

# THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Written by Robert E. Slavin and Kate Conway





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## *The American Revolution*

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**Developers:** Robert E. Slavin, Kate Conway, Alli Hoge, Wendy Fitchett

**Editors:** Janet Wisner, Marti Gastineau

**Designers:** Barbara Colquitt, Susan Perkins, Michael Hummel

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300 E. Joppa Road, Suite 500, Baltimore, MD 21286

PHONE: (800) 548-4998 FAX: (410) 324-4444 E-MAIL: [sfainfo@successforall.org](mailto:sfainfo@successforall.org) WEBSITE: [www.successforall.org](http://www.successforall.org)





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## INTRODUCTION

The militiamen stood gathered on the Lexington town green. Arranged in a line, the men were ready to give their lives for the colonies—and for freedom. They knew the British were coming.

Finally, just as the sun rose, hundreds of troops cloaked in red appeared. The **colonists** quickly

realized that they were outnumbered by the British soldiers, whom they called Redcoats.

Neither side was ready for battle. Still, a shot rang out. It was the shot heard ‘round the world, according to poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was the shot that began the American Revolution.





To this day, no one knows whether the British or the colonists fired that first shot. But it was the first of many during an eight-year war that would bring freedom to the colonists.

The American Revolution was a fight over the right of people to choose their own leaders and make their own laws. After Great Britain was defeated, the British colonies in America became the United States of America. Americans had won the freedom to govern themselves.



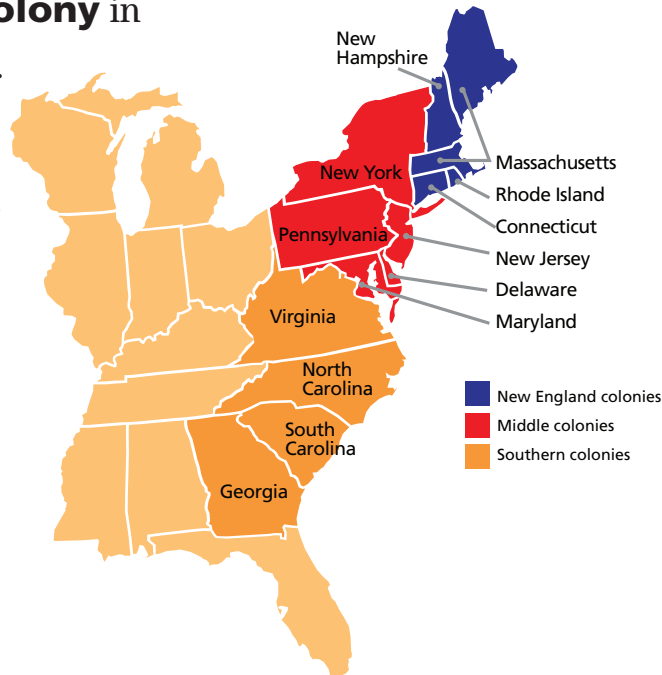


# THE COLONIES

In December 1606, the London Company was sent on a voyage to the **New World**. King James I wanted the British to settle land in North America. By May, they set up a fort at Jamestown, Virginia. This became the first permanent **colony** in the new land.

As more people came to America, more British colonies were founded. By 1733, there were thirteen British colonies. Each colony had its own government, although they all answered to the king and government in Great Britain.

13 British colonies



# FACT

Great Britain is made up of one large island and many small surrounding islands. The countries of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland make up Great Britain today.



# TROUBLE IN THE COLONIES

British immigrants flocked to the colonies. They built **settlements** up and down America's eastern coast. As these settlers spread out across the New World, they came into conflict with people who had lived on and tended the land for many years—the Indians. Both groups wanted to hunt, fish, farm, and live on the same land.

## The French and Indian War

As the British **Empire** colonized the Atlantic coast of America, France took control of much of the land in Canada. Eventually, the two nations began to argue over land. They each wanted control over North American land west of the Appalachian Mountains, known as the Ohio Territory. A war broke out. During the war, different Indian tribes fought on one side or the other. British colonists called it the French and Indian War.





## Settlers Look West

After the French and Indian War, many colonists wanted to move into the rich farmlands west of the Appalachian Mountains. This worried the British government.

The British thought settling the region would cause more conflict with the Indians. They did not want another war. The British government tried to stop the colonists from moving west, which angered the colonists further. They had fought the war to gain control of the Ohio Territory, and now they were being kept out of it.



## REBELLION BREWS IN BOSTON

The colonists had no representatives in the British government. Leaders in Britain set taxes and laws for the colonists in America. The colonists thought this was unfair. If they were going to follow British laws and send money to the king, they wanted to have a say in the government.

The British would not give the colonists a voice. Instead, they raised taxes and passed more laws to try to control the colonies. With every new tax or law, the colonists grew angrier. Two events in Boston would help turn this discontent into **rebellion**.



Unhappy Boston! see thy Sons deplore,  
Thy hollow Walks beset with quills & Gore,  
While faithless P—n and his savage Bands,  
With murderous Rancour stretch their bloody hands,  
Like fierce Barbarians ginning o'er their Prey,  
Approve the Carnage and enjoy the Day,  
If falling drops from Rage from Anguish flow,  
If speechless Sorrows lab'ring for a Tongue,  
Or if a weeping World can ought appease,  
The plaintive Ghosts of Victims such as these,  
The Patriot's copious Tears for each are shed,  
A glorious Tribute which embalms the Dead

The unhappy sufferers were Messrs SAUNDERS GRAY SAMUEL MAVERICK, JAMES  
KILLED: Six wounded; two of them (CHRISTOPHER MONROE & JOHN  
Published in 1770



## The Boston Massacre

By 1768, British soldiers were sent to Boston to protect British officials from angry colonists. This made the citizens of Boston furious. Over a two-year period, small conflicts broke out between the British soldiers and American colonists.

In 1770, these tensions exploded into bloodshed. On a March evening, British soldiers and a group of Boston men and boys began arguing and trading insults. A soldier struck one Boston boy in the head with a rifle. A crowd began to grow. They threw sticks and snowballs at the British soldiers. The soldiers fired into the crowd, killing five colonists.

This event became known as the Boston Massacre. Colonists who opposed British rule used it to stir up even more anti-British anger. They printed a pamphlet called "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre." The pamphlet called the soldiers murderers.

The British soldiers were tried in court, and a jury found the soldiers not guilty. However, this violent incident convinced many colonists that the British were cruel killers. The colonies moved a step closer to **revolution**.

## FACT

John Adams defended the British soldiers in court. He later became the second president of the United States.



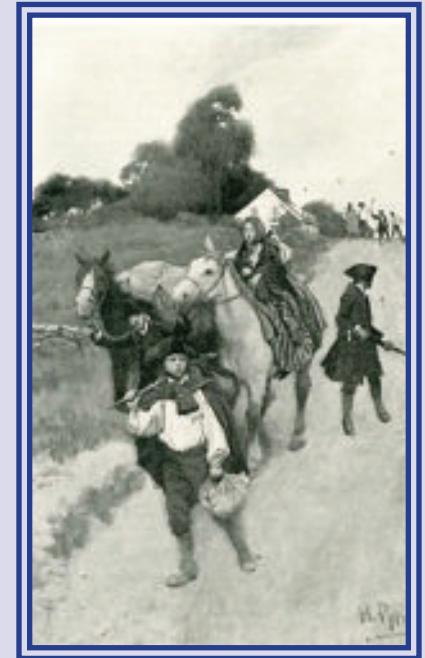
## PATRIOTS AND LOYALISTS

Not everyone disagreed with the British. The colonists were divided.

Those who were angry at the British and wanted more rights for the colonies called themselves **Patriots**.

Patriots believed in “no taxation without representation.” That means that they did not believe they should be taxed if they did not have a say in the government. They wanted freedom from British rule.

**Loyalists** stayed loyal to Britain and King George III. Not all of them agreed with the king’s policies, but they wanted to remain British citizens. Loyalists were also called Tories.



## The Boston Tea Party

For years, the colonists had been angry over British taxation. By law, citizens in Britain could only be taxed if their representatives voted for the tax. Those citizens had a say in choosing their leaders. The colonists wanted the same **rights** as people in Britain. They wanted to be able to elect their own leaders. Many colonists refused to pay the British taxes until they were given the same rights as those in Britain.

In 1773, the British passed the Tea Act. This law placed a tax on tea sold in the American colonies. The tax, in part, would be used to pay British officials in America. Americans found out about the Tea Act as British ships carrying

thousands of pounds of tea were making their way to the colonies. One of these ships docked in Boston Harbor.





Thousands of colonists met to plan a reaction. They sent a message to the ship's captain, urging him to leave Boston without paying the tax.

Those attending the meeting also chose men to make sure that the tea was not unloaded. Meanwhile, two more tea ships arrived in the harbor.

On December 16, 1773, dozens of Boston men boarded the ships. Some dressed as Indian warriors so they would not be recognized. Using axes, they chopped open hundreds of chests of

tea worth a huge amount of money and dumped the contents into Boston Harbor. This act of American rebellion was another step toward war with Great Britain.

When word of the Boston Tea Party reached Britain, King George III and members of Parliament were furious. They quickly took steps to punish the colonists. Boston's **port** was closed. This did severe damage to the city's **economy**. Businesses closed, and people lost their jobs. Parliament put restrictions on

town meetings and made changes to the colonial government. American colonists came to call these laws the Intolerable Acts. Britain sent thousands of soldiers to enforce the laws and bring the colonists under tighter control. Sending these troops was the spark that erupted into the flames of war.

The Intolerable Acts were King George III's way of punishing the colonists for the Boston Tea Party. There were four acts, including:

- The Boston Port Bill: Boston Harbor was closed to everything but British ships.
- The Quartering Act: Colonists had to feed British soldiers and give them a place to sleep. Colonists could be shot if they refused.
- The Administration of Justice Act: British officials accused of crimes could not be tried in colonial courts. This allowed the officials to do what they pleased in the colonies.
- Massachusetts Government Act: The British government took control of Massachusetts. Towns could no longer govern themselves or have town meetings.



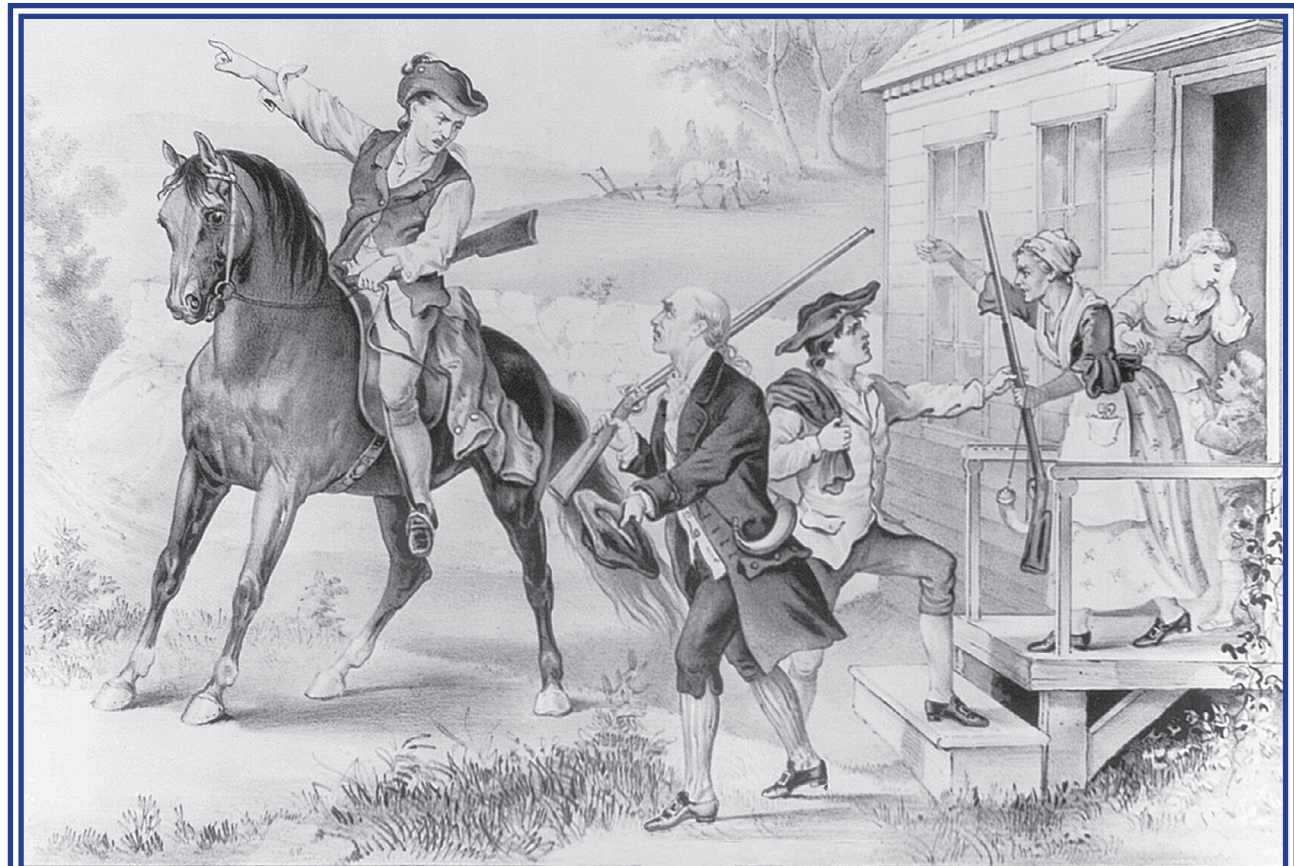
## THE FIRST SHOTS FIRED

As tensions with Britain increased, some American colonists began to form militias. These were groups of local men who organized as nonprofessional soldiers. The Massachusetts militia was called the Minutemen. They had stored guns and gunpowder at the town of Concord. When the British learned about these weapons, they made plans to capture and destroy them.

On the night of April 19, 1775, about 700 British troops began marching from Boston to Concord. Patriot spies found out that British soldiers were on the move. Paul Revere and William Dawes rode out from Boston to alert the colonists that the British were coming.

### **Minutemen:**

*Name given to the Massachusetts Patriot militia because they could get ready to fight in a minute.*





## PAUL REVERE

Paul Revere was a well-known Patriot who participated in the Boston Tea Party. He was a member of a group of Patriots who were watching the British Army. When the army started to move, Revere and another rider, William Dawes, were sent to Lexington to warn the Patriot

militia. The Patriots sent two riders in case one of them was captured. Each took a different route from Boston to Lexington.

Revere created a system to alert Patriots in nearby Charlestown of the British advance. A famous poem was written about it.

## *Paul Revere's Ride*

*Listen, my children, and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,  
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:  
Hardly a man is now alive  
Who remembers that famous day and year.*

*He said to his friend, — "If the British march  
By land or sea from the town to-night,  
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch  
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light, —  
One if by land, and two if by sea;  
And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm  
Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm."*

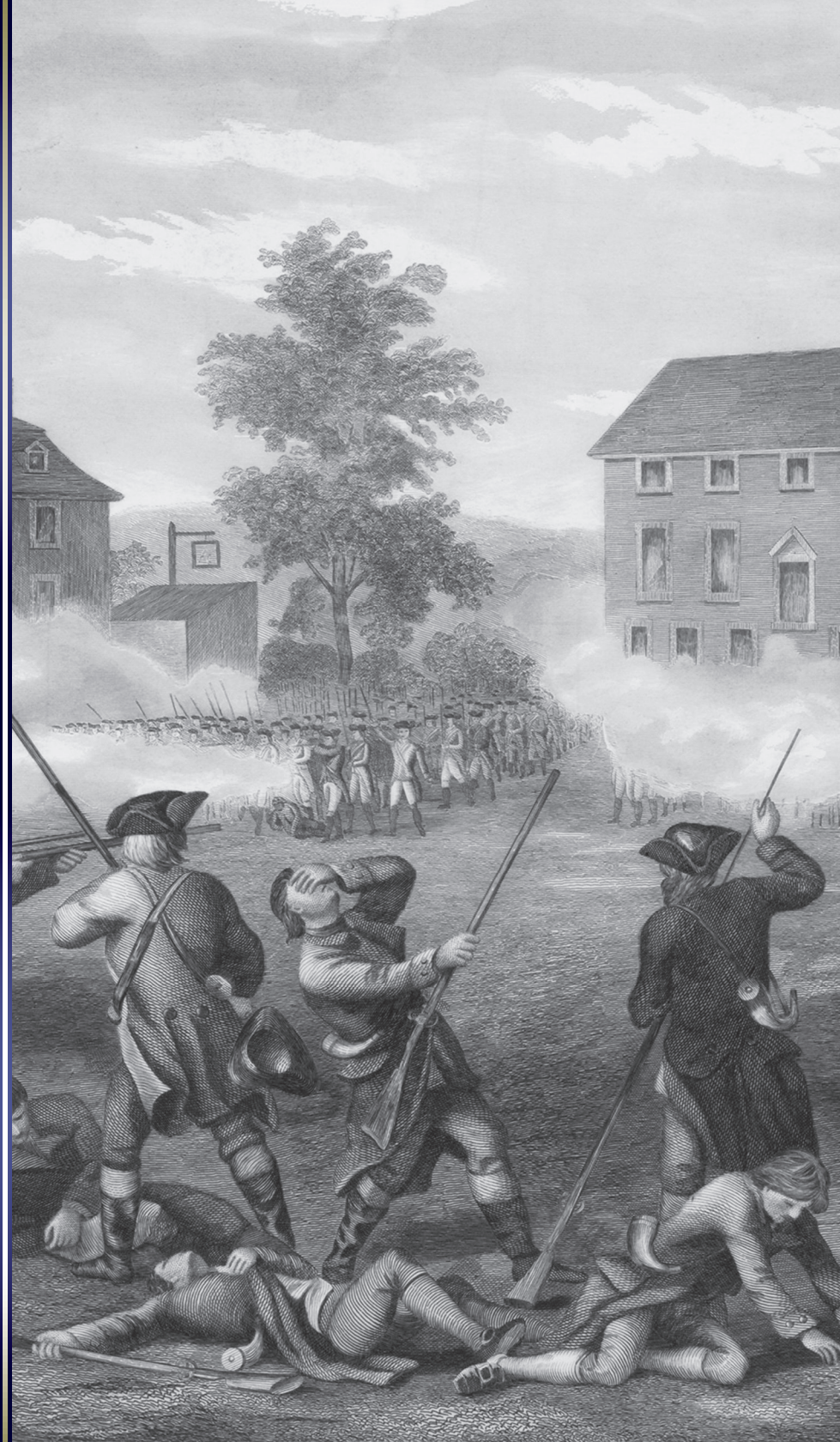
— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



When the British soldiers got to the town of Lexington, the Minutemen were waiting for them in the town **common**. The British and American soldiers exchanged fire. These were the first shots of the American Revolution.

The fighting at Lexington only lasted about ten minutes. Eight Minutemen were killed and nine wounded. The colonial soldiers were

outnumbered and quickly **retreated** to Concord. The British followed. At Concord, the tables were turned. More Minutemen had gathered in and around the town. Again the British and American soldiers exchanged fire. This time the colonial troops did not retreat. More Minutemen continued to arrive, ready to fight. The British realized that their only chance was to get back to Boston as quickly as possible.





They began a quick march out of Concord. Minutemen continued to attack the British troops from behind trees, fences, and buildings that lined the road. By the time the British made it back to Boston, about 250 soldiers had been wounded, and more than seventy had died. By the end of the day, one hundred Minutemen had been shot, and about half that number had died.

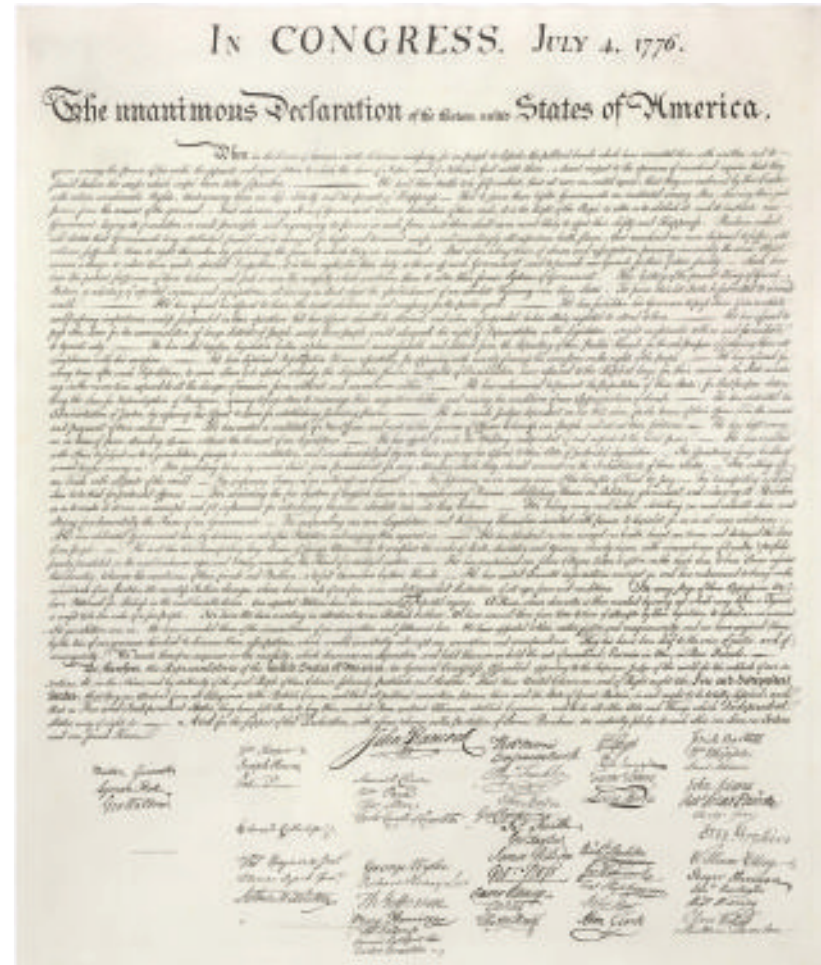
The Battles of Lexington and Concord were small but extremely important. They showed that what the British thought was a **ragtag** colonial militia could stand up to the powerful British army. Most importantly, these battles meant there was no turning back. The colonies had taken their first step toward open rebellion. The American Revolution had begun.



# THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

For several months after the battles, many colonists still hoped King George III would stop the coming war. Instead, he announced a **blockade** of American ports. He said the British navy would capture or sink any American ships they found.

A Continental Congress met in Philadelphia to decide what to do. There were **delegates** from each of the thirteen colonies. While the Congress debated, debates were also going on in the colonies. The colonies sent instructions to their delegates. Most told them to vote for independence from Britain, but some did not.



*Declaration of Independence, 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."*



In 1776, the Congress set up a small committee of men, including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. Their task was to draft a declaration of independence. This declaration would tell why America could no longer stay in the British Empire. Thomas Jefferson did most of the writing. Then the whole Congress reviewed the draft. They made many changes, including removing a section against slavery.

Southern colonies wanted to keep using slave labor as they always had. Many white colonists did not believe that the rights and freedoms called for in the Declaration of Independence should apply to slaves.

There was also no mention of the rights of women in the Declaration of Independence. However, some women colonists had a lot to say on the matter. Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams, wrote about the subject to her husband at the Continental Congress.



*“And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors... If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”*

— Abigail Adams

Finally, on July 2, 1776, every state except New York voted in favor of the Declaration of Independence. All the delegates signed it. Their signatures made them **traitors** to the British Empire. Each of them knew that if the revolution failed, they would be executed.



If the declaration was passed on July 2, why do we celebrate Independence Day on July 4? That was the day the declaration was printed and released to the public.



## FROM WORDS TO WAR

The American colonies had declared their independence from Britain, but those were just words. Now they had to fight for it, which meant going up against the most powerful kingdom in the world, the British Empire. The British had about 9 million people, while

the Americans only had about 2.5 million. The British had the largest navy and one of the largest armies in the world. The Americans had hardly any navy and only state militias. British soldiers were better trained and better organized than American troops.

The colonial forces were called the Continental Army. They were led by General George Washington, who had gained valuable military experience during the French and Indian War. He knew that the colonies would have to work together to defeat the British. They would

also need help from foreign countries. Until that help came, the American troops had to show some success on their own. This would encourage other countries to get involved in the war.

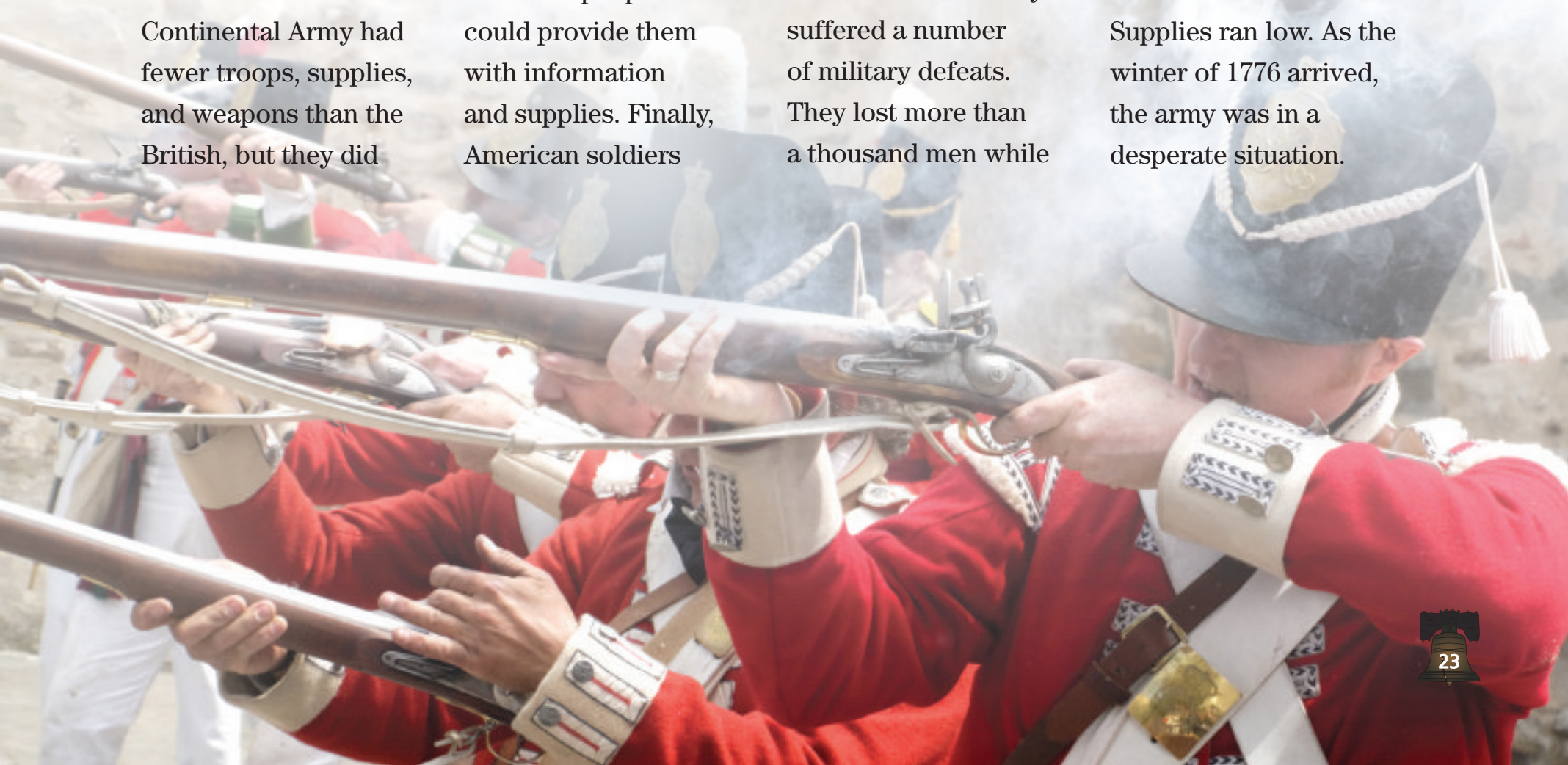
The British could hold any port city they wanted because of their powerful navy. However, America was so big that the British could not hold all the cities at the same time. The Continental Army had fewer troops, supplies, and weapons than the British, but they did

have some advantages. The Americans knew the land they would be fighting on far better than the British. They also had support from the local population. The local people could provide them with information and supplies. Finally, American soldiers

were fighting to defend their freedom, their families, their homes, and their neighbors.

After their early victory at Concord, the Continental Army suffered a number of military defeats. They lost more than a thousand men while

fighting in New York. Washington's troops were forced to retreat to New Jersey. Then they retreated to Pennsylvania, where they set up camp. Many soldiers deserted. Supplies ran low. As the winter of 1776 arrived, the army was in a desperate situation.



Washington decided that bold action was needed. British troops and German **mercenaries** were spending the winter in the nearby town of Trenton, New

Jersey. On the night of December 26, 1776, Washington secretly rowed his army across the Delaware River. Early the next morning, they attacked the British

and German troops. After a short battle, the American forces defeated the British and German soldiers. This was a critical victory for the Continental Army

because it proved that it could beat European forces. American confidence rose, and more colonial men enlisted in the army.





## VICTORY!

Though the battle at Trenton was an important victory for the Continental Army, the war was far from over. The Americans still needed help to defeat the British once and for all. Benjamin Franklin was sent to France, where he was very popular, to convince the French to enter the war on the American side. France's King Louis XVI was not eager to go to war against a powerful country like Great Britain.



However, this changed in the fall of 1777. Washington's army beat the British forces at the Battle of Saratoga in New York. The win was unexpected. The British surrendered, and more than 6,000 soldiers were captured.

When word of the American victory at Saratoga reached King Louis XVI, he summoned Franklin back to France. France would join the war as America's **ally**.

Many historians consider the Battle of Saratoga the turning point in the American Revolution. It was the biggest American military victory up to that point. It convinced the French to come to the aid of the Americans. However, the war would drag on for another four years.



*Surrender at Saratoga*

## Valley Forge

In the winter of 1777–1778, the British were comfortable in Philadelphia while the American army shivered in log cabins just outside of the city. Out of 12,000 soldiers, 2,500 died from disease or the cold. The Americans spent their time drilling and learning fighting skills from Baron Von Steuben,

a German who came to help the Americans. What was important about Valley Forge was that the army stayed together. The following June, the British retreated from Philadelphia to greater safety in New York.



## Yorktown

Battles were fought for several years in the southern colonies. Eventually, British troops traveled along the Chesapeake Bay

to Yorktown, Virginia. Washington quickly marched his army south from New York. Meanwhile, a large French **fleet** sailed

into the bay and defeated a British fleet. In September of 1781, American and French forces trapped the British army in

Yorktown. They held the British under siege for more than a month. Finally, on the morning of October 17, a drummer walked out of Yorktown, followed by a British officer waving a white handkerchief. The British were ready to surrender.



*Surrender at Yorktown*



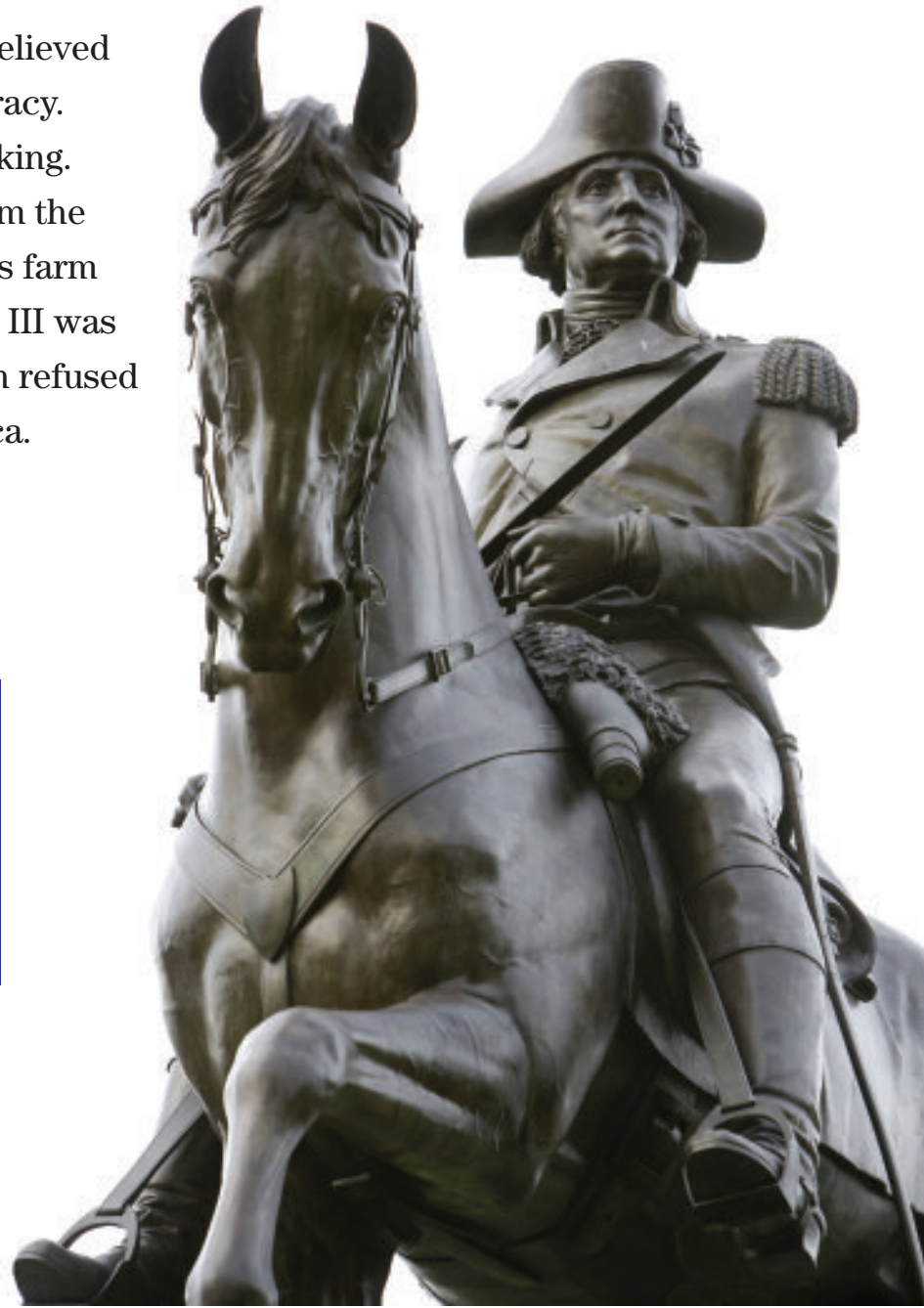
## FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

The Americans won their revolution and the thirteen colonies became thirteen states. They had to come together to form a country. George Washington was a popular leader by the end of the war. He was so popular that he could have been king of America.

However, Washington believed in the **ideals** of democracy. He refused offers to be king. Instead, he resigned from the army and returned to his farm in Virginia. King George III was amazed that Washington refused to be the king of America.

### FACT

Although the British surrendered in 1781, the war wasn't officially over until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783.



The new country needed a **constitution** to define how the American government would operate. In 1787, delegates from each state met in Philadelphia. George Washington was elected to lead the Constitutional Convention. Over the next few months, delegates worked hard to agree on laws for the new United States. Some states would not sign the Constitution until it stated the basic rights of citizens. They added a **Bill of Rights** which secured for all



Americans the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, and other rights that no other country had ever given its people.

The U.S. Constitution was adopted in 1788. It became the supreme law of the land. The next year, Washington was elected as the first

president of the United States of America. The democratic dreams that sparked the American Revolution were coming to life.



## INSPIRATION FOR CHANGE

No country in the world was a democracy before the American Revolution. Common people usually had little say in choosing their leaders or their laws. Most countries were ruled by people who were born into those positions or who took them by force.

The American Revolution served as a model for people in other countries who also wanted freedom. Soon after the revolution, many in France saw that change was possible. They rose up against royalty during the French Revolution. After a long and bloody fight, the French established a democratic form of government. Colonies such as Mexico, Colombia, and Haiti were inspired to fight for independence from Spain and France. For more than two centuries, the American Revolution has inspired people around the world to fight for their freedom.



Though the American Revolution led to greater freedom for many Americans, not all were able to enjoy these new rights. Slavery was still legal in much of the United States. Women did not have the right to vote. It would take decades and another war to end slavery. Women would not win full voting rights until 1920.

The struggle to fulfill the promises of equality and freedom in the Declaration of Independence continued long after the American Revolution ended. However, these ideals serve as a ruler to measure our progress. Throughout our history, Americans have pointed to our founding documents and demanded that we live up to their noble words.



# I HAVE A DREAM

During the fight for civil rights, Martin Luther King, Jr. did just that. Speaking to thousands from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, he quoted from the Declaration of Independence:



*I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this Nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—"we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..."*



## GLOSSARY

**ally:** A person or group that works with others for a common purpose.

---

**Bill of Rights:** Part of the U.S. Constitution that guarantees Americans the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, and other rights.

---

**blockade:** Action to prevent goods or people from entering or leaving a place.

---

**colonists:** People who live in a colony.

---

**colony:** A settlement in one country controlled by another country.

---

**common:** Piece of open public land in a town or city.

---

**constitution:** A written statement of the basic laws of a country.

---

**delegates:** People chosen to act for others.

---

**economy:** A community's production and exchange of goods and services.

---

**empire:** A group of nations or peoples ruled by a single government. An empire usually controls colonies or countries far from its home.

---

**fleet:** Group of ships.

---

**ideals:** Ideas of how things should be; values.

---

**Loyalists:** Colonists who stayed loyal to Great Britain.

---

**mercenaries:** Soldiers paid to fight for a country that is not their own.

---

**militia:** Citizens who are trained to fight but are not professional soldiers.

---

**New World:** Regions in the western hemisphere, including North America, South America, and the Caribbean islands.

---

**Patriots:** Colonists who wanted freedom from Great Britain.

---

**port:** City or town where ships load and unload.

---

**ragtag:** Insulting term for common people.

---

**rebellion:** Attempt to overthrow a government.

---

**retreated:** Moved back or away from a place, especially after losing a battle.

---

**revolution:** Overthrowing a political system or government by force.

---

**rights:** What people are allowed to have due to nature or law, for example, the right to vote or the right to free speech.

---

**settlements:** Small communities built in a new land.

---

**traitors:** People who are disloyal to their country.

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