American Revolution

Events of the American Revolution

On July 4, 1776, representatives from 13 of Britain's North American colonies met in Philadelphia and approved a document meant to end their relationship to the British king. The *Declaration of Independence* boldly declared a set of "self-evident" truths that included the universal equality of all men,[1] the existence of natural rights, and the duty of oppressed people to overthrow tyrannical governments. It included a long and detailed list of the ways in which King George III failed to uphold the equality, liberty, and rights of his subjects across the Atlantic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence felt so strongly about these principles they were willing to risk going to war against the strongest military on earth.

1. The document meant "men" in a universal sense, but in a practical sense as well. Women in the United States were not granted full political rights until 1920. The signers of the document, most of whom were slaveholders, did not extend these rights to the enslaved either. It took a civil war and a civil rights movement to do that, and some argue that access to such rights remains unequal today.

American Revolution

Events of the American Revolution

Primary Source: *Declaration of Independence* (1776)

Legacy of the American Revolution

Painting of the drafting of the Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull, 1819

The anger expressed in the Declaration had been building in the colonies for more than a decade. Britain thought the colonists should help pay some of the debts incurred while fighting alongside Britain's Native American allies in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) against the French and their Native American allies. Britain's Parliament restricted trade and instituted new taxes on sugar, tea, and official documents. The North American colonists were furious at being treated differently from fellow-citizens living in Britain and being subject to taxes to which they did not directly consent.

Riots broke out across the colonies, but especially in Boston, where in December 1773 an angry mob attacked a merchant ship and dumped tea into the harbor. The British government sent two army regiments to Boston, which only inflamed tensions as Britain clamped down harder, leading to more violations of what the colonists considered to be their natural rights, and their political rights as British citizens. British naval ships moved into New York Harbor and sailed up the Delaware River to Philadelphia. Though 15–20% of colonists remained loyal to Britain, the majority began to feel that becoming independent was the only reasonable way forward.

Map of the American War of Independence, 1775-1783

The Continental Congress commissioned General George Washington, a Virginia plantation owner and veteran of the Seven Years' War, to lead the Continental Army. Washington's troops were poorly trained and poorly equipped volunteers with little military experience, expected to defend the entire Atlantic seaboard against the disciplined, professional soldiers and sailors of the British military. Washington tried to avoid battles, which his troops nearly always lost. Instead, he fought a guerilla campaign with raids on British positions while he tried to keep his army together and sought help from Britain's rivals elsewhere. Washington's most useful ally was a young French nobleman, Gilbert du Motier, the marquis de Lafayette, who fought alongside him and served as a liaison to the French monarchy, which provided money, weaponry, and engineering expertise. Washington finally defeated the British at Yorktown, Virginia in the fall of 1781. The Continental Army together with regiments and ships sent by France managed to trap the British in a swamp, where they surrendered. Two years later,

Britain signed the Treaty of Paris (1783), officially ending the war and confirming the independence of the new United States of America.

Depiction of the the British defeat at Yorktown

Having secured their independence, the colonists had to decide how to proceed. They wanted to create a government based on the principles expressed in the *Declaration of Independence* while preserving the political institutions and social traditions developed through their colonial legislatures. This meant that political participation was limited to men of property: all women, enslaved Blacks, poor whites, and Native Americans had no say in their government. It also meant that the independent states were reluctant to give up any of their sovereignty to a central government. It still took a lot of negotiation to ensure that small states would not be crushed by large states and the institution of slavery would be preserved. The Constitutional Convention presented a finalized plan for a new governing order to the states on September 17, 1787. By March 9, 1789, all but two states had ratified the proposed constitution, and it went into effect. George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States on April 30 of that year.

Though the new United States constitution laid out the functions of each branch of government and the procedures of governing, many people were concerned that it did not explicitly enumerate and protect the rights for which the Revolutionary War had been fought. One of the first tasks of the new government was to create a Bill of Rights to amend to the new constitution. Twelve amendments were proposed; the states rejected the first two, which addressed the number of representatives to Congress and their financial compensation. By December 1791, the requisite three-fourths of states had approved the remaining ten amendments. This established a set of rights guaranteed to citizens of the United States and limiting the powers of the government to infringe on citizen's liberties. Of course, who counted as a citizen remained remarkably limited, as mass enslavement, the disenfranchisement of women, and voting restrictions based on property all remained in effect.

A Bill of Rights

as provided in the Ten Original Amendments to

The Constitution of the United States

in force December 15, 1791

Article I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Article II

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Article III

No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Article IV

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Article V

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any Criminal Case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Article VI

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining Witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

Article VII

In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury shall be otherwise re-examined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Article VIII

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Article IX

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Article X

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

1950 rendition of the United States Bill of Rights, which went into effect December 15, 1791

Primary Source: Declaration of Independence (1776)

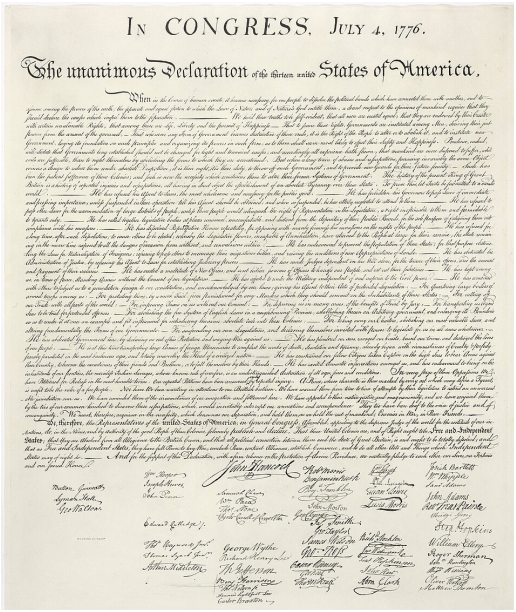
The Declaration of Independence *claims that rights are natural, unalienable, and self-evident. Then it lists specific things King George III ("he") has done wrong to justify the colonies breaking away from Britain. You may have read this document before, in whole or in part, or heard about it.*

- *What do you see that you were not expecting, that you forgot was part of this document, or that does not seem to fit what you remembered the American Revolution was about?*
- *The* Declaration of Independence *supported equality and liberty of all and opposed tyranny. But those terms can mean many things to many people. What types of freedom most concerned its signers and what types did they not discuss?*

Source: "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," America's Founding Documents, National Archives, last reviewed March 4, 2025, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript

In Congress, July 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America


IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

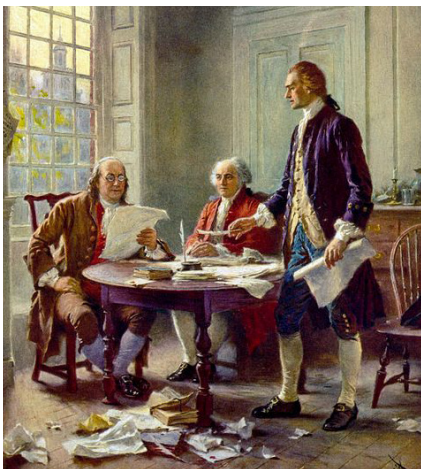
The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

United States Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.



Painting of the writing of the Declaration of Independence by Jean Leon George Ferris, c. 1932

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

Independence Hall Assembly Room, where the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

Depiction of Bostonians tarring and feathering a tax man by Philip Dawe, 1744

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Painting of revolutionaries pulling down a statue of King George III, c. 1852

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Legacy of the American Revolution

Portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, 1796

After the Revolutionary War, many colonists wanted George Washington to become America's king. Washington rejected this idea and instead negotiated a constitution with an elected president with limited powers. He then modeled the peaceful transition of power when he voluntarily stepped down as president after two terms of office. Even after Washington finally retired to his plantation in Virginia in 1796, he continued to serve as a powerful symbol of both the Revolutionary War and the creation of the United States Constitution. In Washington's farewell address, which was printed and widely distributed, he reflected on his imperfections and asked that his "faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be." Though any failures Washington experienced were quickly forgotten, the man himself was not. He was being called "the Father of the Country" even before he died in late 1799. Some even referred to Washington as a godlike figure.[2] Over the next century, George Washington's name and image became a representation of all the new United States of America aspired to be, especially in the years following the Civil War (1861–1865). In 1869, Washington's face was put on the dollar bill. In 1879, Congress declared his birthday a federal holiday. In 1885, the Washington Monument was dedicated; at the time, it was the tallest structure in the world.

Arrival of Lafayette at Castle Garden, New York on August 16, 1824

Decades after Washington's death, President James Monroe invited the Marquis de Lafayette to tour the United States in advance of the 50th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution. Incredibly, Lafayette was only a teenager when he first sailed from France to fight with the Continental Army. Between the fall of 1824 and the spring of 1825, Lafayette visited all of the 24 states that were then part of the United States, accompanied by his son, named Georges Washington de Lafayette. The Marquis de Lafayette received a hero's welcome everywhere he went, met with parades and speeches and celebrations as a living memorial to the American Revolution. Many towns erected statues or plaques in Lafayette's honor, since so many people were thankful for the support he and his troops had provided for the revolutionary armies. Later in the 19th century, however, Lafayette's fame dramatically declined, as other aspects of the revolution became more central to American memory culture.

2. John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Oxford University Press, 1988), xviii–xix.

Memorial to Prince Estabrook, the first Black casualty of the Revolutionary war, wounded at the Battle of Lexington and Concord

Starting around the time of the centennial celebration of the American Revolution in 1876, the United States also began seeing a massive increase in immigration from places in Europe like Germany, Ireland, Italy, and the Russian Empire (including Poland). Often facing anti-immigrant discrimination, these new immigrants wanted to present themselves and their ancestors in the story of America's founding. They began supporting the construction of statues and memorials to honor Polish-born soldiers Casimir Pulaski and Thaddeus Kosciusko, for instance, who fought alongside George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette in the revolution. During this time, Italian-born immigrants and Italian-Americans also supported the celebration of Christopher Columbus for his role in starting a tradition of European colonization of and migration to the Americas.

It was only during and after the Civil Rights Movement, especially in the 1960s, that the important contributions of Black people to the American Revolution began to be emphasized as well. For example, around 1,000 free Black and mixed-race soldiers had come from Haiti to support the American colonists' fight for independence. The first monument dedicated to their contributions to the revolution was dedicated in Savanna, Georgia, in 2008. Many Black Americans, both enslaved and free, joined the revolutionary war in hopes that the language about liberty and equality would eventually apply to them. They ended the war disappointed. Since then, a number of memorials to Black Americans' contributions to the American revolution have been established, including one in Portsmouth, Rhode Island for the bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976 and one in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania from 1993.

Memorial to Les Chasseurs-Volontaires de Saint-Domingue in Franklin Square, Savannah, Georgia (top); Sybil Ludington stamp, issued in 1975 (bottom)

The bicentennial in 1976 also coincided with a resurgence of feminism—sometimes called "second wave feminism," which included an increased interest in women's contributions to United States history. Women who directly participated in the American Revolution received increased attention in America's monument landscape. Margaret Corbin, for instance, who fought alongside her husband at the assault on Fort Washington in 1776 and received a soldier's pension for the injuries she sustained. In 1976, the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, established the Margaret Corbin Forum to educate cadets about women's roles in the American military as the first women joined the Corps of Cadets that same year. The "female Paul Revere" Sybil Ludington jumped on a horse to warn the colonial militia

Monument to Margaret Corbin in Fort Tryon Park

of a British advance in 1777. In 1975, the United States Postal Service commemorated Ludington with a commemorative stamp for the bicentenary. Mary Ludwig Hayes, aka Molly Pitcher, brought water to Continental soldiers at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778 then took over her wounded husband's position to fire artillery at the oncoming British. A memorial commemorating Corbin from 1982 stands in Fort Tryon Park in New York City. Historian Kieran O'Keefe, who has studied American Revolution monuments, found that memorials honoring these women, along with those that recognize the contributions of Black and immigrant fighters, share themes with earlier monuments. "From 1776 to the present," O'Keefe writes, "these monuments have consistently emphasized unity, patriotism, freedom, and sacrifice."[3] Of course, such united messages mask deep disparities in the actual history of colonial and early American life.

Molly Pitcher, a participant in the Revolution, loading a cannon in the Battle of Monmouth

In recent years, scholars and others have recognized George Washington and other leading figures of the American Revolution as complicated figures who did not always live up to the high ideals they espoused. George Washington was a slaveholder throughout his life, freeing the enslaved people at his estate of Mount Vernon only after his death. Some historians have also studied Washington's view of Native Americans, including how he believed they should assimilate into white American culture and make room for the further expansion of white settlers to the west; those who resisted could justifiably be destroyed. Some historical monuments dedicated to George Washington and the American Revolution have attempted to include this complicated legacy. For example, Independence Hall in Philadelphia has marked the location of slave quarters, and Washington's home of Mount Vernon tells the story of the enslaved Black people who lived and worked there. Still, there have also been calls for the removal of memorials to Washington and institutions bearing his name due to his racist and inhumane treatment of Native Americans and enslaved African Americans. At the end of this module, you might be in a position to make a decision about this topic for yourself.

Cabin of enslaved people on George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, now maintained as a historic site

3. Kieran J. O'Keefe, "Monuments to the American Revolution," *Journal of the American Revolution*, September 17, 2019, https://allthingsliberty.com/2019/09/monuments-to-the-american-revolution/.

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