian Society](#). Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The American Yawp is an evolving, collaborative text. Please click [here](#) to improve this chapter.

I. Introduction | II. The Origins of the American Revolution | III. The Causes of the American Revolution | IV. Independence | V. The War for Independence | VI. The Consequences of the American Revolution | VII. Conclusion | VIII. Primary Sources | IX. Reference Material

I. Introduction

In the 1760s, Benjamin Rush, a native of Philadelphia, recounted a visit to Parliament. Upon seeing the king's throne in the House of Lords, Rush said he “felt as if he walked on sacred ground” with “emotions that I cannot describe.”¹ Throughout the eighteenth century, colonists had developed significant emotional ties with both the British monarchy and the British constitution. The British North American colonists had just helped to win a world war and most, like Rush, had never been more proud to be British. And yet, in a little over a decade, those same colonists would declare their independence and break away from the British Empire. Seen from 1763, nothing would have seemed as improbable as the American Revolution.

The Revolution built institutions and codified the language and ideas that still define Americans' image of themselves. Moreover, revolutionaries justified their new nation with radical new ideals that changed the course of history and sparked a global “age of revolution.” But the Revolution was as paradoxical as it was unpredictable. A revolution fought in the name of liberty allowed slavery to persist. Resistance to centralized authority tied disparate colonies ever closer together under new governments. The revolution created politicians eager to foster republican selflessness and protect the public good but also encouraged individual self-interest and personal gain. The “founding fathers” instigated and fought a revolution to secure independence from Britain, but they did not fight that revolution to create a “democracy.” To successfully rebel against Britain, however, required more than a few dozen “founding fathers.” Common colonists joined the fight, unleashing popular forces that shaped the Revolution itself, often in ways not welcomed by elite leaders. But once unleashed, these popular forces continued to shape the new nation and indeed the rest of American history.

II. The Origins of the American Revolution

The American Revolution had both long-term origins and short-term causes. In this section, we will look broadly at some of the long-term political, intellectual, cultural, and economic developments in the eighteenth century that set the context for the crisis of the 1760s and 1770s.

Between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the middle of the eighteenth century, Britain had largely failed to define the colonies' relationship to the empire and institute a coherent program of imperial reform. Two factors contributed to these failures. First, Britain was at war from the War

of the Spanish Succession at the start of the century through the Seven Years' War in 1763. Constant war was politically consuming and economically expensive. Second, competing visions of empire divided British officials. Old Whigs and their Tory supporters envisioned an authoritarian empire, based on conquering territory and extracting resources. They sought to eliminate Britain's growing national debt by raising taxes and cutting spending on the colonies. The radical (or patriot) Whigs based their imperial vision on trade and manufacturing instead of land and resources. They argued that economic growth, not raising taxes, would solve the national debt. Instead of an authoritarian empire, "patriot Whigs" argued that the colonies should have equal status with the mother country. There were occasional attempts to reform the administration of the colonies, but debate between the two sides prevented coherent reform.²

Colonists developed their own understanding of how they fit into the empire. They saw themselves as British subjects "entitled to all the natural, essential, inherent, and inseparable rights of our fellow subjects in Great-Britain." The eighteenth century brought significant economic and demographic growth in the colonies. This success, they believed, resulted partly from Britain's hands-off approach to the colonies, an approach that has been called salutary neglect. By midcentury, colonists believed that they held a special place in the empire, which justified Britain's hands-off policy. In 1764, James Otis Jr. wrote, "The colonists are entitled to as *ample* rights, liberties, and privileges as the subjects of the mother country are, and in some respects *to more*."³

In this same period, the colonies developed their own local political institutions. Samuel Adams, in the *Boston Gazette*, described the colonies as each being a "separate body politic" from Britain. Almost immediately upon each colony's settlement, they created a colonial assembly. These assemblies assumed many of the same duties as the Commons exercised in Britain, including taxing residents, managing the spending of the colonies' revenue, and granting salaries to royal officials. In the early 1700s, colonial leaders unsuccessfully lobbied the British government to define their assemblies' legal prerogatives, but Britain was too occupied with European wars. In the first half of the eighteenth century, royal governors tasked by the Board of Trade attempted to limit the power of the assemblies, but the assemblies' power only grew. Many colonists came to see their assemblies as having the same jurisdiction over them that Parliament exercised over those in England. They interpreted British inaction as justifying their tradition of local governance. The Crown and Parliament, however, disagreed.⁴

Political culture in the colonies also developed differently than that of the mother country. In

both Britain and the colonies, land was the key to political participation, but because land was more easily obtained in the colonies, a higher proportion of male colonists participated in politics. Colonial political culture drew inspiration from the “country” party in Britain. These ideas—generally referred to as the ideology of republicanism—stressed the corrupting nature of power and the need for those involved in self-governing to be virtuous (i.e., putting the “public good” over their own self-interest). Patriots would need to be ever vigilant against the rise of conspiracies, centralized control, and tyranny. Only a small fringe in Britain held these ideas, but in the colonies, they were widely accepted.⁵

In the 1740s, two seemingly conflicting bodies of thought—the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening—began to combine in the colonies and challenge older ideas about authority. Perhaps no single philosopher had a greater impact on colonial thinking than John Locke. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that the mind was originally a *tabula rasa* (or blank slate) and that individuals were formed primarily by their environment. The aristocracy then were wealthy or successful because they had greater access to wealth, education, and patronage and not because they were innately superior. Locke followed this essay with *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which introduced radical new ideas about the importance of education. Education would produce rational human beings capable of thinking for themselves and questioning authority rather than tacitly accepting tradition. These ideas slowly came to have far-reaching effects in the colonies and, later, the new nation.

At the same time that Locke’s ideas about knowledge and education spread in North America, the colonies also experienced an unprecedented wave of evangelical Protestant revivalism. Between 1739 and 1740, the Rev. George Whitefield, an enigmatic, itinerant preacher, traveled the colonies preaching Calvinist sermons to huge crowds. Unlike the rationalism of Locke, his sermons were designed to appeal to his listeners’ emotions. Whitefield told his listeners that salvation could only be found by taking personal responsibility for one’s own unmediated relationship with God, a process that came to be known as a “conversion” experience. He also argued that the current Church hierarchies populated by “unconverted” ministers only stood as a barrier between the individual and God. In his wake, new traveling preachers picked up his message and many congregations split. Both Locke and Whitefield had empowered individuals to question authority and to take their lives into their own hands.

In other ways, eighteenth-century colonists were becoming more culturally similar to Britons, a

process often referred to as Anglicization. As colonial economies grew, they quickly became an important market for British manufacturing exports. Colonists with disposable income and access to British markets attempted to mimic British culture. By the middle of the eighteenth century, middling-class colonists could also afford items previously thought of as luxuries like British fashions, dining wares, and more. The desire to purchase British goods meshed with the desire to enjoy British liberties.⁶ These political, intellectual, cultural, and economic developments built tensions that rose to the surface when, after the Seven Years' War, Britain finally began to implement a program of imperial reform that conflicted with colonists' understanding of the empire and their place in it.

III. The Causes of the American Revolution

Most immediately, the American Revolution resulted directly from attempts to reform the British Empire after the Seven Years' War. The Seven Years' War culminated nearly a half century of war between Europe's imperial powers. It was truly a world war, fought between multiple empires on multiple continents. At its conclusion, the British Empire had never been larger. Britain now controlled the North American continent east of the Mississippi River, including French Canada. It had also consolidated its control over India. But the realities and responsibilities of the postwar empire were daunting. War (let alone victory) on such a scale was costly. Britain doubled the national debt to 13.5 times its annual revenue. Britain faced significant new costs required to secure and defend its far-flung empire, especially the western frontiers of the North American colonies. These factors led Britain in the 1760s to attempt to consolidate control over its North American colonies, which, in turn, led to resistance.

King George III took the crown in 1760 and brought Tories into his government after three decades of Whig rule. They represented an authoritarian vision of empire in which colonies would be subordinate. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was Britain's first major postwar imperial action targeting North America. The king forbade settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains in an attempt to limit costly wars with Native Americans. Colonists, however, protested and demanded access to the territory for which they had fought alongside the British.

In 1764, Parliament passed two more reforms. The Sugar Act sought to combat widespread

smuggling of molasses in New England by cutting the duty in half but increasing enforcement. Also, smugglers would be tried by vice-admiralty courts and not juries. Parliament also passed the Currency Act, which restricted colonies from producing paper money. Hard money, such as gold and silver coins, was scarce in the colonies. The lack of currency impeded the colonies' increasingly sophisticated transatlantic economies, but it was especially damaging in 1764 because a postwar recession had already begun. Between the restrictions of the Proclamation of 1763, the Currency Act, and the Sugar Act's canceling of trials-by-jury for smugglers, some colonists began to fear a pattern of increased taxation and restricted liberties.

In March 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act. The act required that many documents be printed on paper that had been stamped to show the duty had been paid, including newspapers, pamphlets, diplomas, legal documents, and even playing cards. The Sugar Act of 1764 was an attempt to get merchants to pay an already existing duty, but the Stamp Act created a new, direct (or "internal") tax. Parliament had never before directly taxed the colonists. Instead, colonies contributed to the empire through the payment of indirect, "external" taxes, such as customs duties. In 1765, Daniel Dulany of Maryland wrote, "A right to impose an internal tax on the colonies, without their consent for the single purpose of revenue, is denied, a right to regulate their trade without their consent is, admitted."⁷ Also, unlike the Sugar Act, which primarily affected merchants, the Stamp Act directly affected numerous groups throughout colonial society, including printers, lawyers, college graduates, and even sailors who played cards. This led, in part, to broader, more popular resistance.

Resistance to the Stamp Act took three forms, distinguished largely by class: legislative resistance by elites, economic resistance by merchants, and popular protest by common colonists. Colonial elites responded by passing resolutions in their assemblies. The most famous of the anti-Stamp Act resolutions were the Virginia Resolves, passed by the House of Burgesses on May 30, 1765, which declared that the colonists were entitled to "all the liberties, privileges, franchises, and immunities . . . possessed by the people of Great Britain." When the Virginia Resolves were printed throughout the colonies, however, they often included a few extra, far more radical resolutions not passed by the Virginia House of Burgesses, the last of which asserted that only "the general assembly of this colony have any right or power to impose or lay any taxation" and that anyone who argued differently "shall be deemed an enemy to this his majesty's colony."⁸ These additional items spread throughout the colonies and helped radicalize subsequent responses in other colonial assemblies. These responses eventually led to the calling of the Stamp Act Congress in New

York City in October 1765. Nine colonies sent delegates, who included Benjamin Franklin, John Dickinson, Thomas Hutchinson, Philip Livingston, and James Otis.⁹



Men and women politicized the domestic sphere by buying and displaying items that conspicuously revealed their position for or against parliamentary actions. This witty teapot, which celebrates the end of taxation on goods like tea itself, makes clear the owner's perspective on the egregious taxation. Teapot, Stamp Act Repeal'd, 1786, in Peabody Essex Museum. [Salem State University](#).

The Stamp Act Congress issued a “Declaration of Rights and Grievances,” which, like the Virginia Resolves, declared allegiance to the king and “all due subordination” to Parliament but

also reasserted the idea that colonists were entitled to the same rights as Britons. Those rights included trial by jury, which had been abridged by the Sugar Act, and the right to be taxed only by their own elected representatives. As Daniel Dulany wrote in 1765, “It is an essential principle of the English constitution, that the subject shall not be taxed without his consent.”¹⁰ Benjamin Franklin called it the “prime Maxim of all free Government.”¹¹ Because the colonies did not elect members to Parliament, they believed that they were not represented and could not be taxed by that body. In response, Parliament and the Crown argued that the colonists were “virtually represented,” just like the residents of those boroughs or counties in England that did not elect members to Parliament. However, the colonists rejected the notion of virtual representation, with one pamphleteer calling it a “monstrous idea.”¹²

The second type of resistance to the Stamp Act was economic. While the Stamp Act Congress deliberated, merchants in major port cities were preparing nonimportation agreements, hoping that their refusal to import British goods would lead British merchants to lobby for the repeal of the Stamp Act. In New York City, “upwards of two hundred principal merchants” agreed not to import, sell, or buy “any goods, wares, or merchandises” from Great Britain.¹³ In Philadelphia, merchants gathered at “a general meeting” to agree that “they would not Import any Goods from Great-Britain until the Stamp-Act was Repealed.”¹⁴ The plan worked. By January 1766, London merchants sent a letter to Parliament arguing that they had been “reduced to the necessity of pending ruin” by the Stamp Act and the subsequent boycotts.¹⁵

The third, and perhaps, most crucial type of resistance was popular protest. Riots broke out in Boston. Crowds burned the appointed stamp distributor for Massachusetts, Andrew Oliver, in effigy and pulled a building he owned “down to the Ground in five minutes.”¹⁶ Oliver resigned the position the next day. The following week, a crowd also set upon the home of his brother-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who had publicly argued for submission to the stamp tax. Before the evening was over, much of Hutchinson’s home and belongings had been destroyed.¹⁷

Popular violence and intimidation spread quickly throughout the colonies. In New York City, posted notices read:

PRO PATRIA,

*The first Man that either
distributes or makes use of Stamp
Paper, let him take care of
his House, Person, & Effects.
Vox Populi;
We dare.”¹⁸*

By November 16, all of the original twelve stamp distributors had resigned, and by 1766, groups calling themselves the Sons of Liberty were formed in most colonies to direct and organize further resistance. These tactics had the dual effect of sending a message to Parliament and discouraging colonists from accepting appointments as stamp collectors. With no one to distribute the stamps, the act became unenforceable.



Violent protest by groups like the Sons of Liberty created quite a stir both in the colonies and in England itself. While extreme acts like the tarring and feathering of Boston's Commissioner of Customs in 1774 propagated more protest against symbols of Parliament's tyranny throughout the colonies, violent demonstrations were regarded as acts of terrorism by British officials. This print of the 1774 event was from the British perspective, picturing the Sons as brutal instigators with almost demonic smiles on their faces as they enacted this excruciating punishment on the Custom Commissioner. Philip Dawe (attrib-

uted), “*The Bostonians Paying the Excise-man, or Tarring and Feathering*,” [Wikimedia](#).

Pressure on Parliament grew until, in February 1766, it repealed the Stamp Act. But to save face and to try to avoid this kind of problem in the future, Parliament also passed the Declaratory Act, asserting that Parliament had the “full power and authority to make laws . . . to bind the colonies and people of America . . . in all cases whatsoever.” However, colonists were too busy celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act to take much notice of the Declaratory Act. In New York City, the inhabitants raised a huge lead statue of King George III in honor of the Stamp Act’s repeal. It could be argued that there was no moment at which colonists felt more proud to be members of the free British Empire than 1766. But Britain still needed revenue from the colonies.¹⁹

The colonies had resisted the implementation of direct taxes, but the Declaratory Act reserved Parliament’s right to impose them. And, in the colonists’ dispatches to Parliament and in numerous pamphlets, they had explicitly acknowledged the right of Parliament to regulate colonial trade. So Britain’s next attempt to draw revenues from the colonies, the Townshend Acts, were passed in June 1767, creating new customs duties on common items, like lead, glass, paint, and tea, instead of direct taxes. The acts also created and strengthened formal mechanisms to enforce compliance, including a new American Board of Customs Commissioners and more vice-admiralty courts to try smugglers. Revenues from customs seizures would be used to pay customs officers and other royal officials, including the governors, thereby incentivizing them to convict offenders. These acts increased the presence of the British government in the colonies and circumscribed the authority of the colonial assemblies, since paying the governor’s salary had long given the assemblies significant power over them. Unsurprisingly, colonists, once again, resisted.

Even though these were duties, many colonial resistance authors still referred to them as “taxes,” because they were designed primarily to extract revenues from the colonies not to regulate trade. John Dickinson, in his “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” wrote, “That we may legally be bound to pay any general duties on these commodities, relative to the regulation of trade, is granted; but we being obliged by her laws to take them from Great Britain, any special duties imposed on their exportation to us only, with intention to raise a revenue from us only, are as much taxes upon us, as those imposed by the Stamp Act.” Hence, many authors asked: once the colonists assented to a tax *in any form*, what would stop the British from imposing ever more and greater taxes on the colonists?²⁰

New forms of resistance emerged in which elite, middling, and working-class colonists participated together. Merchants reinstituted nonimportation agreements, and common colonists agreed not to consume these same products. Lists were circulated with signatories promising not to buy any British goods. These lists were often published in newspapers, bestowing recognition on those who had signed and led to pressure on those who had not.

Women, too, became involved to an unprecedented degree in resistance to the Townshend Acts. They circulated subscription lists and gathered signatures. The first political commentaries in newspapers written by women appeared.²¹ Also, without new imports of British clothes, colonists took to wearing simple, homespun clothing. Spinning clubs were formed, in which local women would gather at one of their homes and spin cloth for homespun clothing for their families and even for the community.²²

Homespun clothing quickly became a marker of one's virtue and patriotism, and women were an important part of this cultural shift. At the same time, British goods and luxuries previously desired now became symbols of tyranny. Nonimportation and, especially, nonconsumption agreements changed colonists' cultural relationship with the mother country. Committees of Inspection monitored merchants and residents to make sure that no one broke the agreements. Offenders could expect to be shamed by having their names and offenses published in the newspaper and in broadsides.

Nonimportation and nonconsumption helped forge colonial unity. Colonies formed Committees of Correspondence to keep each other informed of the resistance efforts throughout the colonies. Newspapers reprinted exploits of resistance, giving colonists a sense that they were part of a broader political community. The best example of this new "continental conversation" came in the wake of the Boston Massacre. Britain sent regiments to Boston in 1768 to help enforce the new acts and quell the resistance. On the evening of March 5, 1770, a crowd gathered outside the Custom House and began hurling insults, snowballs, and perhaps more at the young sentry. When a small number of soldiers came to the sentry's aid, the crowd grew increasingly hostile until the soldiers fired. After the smoke cleared, five Bostonians were dead, including one of the ringleaders, Crispus Attucks, a formerly enslaved man turned free dockworker. The soldiers were tried in Boston and won acquittal, thanks, in part, to their defense attorney, John Adams. News of the Boston Massacre spread quickly through the new resistance communication networks, aided by a famous engraving initially circulated by Paul Revere, which depicted blood-

thirsty British soldiers with grins on their faces firing into a peaceful crowd. The engraving was quickly circulated and reprinted throughout the colonies, generating sympathy for Boston and anger with Britain.



This iconic image of the Boston Massacre by Paul Revere sparked fury in both Americans and the British by portraying the redcoats as brutal slaughterers and the onlookers as helpless victims. The events of March 5, 1770 did not actually play out as Revere pictured them, yet his intention was not simply to recount the affair. Revere created an effective propaganda piece that

lent credence to those demanding that the British authoritarian rule be stopped. Paul Revere (engraver), "The bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th Regt.," 1770. [Library of Congress](#).

Resistance again led to repeal. In March 1770, Parliament repealed all of the new duties except the one on tea, which, like the Declaratory Act, was left, in part, to save face and assert that Parliament still retained the right to tax the colonies. The character of colonial resistance had changed between 1765 and 1770. During the Stamp Act resistance, elites wrote resolves and held congresses while violent, popular mobs burned effigies and tore down houses, with minimal coordination between colonies. But methods of resistance against the Townshend Acts became more inclusive and more coordinated. Colonists previously excluded from meaningful political participation now gathered signatures, and colonists of all ranks participated in the resistance by not buying British goods and monitoring and enforcing the boycotts.

Britain's failed attempts at imperial reform in the 1760s created an increasingly vigilant and resistant colonial population and, most importantly, an enlarged political sphere—both on the colonial and continental levels—far beyond anything anyone could have imagined a few years earlier. A new sense of shared grievances began to join the colonists in a shared American political identity.

IV. Independence

Tensions between the colonies and England eased for a time after the Boston Massacre. The colonial economy improved as the postwar recession receded. The Sons of Liberty in some colonies sought to continue nonimportation even after the repeal of the Townshend Acts. But in New York, a door-to-door poll of the population revealed that the majority wanted to end nonimportation.²³ Yet Britain's desire and need to reform imperial administration remained.

In April 1773, Parliament passed two acts to aid the failing East India Company, which had fallen behind in the annual payments it owed Britain. But the company was not only drowning in debt; it was also drowning in tea, with almost fifteen million pounds of it stored in warehouses from India to England. In 1773, Parliament passed the Regulating Act, which effectively put the troubled company under government control. It then passed the Tea Act, which would allow the company to sell its tea in the colonies directly and without the company having to pay the usual

export tax in London. Even though this would greatly lower the cost of tea for colonists, they resisted.

Merchants resisted the Tea Act because they resented the East India Company's monopoly. But like the Sugar Act, the Tea Act affected only a small, specific group of people. The widespread support for resisting the Tea Act had more to do with principles. By buying tea, even though it was cheaper, colonists would be paying the duty and thereby implicitly acknowledging Parliament's right to tax them. According to the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, Prime Minister Lord North was a "great schemer" who sought "to out wit us, and to effectually establish that Act, which will forever after be pleaded as a precedent for every imposition the Parliament of Great-Britain shall think proper to saddle us with."²⁴

The Tea Act stipulated that the duty had to be paid when the ship unloaded. Newspaper essays and letters throughout the summer of 1773 in the major port cities debated what to do upon the ships' arrival. In November, the Boston Sons of Liberty, led by Samuel Adams and John Hancock, resolved to "prevent the landing and sale of the [tea], and the payment of any duty thereon" and to do so "at the risk of their lives and property."²⁵ The meeting appointed men to guard the wharfs and make sure the tea remained on the ships until they returned to London. This worked and the tea did not reach the shore, but by December 16, the ships were still there. Hence, another town meeting was held at the Old South Meeting House, at the end of which dozens of men disguised as Mohawks made their way to the wharf. The *Boston Gazette* reported what happened next:

*But, behold what followed! A number of brave & resolute men, determined to do all in their power to save their country from the ruin which their enemies had plotted, in less than four hours, emptied every chest of tea on board the three ships . . . amounting to 342 chests, into the sea !! without the least damage done to the ships or any other property.*²⁶

As word spread throughout the colonies, patriots were emboldened to do the same to the tea sitting in their harbors. Tea was either dumped or seized in Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York, with numerous other smaller “tea parties” taking place throughout 1774.

Popular protest spread across the continent and down through all levels of colonial society. Fifty-one women in Edenton, North Carolina, for example, signed an agreement—published in numerous newspapers—in which they promised “to do every Thing as far as lies in our Power” to support the boycotts.²⁷ The ladies of Edenton were not alone in their desire to support the war effort by what means they could. Women across the thirteen colonies could most readily express their political sentiments as consumers and producers. Because women often made decisions regarding household purchases, their participation in consumer boycotts held particular weight.²⁸ Some women also took to the streets as part of more unruly mob actions, participating in grain riots, raids on the offices of royal officials, and demonstrations against the impressment of men into naval service. The agitation of so many helped elicit responses from both Britain and the colonial elites.

Britain’s response was swift. The following spring, Parliament passed four acts known collectively, by the British, as the Coercive Acts. Colonists, however, referred to them as the Intolerable Acts. First, the Boston Port Act shut down the harbor and cut off all trade to and from the city. The Massachusetts Government Act put the colonial government entirely under British control, dissolving the assembly and restricting town meetings. The Administration of Justice Act allowed any royal official accused of a crime to be tried in Britain rather than by Massachusetts courts and juries. Finally, the Quartering Act, passed for all colonies, allowed the British army to quarter newly arrived soldiers in colonists’ homes. Boston had been deemed in open rebellion, and the king, his advisors, and Parliament acted decisively to end the rebellion.

The Crown, however, did not anticipate the other colonies coming to the aid of Massachusetts. Colonists collected food to send to Boston. Virginia’s House of Burgesses called for a day of prayer and fasting to show their support. Rather than isolating Massachusetts, the Coercive Acts fostered the sense of shared identity created over the previous decade. After all, if the Crown and Parliament could dissolve Massachusetts’s government, nothing could stop them from doing the same to any of her sister colonies. In Massachusetts, patriots created the Provincial Congress, and, throughout 1774, they seized control of local and county governments and courts.²⁹ In New York, citizens elected committees to direct the colonies’ response to the Coercive Acts, including a

Mechanics' Committee of middling colonists. By early 1774, Committees of Correspondence and/or extralegal assemblies were established in all of the colonies except Georgia. And throughout the year, they followed Massachusetts's example by seizing the powers of the royal governments.

Committees of Correspondence agreed to send delegates to a Continental Congress to coordinate an intercolonial response. The First Continental Congress convened on September 5, 1774. Over the next six weeks, elite delegates from every colony but Georgia issued a number of documents, including a "Declaration of Rights and Grievances." This document repeated the arguments that colonists had been making since 1765: colonists retained all the rights of native Britons, including the right to be taxed only by their own elected representatives as well as the right to a trial by jury.

Most importantly, the Congress issued a document known as the "Continental Association." The Association declared that "the present unhappy situation of our affairs is occasioned by a ruinous system of colony administration adopted by the British Ministry about the year 1763, evidently calculated for enslaving these Colonies, and, with them, the British Empire." The Association recommended "that a committee be chosen in every county, city, and town . . . whose business it shall be attentively to observe the conduct of all persons touching this association." These Committees of Inspection would consist largely of common colonists. They were effectively deputized to police their communities and instructed to publish the names of anyone who violated the Association so they "may be publicly known, and universally condemned as the enemies of American liberty." The delegates also agreed to a continental nonimportation, nonconsumption, and nonexportation agreement and to "wholly discontinue the slave trade." In all, the Continental Association was perhaps the most radical document of the period. It sought to unite and direct twelve revolutionary governments, establish economic and moral policies, and empower common colonists by giving them an important and unprecedented degree of on-the-ground political power.³⁰

But not all colonists were patriots. Indeed, many remained faithful to the king and Parliament, while a good number took a neutral stance. As the situation intensified throughout 1774 and early 1775, factions emerged within the resistance movements in many colonies. Elite merchants who traded primarily with Britain, Anglican clergy, and colonists holding royal offices depended on and received privileges directly from their relationship with Britain. Initially, they sought to ex-

ert a moderating influence on the resistance committees, but, following the Association, a number of these colonists began to worry that the resistance was too radical and aimed at independence. They, like most colonists in this period, still expected a peaceful conciliation with Britain and grew increasingly suspicious of the resistance movement.

However, by the time the Continental Congress met again in May 1775, war had already broken out in Massachusetts. On April 19, 1775, British regiments set out to seize local militias' arms and powder stores in Lexington and Concord. The town militia met them at the Lexington Green. The British ordered the militia to disperse when someone fired, setting off a volley from the British. The battle continued all the way to the next town, Concord. News of the events at Lexington spread rapidly throughout the countryside. Militia members, known as minutemen, responded quickly and inflicted significant casualties on the British regiments as they chased them back to Boston. Approximately twenty thousand colonial militiamen laid siege to Boston, effectively trapping the British. In June, the militia set up fortifications on Breed's Hill overlooking the city. In the misnamed "Battle of Bunker Hill," the British attempted to dislodge them from the position with a frontal assault, and, despite eventually taking the hill, they suffered severe casualties at the hands of the colonists.



"The Battle of Lexington," Published by John H. Daniels & Son, c1903. [Library of Congress](#).

While men in Boston fought and died, the Continental Congress struggled to organize a re-

sponse. The radical Massachusetts delegates—including John Adams, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock—implored the Congress to support the Massachusetts militia, who without supplies were laying siege to Boston. Meanwhile, many delegates from the Middle Colonies—including New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia—took a more moderate position, calling for renewed attempts at reconciliation. In the South, the Virginia delegation contained radicals such as Richard Henry Lee and Thomas Jefferson, while South Carolina’s delegation included moderates like John and Edward Rutledge. The moderates worried that supporting the Massachusetts militia would be akin to declaring war.

The Congress struck a compromise, agreeing to adopt the Massachusetts militia and form a Continental Army, naming Virginia delegate George Washington commander in chief. They also issued a “Declaration of the Causes of Necessity of Taking Up Arms” to justify the decision. At the same time, the moderates drafted an “Olive Branch Petition,” which assured the king that the colonists “most ardently desire[d] the former Harmony between [the mother country] and these Colonies.” Many understood that the opportunities for reconciliation were running out. After Congress had approved the document, Benjamin Franklin wrote to a friend saying, “The Congress will send one more Petition to the King which I suppose will be treated as the former was, and therefore will probably be the last.”³¹ Congress was in the strange position of attempting reconciliation while publicly raising an army.

The petition arrived in England on August 13, 1775, but before it was delivered, the king issued his own “Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition.” He believed his subjects in North America were being “misled by dangerous and ill-designing men,” who were “traitorously preparing, ordering, and levying war against us.” In an October speech to Parliament, he dismissed the colonists’ petition. The king had no doubt that the resistance was “manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent empire.”³² By the start of 1776, talk of independence was growing while the prospect of reconciliation dimmed.

In the opening months of 1776, independence, for the first time, became part of the popular debate. Town meetings approved resolutions in support of independence. Yet, with moderates still hanging on, it would take another seven months before the Continental Congress officially passed the independence resolution. A small forty-six-page pamphlet published in Philadelphia and written by a recent immigrant from England captured the American conversation. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* argued for independence by denouncing monarchy and challenging the

logic behind the British Empire, saying, “There is something absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.”³³ His combination of easy language, biblical references, and fiery rhetoric proved potent, and the pamphlet was quickly published and dispersed. Arguments over political philosophy and rumors of battlefield developments filled taverns throughout the colonies.

George Washington had taken control of the army and after laying siege to Boston forced the British to retreat to Halifax. In Virginia, the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation declaring martial law and offering freedom to “all indentured servants, Negros, and others” if they would leave their enslavers and join the British. Though only about five hundred to a thousand enslaved people joined Lord Dunmore’s “Ethiopian regiment,” thousands more flocked to the British later in the war, risking capture and punishment for a chance at freedom. Formerly enslaved people occasionally fought, but primarily served in companies called Black Pioneers as laborers, skilled workers, and spies. British motives for offering freedom were practical rather than humanitarian, but the proclamation was the first mass emancipation of enslaved people in American history. Enslaved people could now choose to run and risk their lives for possible freedom with the British army or hope that the United States would live up to its ideals of liberty.³⁴

Dunmore’s proclamation unnerved white southerners already suspicious of rising antislavery sentiments in the mother country. Four years earlier, English courts dealt a serious blow to slavery in the empire. In *Somerset v Stewart*, James Somerset sued for his freedom, and the court not only granted it but also undercut the very legality of slavery on the British mainland. Somerset and now Dunmore began to convince some enslavers that a new independent nation might offer a surer protection for slavery. Indeed, the proclamation laid the groundwork for the very unrest that loyal southerners had hoped to avoid. Consequently, enslavers often used violence to prevent their enslaved laborers from joining the British or rising against them. Virginia enacted regulations to prevent freedom-seeking, threatening to ship rebellious enslaved people to the West Indies or execute them. Many enslavers transported their enslaved people inland, away from the coastal temptation to join the British armies, sometimes separating families in the process.

On May 10, 1776, nearly two months before the Declaration of Independence, the Congress voted on a resolution calling on all colonies that had not already established revolutionary governments to do so and to wrest control from royal officials.³⁵ The Congress also recommended that the colonies should begin preparing new written constitutions. In many ways, this was the

Congress's first declaration of independence. A few weeks later, on June 7, Richard Henry Lee offered the following resolution:

*Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connexion between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.*³⁶

Delegates went scurrying back to their assemblies for new instructions and nearly a month later, on July 2, the resolution finally came to a vote. It passed 12–0, with New York, under imminent threat of British invasion, abstaining.

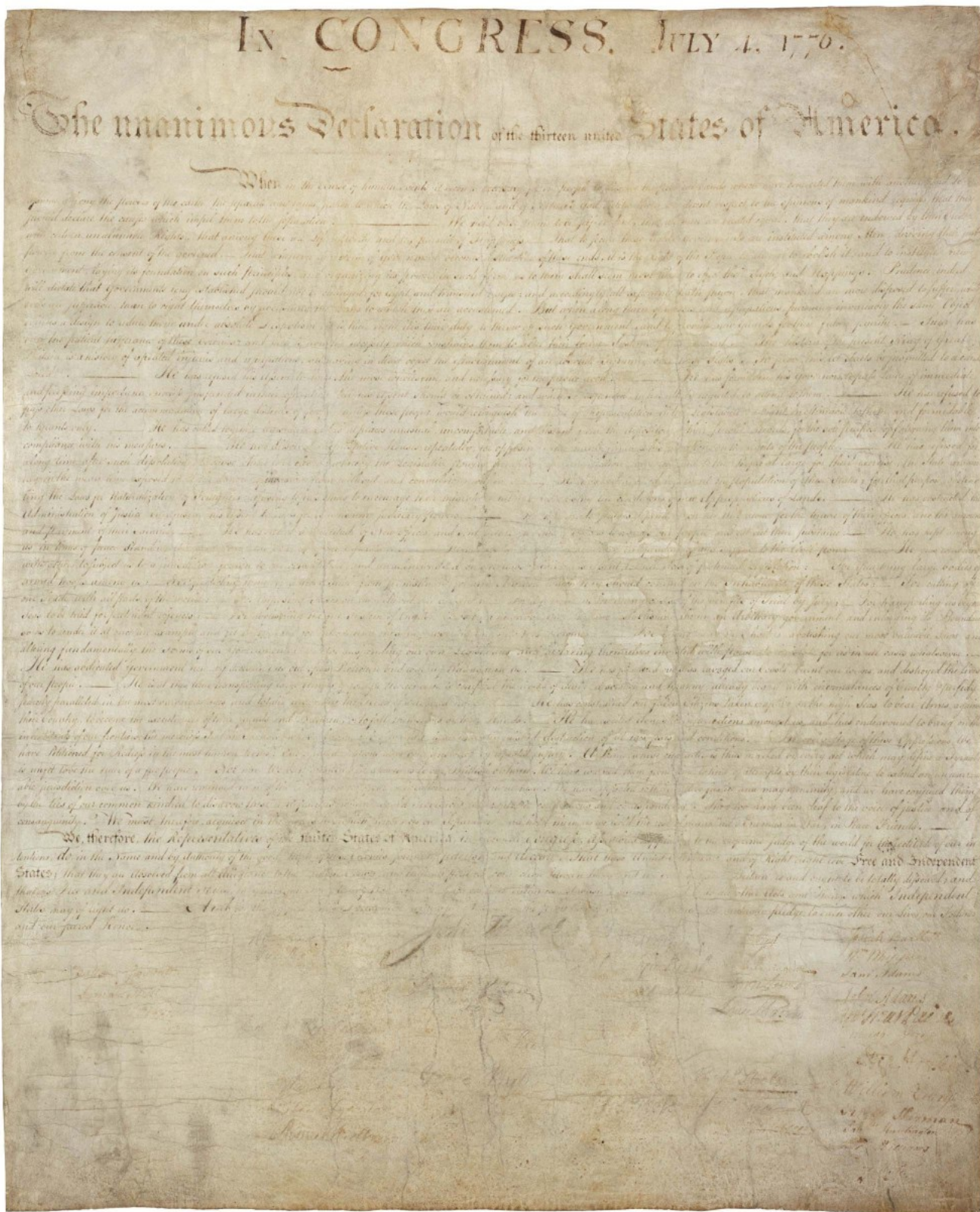
The passage of Lee's resolution was the official legal declaration of independence, but, between the proposal and vote, a committee had been named to draft a public declaration in case the resolution passed. Virginian Thomas Jefferson drafted the document, with edits being made by his fellow committee members John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and then again by the Congress as a whole. The famous preamble went beyond the arguments about the rights of British subjects under the British Constitution, instead referring to “natural law”:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever

*any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.*³⁷

The majority of the document outlined a list of specific grievances that the colonists had with British attempts to reform imperial administration during the 1760s and 1770s. An early draft blamed the British for the transatlantic slave trade and even for discouraging attempts by the colonists to promote abolition. Delegates from South Carolina and Georgia as well as those from northern states who profited from the trade all opposed this language, and it was removed.³⁸

Neither the grievances nor the rhetoric of the preamble were new. Instead, they were the culmination of both a decade of popular resistance to imperial reform and decades more of long-term developments that saw both sides develop incompatible understandings of the British Empire and the colonies' place within it. The Congress approved the document on July 4, 1776. However, it was one thing to declare independence; it was quite another to win it on the battlefield.



The Declaration of Independence, [National Archives and Records Administration](#).

V. The War for Independence

The war began at Lexington and Concord, more than a year before Congress declared independence. In 1775, the British believed that the mere threat of war and a few minor incursions to seize supplies would be enough to cow the colonial rebellion. Those minor incursions, however, turned into a full-out military conflict. Despite an early American victory at Boston, the new states faced the daunting task of taking on the world's largest military.

In the summer of 1776, the British forces that had abandoned Boston arrived at New York. The largest expeditionary force in British history, including tens of thousands of German mercenaries known as Hessians, followed soon after. New York was the perfect location to launch expeditions aimed at seizing control of the Hudson River and isolating New England from the rest of the continent. Also, New York contained many loyalists, particularly among its merchant and Anglican communities. In October, the British finally launched an attack on Brooklyn and Manhattan. The Continental Army took severe losses before retreating through New Jersey.³⁹ With the onset of winter, Washington needed something to lift morale and encourage reenlistment. Therefore, he launched a successful surprise attack on the Hessian camp at Trenton on Christmas Day by ferrying the few thousand men he had left across the Delaware River under the cover of night. The victory won the Continental Army much-needed supplies and a morale boost following the disaster at New York.⁴⁰

An even greater success followed in upstate New York. In 1777, British general John Burgoyne led an army from Canada to secure the Hudson River. In upstate New York, he was to meet up with a detachment of General William Howe's forces marching north from Manhattan. However, Howe abandoned the plan without telling Burgoyne and instead sailed to Philadelphia to capture the new nation's capital. The Continental Army defeated Burgoyne's men at Saratoga, New York.⁴¹ This victory proved a major turning point in the war. Benjamin Franklin had been in Paris trying to secure a treaty of alliance with the French. However, the French were reluctant to back what seemed like an unlikely cause. News of the victory at Saratoga convinced the French that the cause might not have been as unlikely as they had thought. A Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed on February 6, 1778. The treaty effectively turned a colonial rebellion into a global war as fighting between the British and French soon broke out in Europe and India.⁴²



In this 1782 cartoon, the British lion faces a spaniel (Spain), a rooster (France), a rattlesnake (America), and a pug dog (Netherlands). Though the caption predicts Britain's success, it illustrates that Britain faced challenges—and therefore drains on their military and treasury—from more than just the American rebels. J. Barrow, *The British Lion Engaging Four Powers*, 1782. [National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London](#).

Howe had taken Philadelphia in 1777 but returned to New York once winter ended. He slowly realized that European military tactics would not work in North America. In Europe, armies fought head-on battles in attempt to seize major cities. However, in 1777, the British had held Philadelphia and New York and yet still weakened their position. Meanwhile, Washington realized after New York that the largely untrained Continental Army could not win head-on battles with the professional British army. So he developed his own logic of warfare that involved smaller, more frequent skirmishes and avoided major engagements that would risk his entire army. As long as he kept the army intact, the war would continue, no matter how many cities the British captured.

In 1778, the British shifted their attentions to the South, where they believed they enjoyed more popular support. Campaigns from Virginia to South Carolina and Georgia captured major cities, but the British simply did not have the manpower to retain military control. And upon their departures, severe fighting ensued between local patriots and loyalists, often pitting family members against one another. The war in the South was truly a civil war.⁴³

By 1781, the British were also fighting France, Spain, and Holland. The British public's support for the costly war in North America was quickly waning. The Americans took advantage of the British southern strategy with significant aid from the French army and navy. In October, Washington marched his troops from New York to Virginia in an effort to trap the British southern army under the command of General Charles Cornwallis. Cornwallis had dug his men in at

Yorktown awaiting supplies and reinforcements from New York. However, the Continental and French armies arrived first, quickly followed by a French navy contingent, encircling Cornwallis's forces and, after laying siege to the city, forcing his surrender. The capture of another army left the British without a new strategy and without public support to continue the war. Peace negotiations took place in France, and the war came to an official end on September 3, 1783.⁴⁴



*Lord Cornwallis's surrender signaled the victory of the American revolutionaries over what they considered to be the despotic rule of Britain. This moment would live on in American memory as a pivotal one in the nation's origin story, prompting the United States government to commission artist John Trumbull to create this painting of the event in 1817. John Trumbull, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, 1820. [Wikimedia](#).*

Americans celebrated their victory, but it came at great cost. Soldiers suffered through brutal winters with inadequate resources. During the single winter at Valley Forge in 1777–1778, over 2,500 Americans died from disease and exposure. Life was not easy on the home front either. Women on both sides of the conflict were frequently left alone to care for their households. In addition to their existing duties, women took on roles usually assigned to men on farms and in shops and taverns. Abigail Adams addressed the difficulties she encountered while “minding family affairs” on their farm in Braintree, Massachusetts. Abigail managed the planting and harvesting of crops, in the midst of severe labor shortages and inflation, while dealing with several tenants on the Adams property, raising her children, and making clothing and other household goods. In or-

der to support the family economically during John's frequent absences and the uncertainties of war, Abigail also invested in several speculative schemes and sold imported goods.⁴⁵

While Abigail remained safely out of the fray, other women were not so fortunate. The Revolution was not only fought on distant battlefields. It was fought on women's very doorsteps, in the fields next to their homes. There was no way for women to avoid the conflict or the disruptions and devastations it caused. As the leader of the state militia during the Revolution, Mary Silliman's husband, Gold, was absent from their home for much of the conflict. On the morning of July 7, 1779, when a British fleet attacked nearby Fairfield, Connecticut, it was Mary who calmly evacuated her household, including her children and servants, to North Stratford. When Gold was captured by loyalists and held prisoner, Mary, six months pregnant with their second child, wrote letters to try to secure his release. When such appeals were ineffectual, Mary spearheaded an effort, along with Connecticut Governor, John Trumbull, to capture a prominent Tory leader to exchange for her husband's freedom.⁴⁶



American soldiers came from a variety of backgrounds and had numerous reasons for fighting with the American army. Jean-Baptiste-Antoine DeVerger, a French sublieutenant at the Battle of Yorktown, painted this watercolor soon after that battle and chose to depict four men in men military dress: an African American soldier from the 2nd Rhode Island Regiment, a man in the homespun of the militia, another wearing the common "hunting shirt" of the frontier, and the French soldier on the end. Jean-Baptiste-Antoine DeVerger, "American soldiers at the siege of Yorktown," 1781. [Wikimedia](#).

Black Americans, enslaved and free, also impacted (and were impacted by) the Revolution. The British were the first to recruit Black (or "Ethiopian") regiments, as early as Dunmore's Proclamation of 1775 in Virginia, which promised freedom to any enslaved person who would escape their enslavers and join the British cause. At first, Washington, an enslaver himself, resisted allowing Black men to join the Continental Army, but he eventually relented. In 1775, Peter Salem's enslaver freed him to fight with the militia. Salem faced British Regulars in the battles at

Lexington and Bunker Hill, where he fought valiantly with around three dozen other Black Americans. Salem not only contributed to the cause, he earned the ability to determine his own life after his enlistment ended. Salem was not alone, but many more enslaved people seized on the tumult of war to run away and secure their own freedom directly. Historians estimate that between thirty thousand and one hundred thousand formerly enslaved people deserted their enslavers during the war.⁴⁷

Men and women together struggled through years of war and hardship. For patriots (and those who remained neutral), victory brought new political, social, and economic opportunities, but it also brought new uncertainties. The war decimated entire communities, particularly in the South. Thousands of women throughout the nation had been widowed. The American economy, weighed down by war debt and depreciated currencies, would have to be rebuilt following the war. State constitutions had created governments, but now men would have to figure out how to govern. The opportunities created by the Revolution had come at great cost, in both lives and fortune, and it was left to the survivors to seize those opportunities and help forge and define the new nation-state.



Another John Trumbull piece commissioned for the Capitol in 1817, this painting depicts what would be remembered as the moment the new United States became a republic. On December 23, 1783, George Washington, widely considered the hero

of the Revolution, resigned his position as the most powerful man in the former thirteen colonies. Giving up his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Army ensured that civilian rule would define the new nation and that a republic would be set in place rather than a dictatorship. John Trumbull, General George Washington Resigning His Commission, c. 1817-1824. From the [Architect of the Capitol](#).

VI. The Consequences of the American Revolution

Like the earlier distinction between “origins” and “causes,” the Revolution also had short- and long-term consequences. Perhaps the most important immediate consequence of declaring independence was the creation of state constitutions in 1776 and 1777. The Revolution also unleashed powerful political, social, and economic forces that would transform the new nation’s politics and society, including increased participation in politics and governance, the legal institutionalization of religious toleration, and the growth and diffusion of the population, particularly westward. The Revolution affected Native Americans by opening up western settlement and creating governments hostile to their territorial claims. Even more broadly, the Revolution ended the mercantilist economy, opening new opportunities in trade and manufacturing.

The new states drafted written constitutions, which, at the time, was an important innovation from the traditionally unwritten British Constitution. These new state constitutions were based on the idea of “popular sovereignty,” that is, that the power and authority of the government derived from the people.⁴⁸ Most created weak governors and strong legislatures with more regular elections and moderately increased the size of the electorate. A number of states followed the example of Virginia and included a declaration or “bill” of rights in their constitution designed to protect the rights of individuals and circumscribe the prerogative of the government.

Pennsylvania’s first state constitution was the most radical and democratic. They created a unicameral legislature and an Executive Council but no genuine executive. All free men could vote, including those who did not own property. Massachusetts’s constitution, passed in 1780, was less democratic in structure but underwent a more popular process of ratification. In the fall of 1779, each town sent delegates—312 in all—to a constitutional convention in Cambridge. Town meetings debated the constitution draft and offered suggestions. Anticipating the later federal constitution, Massachusetts established a three-branch government based on checks and balances between the branches. Independence came in 1776, and so did an unprecedented period of constitution making and state building.

The Continental Congress ratified the Articles of Confederation in 1781. The articles allowed each state one vote in the Continental Congress. But the articles are perhaps most notable for what they did not allow. Congress was given no power to levy or collect taxes, regulate foreign or interstate commerce, or establish a federal judiciary. These shortcomings rendered the postwar Congress weak and largely ineffectual.

Political and social life changed drastically after independence. Political participation grew as more people gained the right to vote, leading to greater importance being placed on representation within government.⁴⁹ In addition, more common citizens (or “new men”) played increasingly important roles in local and state governance. Hierarchy within the states underwent significant changes. Society became less deferential and more egalitarian, less aristocratic and more meritocratic.

The Revolution’s most important long-term economic consequence was the end of mercantilism. The British Empire had imposed various restrictions on the colonial economies including limiting trade, settlement, and manufacturing. The Revolution opened new markets and new trade relationships. The Americans’ victory also opened the western territories for invasion and settlement, which created new domestic markets. Americans began to create their own manufactures, no longer content to rely on those in Britain.

Despite these important changes, the American Revolution had its limits. Following their unprecedented expansion into political affairs during the imperial resistance, women also served the patriot cause during the war. However, the Revolution did not result in civic equality for women. Instead, during the immediate postwar period, women became incorporated into the polity to some degree as “republican mothers.” Republican societies required virtuous citizens, and it became mothers’ responsibility to raise and educate future citizens. This opened opportunity for women regarding education, but they still remained largely on the peripheries of the new American polity.

Approximately sixty thousand loyalists ended up leaving America because of the Revolution. Loyalists came from all ranks of American society, and many lived the rest of their lives in exile from their homeland. A clause in the Treaty of Paris was supposed to protect their property and require the Americans to compensate Loyalists who had lost property during the war because of their allegiance. The Americans, however, reneged on this promise and, throughout the 1780s,



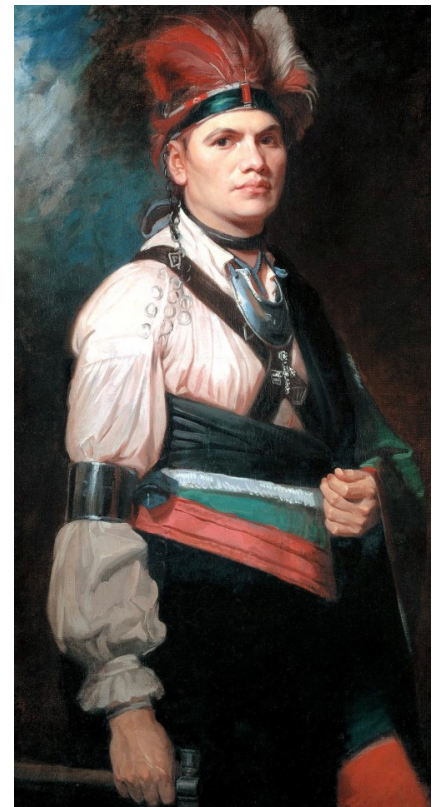
*In the thirteen colonies, boycotting women were seen as patriots. In British prints such as this, they were mocked as immoral harlots sticking their noses in the business of men. Philip Dawe, *A Society of Patriotic Ladies at Edenton in North Carolina*, March 1775. [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).*

states continued seizing property held by Loyalists. Some colonists went to England, where they were strangers and outsiders in what they had thought of as their mother country. Many more, however, settled on the peripheries of the British Empire throughout the world, especially Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec. The Loyalists had come out on the losing side of a Revolution, and many lost everything they had and were forced to create new lives far from the land of their birth.⁵⁰

In 1783, thousands of formerly enslaved Loyalists fled with the British army. They hoped that the British government would uphold the promise of freedom and help them establish new homes elsewhere in the Empire. The Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, demanded that British troops leave formerly enslaved people behind, but the British military commanders upheld earlier promises and evacuated thousands of freedmen, transporting them to Canada, the Caribbean, or Great Britain. They would eventually play a role in settling Nova Scotia, and through the subsequent

efforts of David George, a Black loyalist and Baptist preacher, some settled in Sierra Leone in Africa. Black loyalists, however, continued to face social and economic marginalization, including restrictions on land ownership within the British Empire.⁵¹

The fight for liberty led some Americans to manumit their enslaved laborers, and most of the new northern states soon passed gradual emancipation laws. Some manumissions also occurred in the Upper South, but in the Lower South, some enslavers revoked their offers of freedom for service, and other freedmen were forced back into bondage. The Revolution's rhetoric of equality created a "revolutionary generation" of enslaved people and free Black Americans that would eventually encourage the antislavery movement. Slave revolts began to incorporate claims for freedom based on revolutionary ideals. In the long term, the Revolution failed to reconcile slavery with these new egalitarian republican societies, a tension that eventually boiled over in the 1830s and 1840s and effectively tore the nation in two in the 1850s and 1860s.⁵²



Joseph Brandt as painted by George Romney. Brandt was a Mohawk leader who led Mohawk and British forces in western New York. [Wikimedia](#).

Native Americans, too, participated in and were affected by the Revolution. Many Native American groups, such as the Shawnee, Creek, Cherokee, and Iroquois, had sided with the British. They had hoped for a British victory that would continue to restrain the land-hungry colonial settlers from moving west beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Unfortunately, the Americans' victory and Native Americans' support for the British created a pretense for justifying rapid and often brutal expansion into the western territories. Native American peoples would continue to be displaced and pushed farther west throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, American independence marked the beginning of the end of what had remained of Native American independence.

VII. Conclusion

The American Revolution freed colonists from British rule and offered the first blow in what historians have called “the age of democratic revolutions.” The American Revolution was a global event.⁵³ Revolutions followed in France, then Haiti, and then South America. The American Revolution meanwhile wrought significant changes to the British Empire. Many British historians even use the Revolution as a dividing point between a “first British Empire” and a “second British Empire.” At home, however, the Revolution created a new nation-state, the United States of America. By September 1783, independence had been won. What the new nation would look like, however, was still very much up for grabs. In the 1780s, Americans would shape and then reshape that nation-state, first with the Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, and then with the Constitution in 1787 and 1788.

Historians have long argued over the causes and character of the American Revolution. Was the Revolution caused by British imperial policy or by internal tensions within the colonies? Were colonists primarily motivated by constitutional principles, ideals of equality, or economic self-interest? Was the Revolution radical or conservative? But such questions are hardly limited to historians. From Abraham Lincoln’s use of the Declaration of Independence in the Gettysburg Address to twenty-first-century Tea Party members wearing knee breeches, the Revolution has remained at the center of American political culture. Indeed, how one understands the Revolution often dictates how one defines what it means to be American.

The Revolution was not won by a few founding fathers. Men and women of all ranks contributed to the colonies’ most improbable victory, from the commoners who protested the Stamp Act to the women who helped organize boycotts against the Townshend duties; from the men, Black and white, who fought in the army to the women who contributed to its support. The Revolution, however, did not aim to end all social and civic inequalities in the new nation, and, in the case of Native Americans, it created new inequalities. But over time, the Revolution’s rhetoric of equality, as encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence, helped highlight some of those inequalities and became a shared aspiration for future social and political movements, including, among others, the abolitionist and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century, the suffragist and civil rights movements of the twentieth century, and the gay rights movement of the twenty-first century.