

## Revolutionary War Battles

The American Revolutionary War, spanning from 1775 to 1783, was a pivotal conflict that shaped the course of human events and led to American independence. With 165 principal engagements, this war was not just about military might but about ideas and ideals that laid the foundation for the nation's independence. **Most engagements, large and small, during the American Revolution took place in the Thirteen Colonies in revolt, a few in Canada, and some notable encounters at sea.** The first engagement of the war, **at Lexington and Concord**, occurred before the Americans even had an official army or commander-in-chief. The colonials, who had hoped to avoid war, found themselves pushed into it. A shot rang out at Lexington, fired by an unknown person, and the war began almost as an accident. The war ended six years later at Yorktown, not with a great battle, but rather with the ultimate surrender of the British who found themselves in a natural trap.

- **Military Focus Areas:** Early in the war, the area **around Boston and New York** were the focus of the military efforts. But after three years of fighting, the British had made no great progress against George Washington and his Continental Army. Indeed, Washington's army had grown into a stronger, more cohesive force as they gained experience with each battle. The British turned their attention to the South in what is known as the "Southern Strategy," where they hoped that a combination of British and Loyalist forces together would be able to make headway in the war effort that had not been possible in the North.

## Major Engagements

- **Battle of Lexington and Concord:** The first shots of the war were fired here, marking the beginning of the conflict as British troops clashed with American Minutemen.
- **Siege of Boston:** George Washington's leadership secured American victory at Boston, setting the stage for further battles.
- **Battle of Trenton:** Washington's daring victory here in 1776 boosted American morale after significant defeats.
- **Saratoga:** A turning point in 1777, where American forces surrounded and defeated the British army under General Burgoyne.
- **Southern Campaign:** The British shifted focus to the South in 1778, leading to battles like Camden, Kings Mountain, and Cowpens.

- **Yorktown:** The decisive battle in 1781 where a combined French and American force led by Washington forced Cornwallis to surrender, effectively ending the war

### **Some key figures involved in the American Revolution**

- **George Washington:** A military commander, politician, and Founding Father who led the Continental Army to victory in the American Revolutionary War and served as the first President of the United States
- **Benjamin Franklin:** A Founding Father, drafter and signer of the Declaration of Independence, and a key figure in establishing friendly Franco-American ties during the Revolution
- **Patrick Henry:** Remembered for his famous declaration "Give me liberty, or give me death!" at the Second Virginia Convention, he served as Virginia's first post-colonial governor
- **Marquis de Lafayette:** A French nobleman and military commander who played a crucial role in the American Revolutionary War, leading American forces in engagements like the siege of Yorktown
- **Crispus Attucks:** An African and Native American whaler who fell as the first casualty of the Revolutionary War, becoming a pivotal figure in urging American colonists to break free from British rule
- **Thomas Paine:** Known for his influential pamphlet "Common Sense," which outlined reasons for America to break with Britain, exerting significant influence over both the American and French Revolutions

These individuals, among others like Alexander Hamilton, Samuel Adams, and Benedict Arnold, played essential roles in shaping the course of the American Revolution and its ultimate success in gaining independence from British rule.

### **Political Implications of the War**

- The American Revolution had profound political implications that reshaped the course of history. The revolution marked a shift towards republican ideals and the establishment of a government dedicated to the interests of ordinary people rather than monarchs and aristocrats
- It set a precedent for democratic governance, emphasizing individual rights, the rule of law, and limited government. The Declaration of Independence and the United States

Constitution laid the foundation for American democracy, influencing global movements for independence and serving as a touchstone for discussions on citizenship, civil liberties, and political participation

### **Impact on Society:**

- The American Revolution had a significant impact on society, bringing about transformative changes that reverberated through American life. The revolution saw the dawn of an organized abolitionist movement, sweeping away English traditions like land inheritance laws and dismantling the Anglican Church in America.
- ❖ While slavery was not abolished immediately, the revolution sparked changes in attitudes towards women's rights, religious life, voting, and social classes. States experimented with republican ideas in their constitutions during the war, leading to long-lasting shifts in American society before the nineteenth century.

### **Legacy of the American Revolutionary War**

The legacy of the American Revolution is enduring and multifaceted. It established a democratic republic with a system of checks and balances, committed to individual rights and freedoms. The revolution's ideals continue to inspire political discourse, activism, and advocacy for social justice in contemporary America. Internationally, it influenced other independence movements and contributed to the emergence of the United States as a global player. Despite challenges like the treatment of Loyalists, relationships with Native Americans, slavery, and women's rights struggles, the revolution's legacy remains a testament to the enduring power of revolutionary ideas and the ability of determined individuals to shape their destiny.

### **Philosophical Foundations of the American Revolution**

For Americans, especially those who were in positions of leadership, there was a long tradition of loyalty to the king and England. As the differences between them grew, many Americans searched for an explanation and justification for this changing relationship.

#### ➤ **The Enlightenment**

In the 18th century, some educated Americans were attracted to a European movement in literature and philosophy that is known as the Enlightenment. The leaders of this movement

believed that the “darkness” of past ages could be corrected by the use of human reason in solving most of humanity’s problems. A major influence on the Enlightenment and on American thinking was the work of John Locke, a 17th-century English philosopher and political theorist. Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, reasoned that while the state (the government) is supreme, it is bound to follow “natural laws” based on the rights that people have simply because they are human. He argued that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people rather than with the state. Furthermore, said Locke, citizens had a right and an obligation to revolt against whatever government failed to protect their rights. Other Enlightenment philosophers adopted and expounded on Locke’s ideas. His stress on natural rights would provide a rationale for the American Revolution and later for the basic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

➤ **Other ideas of the Enlightenment**

The era of the Enlightenment was at its peak in the mid- 18th century—the very years that future leaders of the American Revolution (Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams) were coming to maturity. Many of these Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and America were Deists, who believed that God had established natural laws in creating the universe, but that the role of divine intervention in human affairs was minimal. They believed in rationalism and trusted human reason to solve the many problems of life and society, and emphasized reason, science, and respect for humanity. Their political philosophy, derived from Locke and developed further by the French philosopher Jean- Jacques Rousseau, had a profound influence on educated Americans in the 1760s and 1770s—the decades of revolutionary thought and action that finally culminated in the American Revolution.

**The War**

From the first shots fired on Lexington green in 1775 to the final signing of a peace treaty in 1783, the American War for Independence, or Revolutionary War, was a long and bitter struggle. Americans not only fought a war during this period but also forged a new national

identity, as the former colonies became the United States of America. Some 2.6 million people lived in the 13 colonies or states during the war. An estimated 40 percent of the population joined actively in the struggle against Britain. They called themselves American Patriots. A smaller number, 20–30 percent, sided with the British as Loyalists, while the rest tried to remain neutral and uninvolved.

- **Patriots:** The largest number of Patriots was from the New England states and Virginia. Most of the soldiers were reluctant to travel outside their own region. They would serve in local militia units for short periods, leave to work their farms, and then return to duty. Thus, even though several hundred thousand people fought on the Patriot side in the war, General Washington never had more than 20,000 regular troops under his command at one time. His army was chronically short of supplies, poorly equipped, and rarely paid. African Americans: Initially, George Washington rejected the idea of African Americans serving in the Patriot army. But when the British promised freedom to slaves who joined their side, Washington and the congress quickly made the same offer. Approximately 5,000 African Americans fought as Patriots. Most of them were freemen from the North, who fought in mixed racial forces, although there were some all-African-American units. African Americans took part in most of the military actions of the war, and a number, including Peter Salem, were recognized for their bravery.

• **Loyalists/Tories:** The Revolutionary War was in some respects a civil war in which anti-British Patriots fought pro-British Loyalists. Those who maintained their allegiance to the king were also called Tories (after the majority party in Parliament). Almost 60,000 American Tories fought and died next to British soldiers, supplied them with arms and food, and joined in raiding parties that pillaged Patriot homes and farms. Members of the same family sometimes joined opposite sides. While Benjamin Franklin was a leading patriot, for example,

his son William Franklin joined the Tories and served during the war as the last royal governor of New Jersey.

**How many American Tories were there?** Estimates range from 520,000–780,000 people. In New York, New Jersey, and Georgia, they were probably in the majority. Toward the end of the war, about 80,000 Loyalists emigrated from the states to settle in Canada or Britain rather than face persecution at the hands of the victorious Patriots. Social background. Although Loyalists came from all groups and classes, the majority tended to be wealthier and more conservative than the Patriots. Most government officials and Anglican clergymen in America remained loyal to the crown.

**Native Americans:** At first, the Native Americans tried to stay out of the war. Eventually, however, attacks by Americans moved many Native Americans to support the British, who promised to limit colonial settlements in the West.

#### **Initial American Losses and Hardships**

The first three years of the war, 1775 to 1777, went badly for Washington's poorly trained and equipped revolutionary army. It barely escaped complete disaster in a battle for New York City in 1776, in which Washington's forces were routed by the British. By the end of 1777, the British occupied both New York and Philadelphia. After losing Philadelphia, Washington's demoralized troops suffered through the severe winter of 1777–1778 camped at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. Economic troubles added to the Patriots' bleak prospects. British occupation of American ports resulted in a 95 percent decline in trade between 1775 and 1777. Goods were scarce, and inflation was rampant. The paper money issued by Congress, known as Continentals, became almost worthless.

#### **Alliance with France**

The few American military achievements early in the war had little impact on other nations. The turning point for the American revolutionaries came with a victory at Saratoga in upstate New York in October 1777. British forces under General John Burgoyne had marched from Canada in an ambitious effort to link up with other forces marching from the west and south.

Their objective was to cut off New England from the rest of the colonies (or states). But Burgoyne's troops were attacked at Saratoga by troops commanded by American generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold. The British army was forced to surrender.

The diplomatic outcome of the Battle of Saratoga was even more important than the military result. News of the surprising American victory persuaded France to join in the war against Britain. An absolute monarch, with all political power, Louis XVI had no interest in aiding a revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, the French king believed that he could weaken his country's traditional foe, Great Britain, by helping to undermine its colonial empire. France had secretly extended aid to the American revolutionaries as early as 1775, giving both money and supplies. After Saratoga, in 1778, France openly allied itself with the Americans. (A year later, Spain and Holland also entered the war against Britain.) The French alliance proved a decisive factor in the American struggle for independence because it widened the war and forced the British to divert military resources away from America.

### Victory

Faced with a larger war, Britain decided to consolidate its forces in America. British troops were pulled out of Philadelphia, and New York became the chief base of British operations. In a campaign through 1778–1779, the Patriots, led by George Rogers Clark, captured a series of British forts in the Illinois country to gain control of parts of the vast Ohio territory. In 1780, the British army adopted a southern strategy, concentrating its military campaigns in Virginia and the Carolinas where Loyalists were especially numerous and active.

Yorktown: In 1781, the last major battle of the Revolutionary War was fought near Yorktown, Virginia, on the shores of Chesapeake Bay. Strongly supported by French naval and military forces, Washington's army forced the surrender of a large British army commanded by General Charles Cornwallis.

**Treaty of Paris:** In London, news of Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown came as a heavy blow to the Tory party in Parliament that was responsible for conducting the war. The war had become increasingly unpopular in England, partly because it placed a heavy strain on the

British economy and the government's finances. Lord North and other Tory ministers resigned and were replaced by leaders of the Whig party who wanted to end the war.

In Paris, in 1783, a treaty of peace was finally signed by the various belligerents. The Treaty of Paris provided for the following: (1) Britain would recognize the existence of the United States as an independent nation. (2) The Mississippi River would be the western boundary of that nation. (3) Americans would have fishing rights off the coast of Canada. (4) Americans would pay debts owed to British merchants and honor Loyalist claims for property confiscated during the war.

### Organization of New Governments

While the Revolutionary War was being fought, leaders of the 13 colonies worked to change them into independently governed states, each with its own constitution (written plan of government). At the same time, the revolutionary Congress that originally met in Philadelphia tried to define the powers of a new central government for the nation that was coming into being.

### State Governments

By 1777, ten of the former colonies had written new constitutions. Most of these documents were both written and adopted by the states' legislatures. In a few of the states (Maryland, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina), a proposed constitution was submitted to a vote of the people for ratification (approval). Each state constitution was the subject of heated debate between conservatives, who stressed the need for law and order, and liberals, who were most concerned about protecting individual rights and preventing future tyrannies. Although the various constitutions differed on specific points, they had the following features in common:

**List of rights:** Each state constitution began with a "bill" or "declaration" listing the basic rights and freedoms, such as a jury trial and freedom of religion, that belonged to all citizens by right and that state officials could not infringe (encroach on).

**Separation of powers:** With a few exceptions, the powers of state government were given to three separate branches: (1) legislative powers to an elected two-house legislature, (2)



executive powers to an elected governor, and (3) judicial powers to a system of courts. The principle of separation of powers was intended to be a safeguard against tyranny—especially against the tyranny of an over powerful executive.

Voting: The right to vote was extended to all white males who owned some property. The property requirement, usually for a minimal amount of land or money, was based on the assumption that property-owners had a larger stake in government than did the poor and property less.

**Office-holding:** Those seeking elected office were usually held to a higher property qualification than the voters.