

# Revolutionary War

April 19, 1775, marked the end of an era. At dawn that day, British troops fired on American colonists in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. This was the beginning of the American Revolution. The war started as a fight for the rights of English people in Britain's 13 American colonies. But those people soon declared—and won—their independence from Britain. They created a new nation—the United States of America.

## The Founders

Many people made American independence possible. A group of them are known as the founders of the United States. The best known are George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton.

George Washington led the American military forces—the Continental Army—to victory over the British. He later became the first president of the United States. John Adams was the strongest supporter of American independence. He became the first vice president of the United States and its second president. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Americans' Declaration of Independence. He became the nation's third president.

Benjamin Franklin was the oldest of the founders. He was 70 when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Franklin helped get France to become an ally of the United States. Both during and after the Revolution, Alexander Hamilton urged Americans to form a stronger union of the states.

## Events Leading to the Revolution

Britain established its first colony in North America in 1607. By the early 1760s, there were 13 colonies. These were Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Virginia. About 1.5 million colonists lived there. The colonies were far away from Britain, and they were used to running their own affairs. Each had its own assembly. They ran the everyday business of the colonies and collected taxes. Britain rarely taxed the Americans.

The French and Indian War (1754–63) changed that. Britain won that war against France. But the war was costly, and Britain owed a lot of money. Britain also needed money to keep up its army in North America. The British government therefore decided to tax the Americans.

## Colonial Opposition

The British Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765. It taxed newspapers and almost everything else that was printed. This angered the colonists. Why, they asked, should we pay taxes to Britain?

The colonists decided to fight against the taxes. Representatives of nine of the colonies met in New York in 1765. They formed the Stamp Act Congress. It said the colonists should boycott (refuse to buy) British goods. Groups called the Sons of Liberty also fought against British taxes. They often used violence against British tax collectors.

The colonists' opposition forced Parliament to repeal (withdraw) the Stamp Act. This made the colonists aware of their power. Other British attempts to impose new taxes only made things worse.

Boston was the center of opposition to Britain's tax policies. In 1770, a raggedy crowd of people taunted some British soldiers. The frightened soldiers shot into the crowd, killing five Americans. The Boston Massacre, as it was called, led to a new boycott.

Parliament again gave in. It removed all taxes except for one on tea, the most popular drink in the colonies. The Americans were outraged. On the night of December 16, 1773, a group of men boarded British ships in Boston harbor. They threw the cargoes of tea overboard. This action became known as the Boston Tea Party.

The British Parliament then passed four harsh measures in 1774. The colonists called them the Intolerable Acts. The acts closed the port of Boston. They took away many of Massachusetts' rights of self-government. And they allowed British troops to be housed in private homes.

These measures only served to unite the colonists. More and more of them felt that their basic liberties were at stake. In 1774, representatives of all the colonies except Georgia met in Philadelphia at the First Continental Congress. They tried to get Britain to resolve the issues peacefully. But they were ready to fight if it became necessary.

## **War and Independence**

The American Revolution is also called the Revolutionary War and the American War of Independence. The first shots of that war were fired on April 19, 1775. British troops were in Lexington, Massachusetts, searching for hidden arms. Waiting for the British were 77 minutemen. They were colonists who were trained to be "ready in a minute." No one knows who fired first. But eight Americans were killed. That same day, British and American soldiers fought again at nearby Concord. The news spread through the colonies, which quickly prepared for war.

But not all colonists were ready for a complete break with Britain. Hundreds of thousands were still loyal to Britain and its king. They opposed independence. They were known as Loyalists or Tories. Hundreds of thousands of other colonists were neutral. They were not sure if they wanted a complete break with Britain.

The question of independence was finally decided at the Second Continental Congress. That Congress began in Philadelphia on May 1775, the month after the fighting started. At first, the delegates were just as divided as the rest of the colonists. They debated the issue for more than a year. Finally, the delegates adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. It declared that the 13 colonies were "free and independent states."

The Congress decided to create a Continental Army, and it picked George Washington to lead it. In addition, it adopted the Articles of Confederation. This created a confederation, or loose union, of the 13 states. The Articles also set up a legislature called the Congress of the Confederation. The Congress was the central government of the Confederation.

## **Boston and New York**

In the early part of the war, most of the British troops were in Boston. In March 1776, Washington moved cannons onto the hills above Boston. General William Howe, the British commander, saw the threat to his troops. He pulled them out of Boston in June. Washington had his first victory.

Howe sailed to New York. Washington met him there, on Long Island. He had 19,000 troops. But they had no experience. They were poorly armed, too. The British had many more soldiers. They pushed Washington and his troops into New York City. Then they pushed them across the Hudson River to New Jersey. Washington was forced to retreat across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania. Then Washington struck back.

## **Successes at Trenton and Saratoga**

On Christmas night, 1776, Washington crossed the Delaware River and attacked Trenton, New Jersey. Hessian troops were stationed there. They were German soldiers who were paid to fight for Britain. Washington quickly defeated them. That victory was followed by another one at Princeton. The British left New Jersey.

In 1777, American troops under General Horatio Gates captured a whole British army at Saratoga, New York. This was the turning point of the war. It showed France that the Americans could defeat Britain, France's enemy. France recognized the independence of the United States. And it entered the war as America's ally.

## Victory at Yorktown and Peace

Starting in 1778, the British focused their efforts on the southern colonies. In the Carolinas and Virginia, British general Charles Cornwallis defeated the Americans in one battle after another. The situation there seemed hopeless.

Then the French came to the rescue. General Rochambeau and some 5,000 French troops arrived in 1780. And a French fleet arrived in 1781.

At that time, General Cornwallis had an army of more than 6,000 British troops at Yorktown, Virginia. Washington led his American and French troops there. For the first time in the war, Washington had a larger military force than the British. The French fleet forced a British fleet to leave. Cornwallis was now surrounded on land and blockaded by sea. Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781.

Yorktown was the last major battle of the war. Peace talks began in Paris, France, in 1782. The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. The new nation had been tested on the battlefield. Now the war was over. For the first time, Britain recognized the United States of America as an independent country.

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