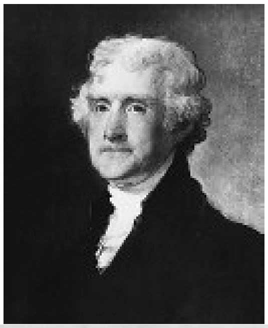
The American Revolution

"Who shall write the history of the American Revolution?
Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?"

-- John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 30, 1815
Lester J. Cappon, ed. The Adams-Jefferson Letters (1988)

John Adams

John Adams
Library of Congress



Th Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson
Library of Congress

"Who shall write the history of the American revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" thus wrote John Adams in 1815 to Thomas Jefferson. From his home in Monticello, Virginia, Jefferson replied: "Nobody; except merely it's external facts. All it's councils, designs and discussions, having been conducted by Congress with closed doors, and no member, as far as I know, having even made notes of them, these, which are the life and soul of history must for ever be unknown."

Not so. Jefferson's statement which infers that the Revolution was led by the Founding Fathers has long dominated the histories of the American Revolution. However, the Revolution was a people's revolution—a truly radical revolution. While the iconic Founding Fathers remain a central part of the Revolution's narrative, the American Revolution would have never occurred nor followed the course that we know now without the ideas, dreams, and blood spilled by American patriots whose names are not recorded alongside Washington, Jefferson, and Adams in history books.

The Road to the War for American Independence

By the time the first shots were fired in the American Revolution in 1775, Britain and America—not long before bonded so closely to one another that most white Americans considered themselves as English as any resident of Britain—had come to view each other as two very different societies. Their differences, which came to seem irreconcilable, propelled them into a war that would change the course of American history. By the time the American Revolution had run its course, a new society, unlike any that had existed anywhere in the world, had emerged. The Revolution not only eliminated a monarchy but also created a republic in which Americans' understanding of history, knowledge, and truth had been altered. The Revolution ushered in a new era representing the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history.

Nearly a generation prior to the outbreak of war in Massachusetts, the colonists were proud to claim their membership in the British Empire. Left alone for the most part by the English government in London, the colonists enjoyed the commercial and political benefits—at hardly any cost—provided by the imperial system. But the ideas and institutions shared by the colonists and the British began rapidly diverging in the aftermath of the French-Indian War, which raged throughout North America from the mid 1750s through the early 1760s.

The French-Indian War was part of a larger struggle that pitted Britain against France for control of international markets and dominance in naval power. In 1763, a peace treaty was struck between both nations in which the defeated French ceded to Britain all other French territory in North America east of the Mississippi. They also ceded the valuable port of New Orleans and land claims west of the Mississippi to Spain, thereby surrendering all title to the mainland of North America.

The consequences of the war had profound effects on both the British Empire and the American colonies. For the British, the war vastly expanded their territorial claims in the New World; however, the cost of the war exacerbated Britain's debt and increased British resentment of the colonists. From the British point of view, the colonists had made few financial contributions to the war effort, proved inept on the battlefield, and had maintained trade with the enemy throughout the conflict. For the colonists, the war had enabled them to come together from all points of the American eastern seaboard for the first time to unite against a common foe thus forming a bond that would prove resilient against the British during the Revolution. In addition, the colonists began to question the legitimacy of British interference in local affairs. At the beginning of the war, the British government enacted policies to impress colonists into the army as well as furnish supplies for the war effort; however, British leaders soon relaxed many of its policies returning authority back to the colonial assemblies.

The accession of King George III in 1760, as well as his appointment of George Grenville as Prime Minister in 1763, ensured that relationship between the British Empire and the American colonies would continue to deteriorate. Both the king and Grenville shared the prevailing opinion within Britain that the colonists had been too long indulged and that they should be compelled to obey the laws and to pay a part of the cost of defending and administering the empire. Therefore, Grenville became the primary architect of collecting debt from the American colonies arguing that the colonists enjoyed all the privileges of being an English subject while also being the least taxed people in the British Empire. He implemented a series of acts that antagonized the colonists: Sugar Act, Currency Act, Quartering Act, and the Stamp Act. Unlike the first three acts, the Stamp Act touched off a firestorm throughout the colonies because it not only affected everyone but also set the precedent that the English intended to raise revenue without the consent of the colonial assemblies. Violent resistance soon began to break out throughout the colonies as mobs, some consisting of slave owners, declared that their own government was enslaving them. In 1767, Charles Townshend assumed control of handling the colonial grievances. But Townshend, like Grenville, responded by imposing new taxes on lead, paint, paper, and tea, and dismantled the New York General Assembly after their leaders refused to comply with the new laws. By 1770, the Grenville and Townshend plans had enabled the colonists to overcome internal conflicts and recognize that the policies emanating from London were a threat to the liberty of all colonists.

As positions hardened on both sides, the result was a progression of events that rapidly spiraled out of control thereby destroying the British Empire in America. In Boston, the harassment of British customs commissioners led to the placement of British troops in the city. Soon, the soldiers and colonists began to clash on a regular basis as the poorly paid soldiers sought to compete with Bostonians for jobs. The skirmishes erupted into gunfire on the evening of March 5, 1770 when 10 British soldiers—provoked, outnumbered, and under snowball attack by a mob of dockworkers—fired into the crowd, wounding 11 rioters and killing five. Before long, colonial radicals transformed the incident into the “Boston Massacre.” Paul Revere produced an engraving of the incident that depicted the moment as a calculated assault on a peaceful crowd thereby capturing the essence of British oppression and brutality. Radical leaders such as Samuel Adams incited Bostonians by forming resistance groups and publishing pamphlets and newspapers declaring their grievances against England. Other colonies soon followed Boston’s lead as the spirit of dissent grew throughout the early 1770s.

When Parliament passed the Tea Act in 1773, Bostonians once again responded by organizing a mob of 50 men, who dressed as Indians to disguise their identities, and destroying 90,000 pounds of tea (approximately 3.5 million dollars in today’s money) on board three vessels in Boston Harbor. The British government, shocked by such a willful destruction of private property, struck back by passing the Coercive Acts, dubbed in the colonies the “Intolerable Acts.” The British closed the Boston harbor to oceangoing traffic, dismantled the Massachusetts General Assembly, removed royal officials accused of a crime in the colonies to England to stand trial, and decreed that British troops be quartered in private homes throughout the colonies. These punitive measures, which were particularly devastating economically to American merchants and sailors, were essential to the British in order to reassert its authority in colonies. Although the Coercive Acts hurt all colonists, Massachusetts was affected more so than any other colony, and, by late 1774, the colony verged on anarchy.

Fifty-five delegates to the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in September 1774 to steer a middle ground between the demands of radicals to assert independence and the reservation of conservatives to reaffirm British law as the foundation of American liberties. To placate the radicals, Congress asserted the right of the colonies to tax and legislate for themselves, ceased all trade with Britain until the Coercive Acts were repealed, and approved a defensive strategy of civil disobedience. On the other hand, the delegates stopped short of denying that Parliament had no authority at all in the colonies, acknowledged the continuing allegiance of the colonies to King George III, and refused to authorize radical proposals to prepare for war. Even though Congress managed to postpone war, its decisions in Philadelphia led the colonies further down the road to a war for independence.

The Boston Tea Party, the actions of the Continental Congress, and news of colonists massing arms and ammunition, proved to the British that the colonies aimed at independence. King George informed Lord Frederick North: "The New England Governments are in a State of Rebellion; blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this Country or independent." North replied by ordering British General Thomas Gage to Concord, Massachusetts to destroy the arms stored there and arrest rabble-rousers such as John Hancock and Samuel Adams. As Gage and his troops marched towards Concord, a band of artisan spies and express riders organized by Paul Revere dashed throughout the countryside alerting colonists with the news that "The redcoats are coming!" A militia of about 70 farmers in Lexington, Massachusetts met nearly 700 British troops in the heart of the rural town on Lexington Green at about 4 a.m. on April 19. Major John Pitcairn, the British commander, ordered the colonial militia to disperse. As the militiamen began to return to their homes a shot rang out—whether the British or the Americans fired first, "the shot heard 'round the world," is unknown—that reverberated throughout not only the colonies, but also the world. When the smoke cleared, eight militiamen lay dead (nine wounded) on the Green. By dawn, hundreds of militiamen were converging on Concord. But whether they recognized it at the time or not, the war for independence had begun.

And the War Came

Prior to 1775, it had seemed impossible to British leaders that the North Americans could or would want to split from the empire. For years the British government had viewed colonial resistance to its policies as self-serving illegal actions perpetuated by a few radicals; however, the events of April 1775 proved to those in Britain blinded by their faith in the Americans' devotion to the empire that the colonies could and would wage a war against the mother country. The blood spilled at Lexington Green and Concord (the British sustained 273 casualties, the Americans 95) on April 19 committed the Americans to a course of rebellion; subsequent events would lead the colonials on the road towards independence.

The Second Continental Congress assembled in May 1775 in the aftermath of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. Despite the outbreak of war, the delegates struggled to pursue a middle ground between the conflicting strategies of resistance and conciliation. Congress approved an Olive Branch Petition that affirmed the colonists' loyalty to George III; however, they also passed a measure to establish an American continental army led by George Washington. When news of the Olive Branch Petition and the creation of the Continental Army reached London, along with word of the Battle of Bunker (Breeds) Hill (a British victory earned at the cost of 1,154 casualties/311 colonists), most Britons demanded retaliation not reconciliation. On August 23, George issued a proclamation of rebellion in response of the events transpiring in New England. Two months later, George extended his proclamation to include all the colonies.

Common Sense Equals Independence

Despite the turn of events, many colonists clung to hopes of reconciliation and the notion that evil ministers rather than George were forcing unconstitutional measures on them and that sooner or later saner heads would prevail by rising to power in Britain. However, the colonists' sentimental attachment to the king and Britain, the last barriers to acceptance of independence, crumbled in January 1776 with the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Paine, having failed in several business ventures in England, arrived in Philadelphia in late 1774 and made the American cause his own. Selling 120,000 copies within three months of publication (equal to one out of every four adult males), *Common Sense* boldly declared that a new era of politics—the age of republicanism—had dawned. Paine ridiculed monarchy and aristocracy as institutions not only dangerous to liberty but also that violated the principles of reason. He urged Americans to unite under a simple republican government of their own insisting, "Small islands not capable of protecting themselves, are the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island." He went on to link the notion of an American nation with a sense of divine mission that many colonists shared: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now." Paine's influential pamphlet removed the last psychological barrier to American independence as a groundswell quickly spread throughout the colonies in support of an official statement to justify separation from Britain. It was the destiny of Americans to be republicans, independent, and American, not monarchists, subjects, and English. That, according to Paine, was common sense.

On July 2, 1776, Congress adopted a resolution prepared mostly by Thomas Jefferson, with the assistance of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston "that these United colonies are, and of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States; … and that all political connexion between them, and the state of Great Britain, is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." Two days later, 12 colonies (New York abstaining) unanimously approved Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was part a statement of American understanding of liberty, government, and mankind, and the other part a list of grievances against the British monarchy. Jefferson's Declaration set forth a justification of revolution and invoked the "self-evident truths" of human equality and "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In perhaps the document's most powerful statement, Jefferson declared that whenever "any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." Even as the Americans began to celebrate their proclamation of independence from King George, ships filled with British redcoats headed towards the colonies bent on destroying notions of liberty in North America.

The Struggle for Independence

Although colonial political leaders and a majority of Americans embraced independence, the sentiment was not universal. Approximately one-third to one-fourth of the population at the outbreak of war, proclaiming themselves "loyalists," refused to back the rebellion. Their rebel opponents dubbed these American loyalists "tories." In many cases, they owed their jobs (government officials) and livelihood (city merchants dependant on British trade) to the empire;

however, their numbers precluded them from posing a serious threat to the Revolution. The greatest threat to the Revolution was neither loyalists nor British soldiers but those Americans who wished to remain neutral (approximately one-third of the population). But the arrival of British ships one after another filled with redcoats forced many on the sidelines to choose sides.

At the command of the Continental Army, George Washington realized that he faced a formidable foe in a seasoned professional army and navy. Despite the surge of patriotism in 1775 that briefly swelled his ranks, Washington soon suffered from chronic shortages of both men and supplies. Most men enlisted either for a short stint (typically three months) in Washington's army or turned out only to support the regular army when British forces threatened their neighborhoods. Furthermore, Washington's army experienced approximately a 35% casualty rate. Washington needed a professional military establishment to wage a protracted campaign; however, many colonial leaders supported citizen-soldiers, those called upon whenever needed, because they feared standing armies. Congress responded by instituting a term of three years or the duration of the war for service in the Continental Army and offered those who enlisted a cash bounty, clothing, and land. The Second Continental Congress issued paper money not only to offer as an inducement for recruitment but also to purchase military supplies.

Out manned and outgunned, Washington's inferior Continental Army was routed by the British army at about every major battle in the Revolutionary War, including the capture of key American cities: Boston (1775), New York City (1776), Philadelphia (1777), Savannah (1778), and Charleston (1780). Washington also faced criticism from Americans who chided him for his cautious behavior. But Washington knew better, for he could not sacrifice his army on a whim. The Continental Army served not only as a fighting force, but also a symbol of the republican cause and its very existence sustained the American Revolution.

In the midst of the many severe crisis for Americans early in the Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine penned a collection of four essays known as *The Crisis* to bolster the sinking morale among patriots while shaming those adhering to a position of neutrality, or even worse, loyalist tendencies. The first of these essays, appearing on December 23, 1776, began with the opening sentence that General George Washington would order to be read aloud to his troops as he prepared to cross the ice-filled Delaware River for a surprise attack on a Hessian garrison at Trenton: "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

In command of a much inferior army, Washington had to adapt because he realized he could not defeat the British on the open battlefield. Therefore, Washington adopted Indian military tactics such as daring nighttime raids and moving through the countryside fighting only when he had the numbers on his side. Washington's strategy succeeded in chipping away at the British army a little piece at a time.

Despite the military superiority enjoyed by Great Britain, British strategists made several key miscalculations that neutralized their advantages over the Americans as they became involved in an impossible military situation. First, the British failed to cultivate loyalist support.

When the rebels seized loyalist's homes and personal property, the British government refused to intervene; therefore, approximately 70,000 to 80,000 loyalists fled the colonies. Second, America was too vast a territory to be conquered by conventional military methods. No matter how many major cities they captured such as Boston (the home of the radicalism of the Revolution) and New York (economic hub of America), the war persisted as long as Washington's Continental Army remained in the countryside. Third, the Americans were fighting in their own backyard while the British were waging a war against rebels in an unknown wilderness without any help from people in the countryside. Fourth, British families grew weary of events occurring on the other side of the world. As the war dragged on and the death rate of British troops soared, the British public was no longer willing to sacrifice their sons for an expensive campaign. In addition, the constant threat of France led many to question the logic in sending a vast amount of troops across the ocean when they may be needed at anytime to ward off a foreign invasion. And fifth, the British never appreciated the depth of the Americans' commitment to a political ideology. Paine concluded that the British were doomed to fail from the beginning. It did not matter if the British gained a victory here or there against Washington and his army, the British could never defeat an idea such as independence with an army.

Winning the Peace

In 1781, despite significant British victories, Congress dispatched General Nathanael Greene to the South to lead the rebels in their struggle against British General Lord Charles Cornwallis. Although Greene subsequently fought a few major battles against Cornwallis resulting in either a British victory or a draw, the young Rhode Islander managed to sap significant numbers and strength from the British army. Cornwallis decided to abandon the Carolinas to the rebels and march his battered army to Yorktown, Virginia. Washington, a Virginia planter knew the territory and sensed an opportunity to trap the remnants of Cornwallis's army. Washington immediately pressed southward from New Jersey along with well-trained French soldiers who had allied with the Americans in their struggle against Great Britain. In the meantime, a French fleet moved dropped anchor off the Virginia shore and landed troops at Yorktown. Cut off from the sea, Cornwallis attempted to move westward but soon encountered Washington's combined Continental (8800 men) and French (7800 men) armies. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered his entire army of 6,000 men. From across the pond, Lord North grumbled, "Oh God! It's all over." Even though the British retained control of New York City and Charles Town (Charleston), the war, with the exception of a few skirmishes, was over. The task of securing the independence Americans had demanded five year prior to Yorktown fell to three American diplomats, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay, dispatched by Congress in June 1782 to Paris to negotiate a peace treaty.

According to Congress's instructions, Adams, Franklin, and Jay were to insist only on the recognition of their independence and defer to the counsel of the French government who would mediate the negotiations between the Americans and the British emissaries. However, the three delegates, conscious that the French might intervene to check the level of independence granted to the Americans by the British, proceeded on their own and managed to achieve a remarkable bargain. The treaty, signed on September 3, 1783, recognized American independence, ceded all territory from the southern boundary of Canada to the northern boundary of Florida and from the

Atlantic to the Mississippi River (excluding New Orleans), and granted New Englanders the right to fish off the Grand Banks of Canada. In exchange, Americans consented on the issue of prewar debts and compensation of confiscated loyalist property. In the end, the Americans had good reason to celebrate when the treaty was announced to the world. Soon thereafter, the last remnants of the British army embarked from New York City, ending 176 years of colonial rule that began with the founding of Jamestown on May 14, 1607.

A Revolution for Black Americas?

War opened some opportunities for African Americans. By 1776, of the 500,000 blacks living in the United States (20% of the total population), all but approximately 25,000 were enslaved. Even those who were free could not vote, lived under curfews, and even lacked the guarantees of equal justice held by the poorest of whites. When the Revolutionary War began, blacks naturally gravitated towards which side would most likely grant them freedom. The British offered immediate emancipation; therefore, approximately 10,000 blacks joined or supported the British army. About 5,000 blacks served in the Continental Army (2 blacks units were raised in Massachusetts and Rhode Island), with most state legislatures passing abolition laws that provided for gradual emancipation. Between 1777 and 1784, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut began phasing out slavery. The strong black support for the British in the South, as opposed to northern blacks, was attributed to the refusal of southern leaders to free their property. Following the war, southern blacks, which had supported the British, were forced to flee to Florida, Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and even Africa.

White Women in Wartime

As in all wars, the role and visibility of women heightened during the American Revolution. Even the most traditional female role took on new meaning in the absence of male household heads. Some women organized boycotts of British goods, raised funds for the fledging Continental Army, and managed farms and businesses of their towns while struggling to maintain a fraction of normalcy as husbands, brothers, and fathers died. Other women followed the army serving military units by cooking, laundering, and nursing the wounded. Furthermore, a few women joined the fight for independence on the battlefield, some even disguising themselves as men such as Massachusetts's Deborah Sampson and New York's Margaret (Molly) Corbin (who served possibly as the famed image of Molly Pitcher).

Conclusion

The Americans had waged a war for independence against the powerful nation in Europe and emerged victorious. Prior to the Revolutions the thirteen colonies had been unable to unite to solve their differences. But the colonists managed to discover a single principle in which they could take a common stand against Britain: human equality. It was this principle that colonists from the north and south could coalesce around to unite and wage a war for their freedom. The cost of freedom was the death of approximately 5% of the population between the ages of 16 and

45—white, black, and some Native Americans. But the peace treaty, which marked the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, did not address two important issues: what kind of society American was to become and what sort of government the new nation would possess. These questions remained as America shifted from colonies to independent states and its people began to experiment in government at both the state and the national level.

Website: The American Revolution http://americanrevwar.homestead.com/files/INDEX2.HTM#contents

The Revolutionary War (1775-83), also known as the American Revolution, arose from growing tensions between residents of Great Britainâ€™s 13 North American colonies and the colonial government, which represented the British crown.