

1775-1783: The American Revolution

*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.*

The struggle by which the **Thirteen Colonies** on the Atlantic seaboard of North America won independence from Great Britain and became the United States. It is also called the American War of Independence.

The "shot heard round the world" fired at **Lexington** on April 19, 1775 began the war for American Independence. It ended eight and a half years later September 3, 1783 with the **Treaty of Paris**.

The Thirteen Colonies

The term used for the colonies of British North America that joined together in the American Revolution against the mother country, adopted the **Declaration of Independence** in 1776, and became the United States. They were **New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia**. They are also called the Thirteen Original States.

Causes and Early Troubles

By the middle of the 18th century, differences in life, thought, and interests had developed between the mother country and the growing colonies. Local political institutions and practice diverged significantly from English ways, while social customs, religious beliefs, and economic interests added to the potential sources of conflict. The British government, like other imperial powers in the 18th century, favoured a policy of **mercantilism**; the Navigation Acts were intended to regulate commerce in the British interest. These were only loosely enforced, however, and the colonies were by and large allowed to develop freely with little interference from England.

Conditions changed abruptly in 1763. The Treaty of Paris in that year ended the French and Indian Wars and removed a long-standing threat to the colonies. At the same time the ministry (1763-65) of George Grenville in Great Britain undertook a new colonial policy intended to tighten political control over the colonies and to make them pay for their defense and return revenue to the mother country. The tax levied on molasses and sugar in 1764 caused some consternation among New England merchants and makers of rum; the tax itself was smaller than the one already on the books, but the promise of stringent enforcement was novel and ominous.

War's Outbreak

Before Congress met again the situation had changed. On the morning of April 19, 1775, shots had been exchanged by colonials and British soldiers, men had been killed, and a revolution had begun. On the very day (May 10, 1775) that the **Second Continental Congress** met, Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys, together with a force under Benedict Arnold, took Fort Ticonderoga from the British, and two days later Seth Warner captured Crown Point. **Boston** was under British siege, and before that siege was climaxed by the costly British victory usually called the battle of **Bunker Hill** (June 17, 1775) the Congress had chosen (June 15, 1775) **George Washington** as commander in chief of the **Continental Armed Forces**.

Indecision and Declaration

The war was on in earnest. Some delegates had come to the Congress already committed to declaring the colonies independent of Great Britain, but even many stalwart upholders of the colonial cause were not ready to take such a step. The lines were being more clearly drawn between the pro-British Loyalists and colonial revolutionists. The time was one of indecision, and the division of the people was symbolized by the split between **Benjamin Franklin** and his Loyalist son, **William Franklin**.

Loyalists were numerous and included small farmers as well as large landowners, royal officeholders, and members of the professions; they were to be found in varying strength in every colony. A large part of the population was more or less neutral, swaying to this side or that or else remaining inert in the struggle, which was to some extent a civil war. So it was to remain to the end.

Civil government and administration had fallen apart and had to be patched together locally. In some places the result was bloody strife, as in the partisan raids in the Carolinas and Georgia and the **Mohawk Valley** massacre in New York. Elsewhere hostility did not produce open struggles.

In Jan., 1776, **Thomas Paine** wrote a pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which urged the colonial cause. Its influence was tremendous, and it was read everywhere with enthusiastic acclaim. Militarily, however, the cause did not prosper greatly. Delegations to the Canadians had been unsuccessful, and the Quebec campaign (1775-76) ended in disaster. The British gave up Boston in March, 1776, but the prospects were still not good for the ill-trained, poorly armed volunteer soldiers of the Continental Army when the Congress decided finally to declare the independence of the Thirteen Colonies.

The Declaration of Independence is conventionally dated July 4, 1776. Drawn up by Thomas Jefferson (with slight emendations), it was to be one of the great historical documents of all time. It did not, however, have any immediate positive effect.

The British under **Gen. William Howe** and his brother, Admiral Richard Howe, came to New York harbour. After vain attempts to negotiate a peace, the British forces struck. Washington lost Brooklyn Heights, retreated northward, was defeated at Harlem Heights in Manhattan and at White Plains, and took part of his dwindling army into New Jersey. Thomas Paine in a new pamphlet, *The Crisis*, exhorted the revolutionists to courage in desperate days, and Washington showed his increasing military skill and helped to restore colonial spirits in the winter of 1776-77 by crossing the ice-ridden Delaware and winning small victories over forces made up mostly of Hessian mercenaries at Trenton (Dec. 26) and Princeton (Jan. 3).

Foreign Assistance

The warfare in the Middle Atlantic region settled almost to stagnation, but foreign aid was finally arriving. Agents of the new nation notably Benjamin Franklin, Arthur Lee, Silas Deane, and later John Adams were striving to get help, and in 1777 Pierre de Beaumarchais had succeeded in getting arms and supplies sent to the colonials in time to help win the battle of Saratoga. That victory made it easier for France to enter upon an alliance with the United States, for which Franklin and the comte de Vergennes (the French foreign minister) signed (1778) a treaty. **Spain** entered the war against Great Britain in 1779, but Spanish help did little for the United States, while **French soldiers** and sailors and especially French supplies and money were of crucial importance.

Aftermath

The Treaty of Paris formally recognized the new nation in **1783**, although many questions were left unsettled. The United States was floundering through a post-war depression and seeking not too successfully to meet its administrative problems under the **Articles of Confederation**.

The leaders in the new country were those prominent either in the council halls or on the fields of the Revolution, and the first three Presidents after the Constitution of the United States was adopted were **Washington, Adams, and Jefferson**. Some of the more radical Revolutionary leaders were disappointed in the turn toward conservatism when the Revolution was over, but **liberty** and **democracy** had been fixed as the highest ideals of the United States.

The American Revolution had a great influence on liberal thought throughout Europe. The struggles and successes of the youthful democracy were much in the minds of those who brought about the French Revolution, and most assuredly later helped to inspire revolutionists in Spain's American colonies.