

American Revolution at a Glance



1775-1783



The American Revolution was an event of sweeping worldwide importance. A costly war that lasted from 1775 to 1783 secured American independence and allowed new approaches to self-government to develop. At its core, the war pitted colonists who wanted independence and the creation of a republic against the power of the British crown, which wanted to keep its empire whole. At certain times and in certain places, Americans fought other Americans in what became a civil war. From the family whose farm was raided, to the merchant who could not trade or the slave who entered British lines on the promise of freedom, everyone had a stake in the outcome. To learn more about these and other aspects of the Revolution, including the revolutionary experiences of loyalists (colonists who supported Britain), women, Indians, and African Americans, visit the National Park Service Revolutionary War website: www.nps.gov/revwar. Information about NPS Revolutionary War parks can also be found at this site.

Why the War Came

The American colonists did not embrace independence easily. Most of them were of British ancestry. They spoke English and traded mainly with Britain and other British colonies. Most shared the mother country's Protestant religious tradition. The Americans' pride in being British reached a high point in 1763, with Britain's great victory in the Seven Years' War (known in America as the French and Indian War). That victory gained Britain what had been French Canada and all territory east of the Mississippi River, including Spanish Florida. Heavily in debt as a result of the war, Britain decided to keep an army in America to secure her new possessions and looked to the colonists to help pay for it. The British Parliament approved new taxes on colonial imports and for the first

time imposed a direct tax—the stamp tax (1765)—on the Americans. Colonial resistance to the new taxes only stiffened Parliament's insistence on its right to govern the colonists "in all cases whatsoever." Even after fighting began at Lexington and Concord, Mass., in April 1775, the Continental Congress petitioned King George III for redress and insisted that the colonists wanted to remain within the empire—but only as free men. The king responded by pronouncing the colonies to be in rebellion, and Congress decided it had no alternative to proclaiming independence. On July 4, 1776, it declared that the "united colonies" were henceforth "free and independent states." Making good on this declaration, however, required a military victory over Britain.

British North America in 1775



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Those Who Fought

The American Revolution was both a civil war within British North America and, by 1778, part of a world war involving European powers. The British fought the war with an army of professional soldiers, lifetime recruits who were subject to strict military discipline. They also employed soldiers from German states and a large number of loyalists, American supporters of British rule who formed their own military units and fought against patriot forces. The patriots, those who favored independence, developed their own Continental Army, which consisted initially of New England militiamen besieging the British in Boston and then of soldiers supplied by various colonies. They also relied on local militia units, whose members served for short terms, and partisan forces, especially in the South. The Marquis de Lafayette, Friedrich W. A. von Steuben, and other European officers made significant contributions to the patriot cause, as did French soldiers and sailors after 1778, especially in helping Washington's army trap Lord Cornwallis's large British force at Yorktown in 1781. With an overall goal of slowing the advance of white settlement, American Indians were divided in their loyalties. Depending on local conditions, they joined the side they thought would favor their interests. Although Southerners opposed their use, some 5,000 African Americans fought side by side with whites for the patriot cause and their own freedom; tens of thousands more enslaved African Americans sought freedom with the British forces.

Following Kings Mountain, Gen. Nathanael Greene arrived in North Carolina to reorganize the southern American forces. In January 1781, a combined force of Continental troops and militia under Gen. Daniel Morgan beat a British army at the Cowpens in South Carolina. In March, Cornwallis and Greene tangled at Guilford Court House (present-day Greensboro), N.C. Cornwallis won a tactical victory, but one-quarter of his men were killed or wounded. After withdrawing to Wilmington, N.C., he decided to move his army north to Virginia. Greene then turned his attention to retaking South Carolina, capturing one by one the isolated British posts, eventually confining the British largely to Charleston and to Savannah, Ga.

Consequences

The end of the Revolutionary War brought independence for 13 American states. Between 1776 and 1780, states wrote new constitutions or changed old charters to become republics. When the alliance of the states under the Articles of Confederation proved inadequate, a convention in 1787 produced the Constitution, which remains our governmental framework. The Constitution settled many issues and formed a stronger union of the states, but it also contained contradictions that would echo through our history. The Declaration of Independence's promise of human equality was at first narrowly applied, and the Constitution failed to end African-American slavery. In the English-speaking world of 1787, few entertained the possibility that women possessed equal political or economic rights.

Much of American history after 1776 represents a struggle to extend full citizenship to white males without property, to people of color, and to women. For Indians, the formation of the United States only increased the flow of white settlers onto their lands and led to more clashes. An acknowledgment of the Revolution's deferred promises, however, should not blind us to its far-reaching effects. In 1776 no other nation had a republican form of government, with all its powers grounded in the consent of the people. Later revolutions in France, Hispaniola (now Haiti), and throughout Latin America drew inspiration from the American Revolution. Once adopted by the United States, the ideals of liberty and self-government would have future effects never imagined by the original revolutionaries.



Congressional medal awarded to Gen. Daniel Morgan for his victory at Cowpens, January 17, 1781.



The 1783 Treaty of Paris recognized the United States as stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River, south of the Great Lakes, and north of Florida. The new nation was surrounded on three sides, with British Quebec to the north, Spanish Louisiana to the west, and Florida, newly returned to Spain, to the south. The 13 new states were allied under the Articles of Confederation. A new republic had joined the nations of the world, but its staying power remained a question.



1778-1781 The British Adopt a Southern Strategy

The year 1778 brought a major change in British strategy. Britain had failed to subdue New England in the war's first phase, and conventional warfare in the middle colonies had not reinstated the crown's authority. Following France's entry into the war, Britain decided to concentrate on holding the southern colonies. It also made sporadic raids on northern ports and, with the help of Indian allies, on frontier settlements. Meanwhile, Gen. Henry Clinton replaced Gen. Howe as overall British commander.

British activities in the West centered on two forts at Detroit and Niagara. In the spring of 1778, Lt. Col. George Rogers Clark assembled about 200 men with the intention of attacking the fort at Detroit. Through forced marches, bold leadership, and shrewd diplomacy with Indian leaders, Clark captured the British posts of Cahokia and Kaskaskia on the Mississippi River. He then moved on to take Vincennes on the Wabash River. The British recaptured Vincennes, but held it only briefly. Although he never captured the British stronghold at Detroit, Clark's actions relieved much of the pressure on the frontier and were the first steps in breaking Britain's hold on the Ohio Country.

Believing the South to be home to many secret loyalists and hoping to keep the region's timber and agricultural products for the empire, the British sent an expedition that captured Savannah, Ga., in December 1778. At first, the British concentrated on taking territory with regular army forces, then organizing loyalist militia units to hold the territory while the army moved on. This strategy largely succeeded in Georgia, but broke down in the Carolinas. The British capture of Charleston, S.C., and its 5,500 defenders in May 1780 energized patriot resistance and led to the formation of irregular militia bands to make hit-and-run attacks against the occupiers and their loyalist supporters.

In August 1780, Gen. Charles, Earl Cornwallis routed a patriot force under Gen. Horatio Gates at Camden, S.C. This did the British little lasting good, as small militia bands under commanders like Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens continued to attack isolated British forces. In October, patriot militia from the Carolinas and Virginia defeated a loyalist army under British Col. Patrick Ferguson at Kings Mountain, S.C., ending organized loyalist activity in the state and boosting American hopes.

By joining his army to British forces in Virginia, Cornwallis planned to gain military control of the state and restore British momentum in the South. Washington was then encamped in New Jersey, engaged in planning an attack on the British in New York in combination with the Comte de Rochambeau's French army. A large French fleet under the Comte de Grasse had already left France with orders first to take control of the seas in the West Indies and then to support Wash-

ington and Rochambeau's operations. In August, Washington learned that de Grasse was headed for the Chesapeake Bay and saw a chance to destroy Cornwallis before he could be reinforced. Leaving a small force to watch over New York City, Washington moved his remaining Continentals and the French troops toward Virginia.

Meanwhile, Cornwallis occupied and fortified Yorktown and Gloucester on opposite banks of the York River. A small Continental and militia force under the Marquis de Lafayette kept Cornwallis's army occupied until Washington could concentrate his forces in Virginia. A British fleet from New York under Admiral Graves sought the French in the Chesapeake Bay. French warships engaged Graves near the bay in the Battle of the Capes, forcing his return to New York and leaving Cornwallis without an escape by sea. At the end of September, with heavy cannons landed under the protection of the French ships, the allied forces began the siege of Yorktown. As the bombardment grew heavier and with no possibility of escaping, Cornwallis had no choice but to seek surrender terms. On October 19, 1781, his army of 8,000 was formally surrendered to Washington.

1782-1783 End Game

Yorktown was a great victory for Franco-American arms, but it did not end the war. The British still occupied New York City, Wilmington, Charleston, and Savannah, and there was no immediate prospect of the Americans taking these cities. However, the British were hard pressed by years of war, and the government in London saw that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to replace Cornwallis's army. The British public was also reaching the limits of its willingness to pay taxes to support the American war. Realizing that the costs of the war were greater than the potential gain, the British government entered into peace negotiations, with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay representing the United States. The Treaty of Paris, signed in September 1783, officially ended hostilities and recognized American independence. The treaty in effect helped create two nations, because the influx of 40,000 loyalists to British Canada profoundly shaped that country's future. The failure of the British to withdraw from forts in United States territory with "all convenient speed" and difficulties with Spain over the navigation of the Mississippi River would require more negotiations. American independence, however, virtually unthinkable in 1763, had been achieved.

- Feb 1778 Rhode Island grants freedom to slaves enlisting in the Continental Army for the war's duration, resulting in the mostly African-American First Rhode Island Regiment.
- Feb 6, 1778 France agrees to an alliance with the United States, providing critical military assistance and loans.
- Feb 23, 1778 Baron von Steuben of Prussia arrives at Valley Forge to begin training of Washington's troops.
- June 18, 1778 British abandon Philadelphia.
- June 28, 1778 Battle of Monmouth, N.J., proves Washington's Continentals are a match for British regulars.
- May-Dec 1778 Northwest Campaign of George Rogers Clark
 - June 29 After weeks of travel and training, Clark launches his campaign against British posts in present-day Illinois and Indiana.
 - July 4 Kaskaskia captured.
 - July 6 Cahokia captured.
 - July 20 Fort Sackville at Vincennes captured.
 - Dec 17 British retake Fort Sackville.
- July 3-4, 1778 Loyalists and Indians win Battle of Wyoming, Pa.
- July 10, 1778 France declares war on Great Britain.
- July 29-Aug 31, 1778 Franco-American siege of Newport, R.I.
- Nov 11, 1778 Loyalists and Indians under Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant attack Cherry Valley, N.Y.
- Dec 29, 1778 British capture Savannah, Ga.
- Feb 25, 1779 George Rogers Clark recaptures Fort Sackville.
- May-Sept 1779 Gen. John Sullivan leads a campaign against Iroquois in Pennsylvania and New York, destroying 41 villages, in response to loyalist and Indian attacks on frontier settlements.

- May 10, 1779 British burn Portsmouth and Norfolk, Va.
- June 16, 1779 Spain declares war on Great Britain.
- July 5-11, 1779 British raid Connecticut coast, destroying Fairfield and Norwalk and ships in New Haven harbor.
- July 22, 1779 Indians & loyalists under Joseph Brant win Battle of Minisink, N.Y.
- July 25-Aug 13, 1779 Massachusetts amphibious effort fails to capture British garrison at Penobscot (in present-day Maine).
- Aug 19, 1779 British abandon Paulus Hook, N.J., shrinking their area of control.
- Sept 16-Oct 9, 1779 Unsuccessful Franco-American siege of Savannah, Ga.
- Sept 23, 1779 John Paul Jones captures British warship Serapis off the coast of England, but loses his own ship, Bonhomme Richard.
- Dec 1, 1779 Main Continental Army sets up winter quarters at Morristown, N.J.
- Feb-May 1780 Second Charleston Expedition, S.C.
 - Mar 29-May 12 British besiege and capture Charleston.
 - Apr 14 Battle of Monk's Corner extends British control in S.C.
 - May 29 Battle of the Waxhaws.
- Mar 1, 1780 Pennsylvania passes legislation providing for the gradual abolition of slavery.
- June 5, 1780 Sir Henry Clinton turns command of the British Army in the South over to General Cornwallis.
- June 7-23, 1780 British troops raid Connecticut Farms and Springfield, N.J.

- June 20, 1780 Loyalists routed at Battle of Ramsour's Mill, N.C.
- July 10, 1780 Philadelphia women found Ladies Association, the first interstate women's association in U.S. history, to support troops.
- July 11, 1780 The Comte de Rochambeau arrives at Newport, R.I., with 6,000 French soldiers.
- July-Aug 1780 Camden Campaign, S.C.
 - July 25 Horatio Gates assumes command of Southern Army.
 - Aug 1 Battle of Rocky Mount.
 - Aug 6 Battle of Hanging Rock.
 - Aug 16 Patriots routed in Battle of Camden.
 - Aug 18 British surprise Americans at Battle of Fishing Creek.
- July 12, 1780 Patriot victory at Battle of Williamson's Plantation, S.C., helps recruiting efforts in that state.
- Sept 21, 1780 Benedict Arnold's treasonous plans to surrender West Point to the British are uncovered.
- Oct 7, 1780 Patriot militia victory at Battle of Kings Mountain, S.C., quiets loyalist activity in that state.
- Oct 14, 1780 Nathanael Greene assumes command of Southern Army.
- Jan 1781 Unpaid Pennsylvania and New Jersey troops mutiny in N.J.; a handful are executed.
- Jan 17, 1781 Morgan defeats Tarleton at Battle of Cowpens, S.C.
- Jan-Dec 1781 Southern Campaigns of Nathanael Greene
 - Feb 25 Battle of Haw River, N.C.
 - Mar 6 Skirmish at Wetzell's Mill, N.C.
 - Mar 15 Battle of Guilford Court House, N.C.
 - Apr 24 Cornwallis heads north toward Chesapeake Bay; Lord Rawdon assumes command of British forces in the Carolinas.

- Apr 25 Battle of Hobkirk's Hill, S.C.
- May 12 Siege of Fort Mifflin, S.C.
- May 22-Jun 19 Siege of Ninety Six, S.C.
- May 22-Jun 5 Siege and capture of Augusta, Ga.
- Sept 8 Battle of Eutaw Springs, S.C.
- Mar-Sept 1781 Lafayette's Virginia Military Operations
 - Apr 25 British occupy Petersburg.
 - May 20 Cornwallis arrives at Petersburg from Wilmington, N.C.; assumes command of combined British forces in Virginia.
 - June 4 Charlottesville raid; Thomas Jefferson, recently governor of Virginia, narrowly avoids capture.
 - July 6 Patriots escape British trap at Battle of Green Spring.
- May 9, 1781 Spanish take Pensacola, Fla., from British.
- Aug-Oct 1781 Yorktown Campaign, Va.
 - Aug 1 Cornwallis's troops occupy Yorktown.
 - Aug 19 Washington and Rochambeau begin movement of American and French armies to Yorktown.
 - Sept 5 Naval Battle of the Capes.
 - Sept 28-Oct 19 Siege and surrender of Yorktown.



Drums were used in the Revolution to provide cadence on marches and transmit orders to troops in camp and battle. Many 18th-century drums, like this reproduction side drum, were undecorated.