

Chapter 5

Americans Revolt

Were the American colonists justified in rebelling against British rule?

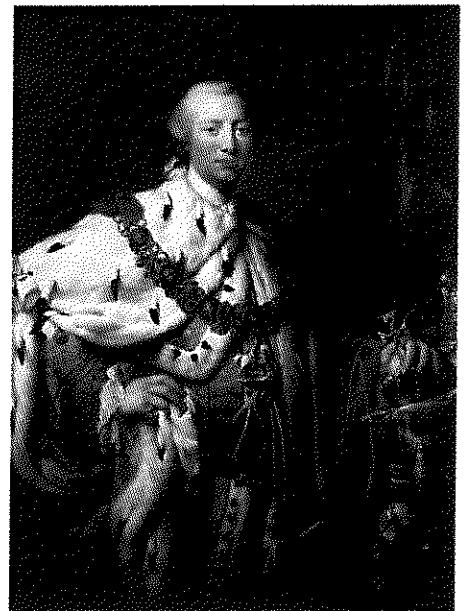
5.1 Introduction

In 1770, the colonists of New York City erected a large statue of King George III on horseback. The 4,000-pound statue stood in Bowling Green, a public park near the southern tip of Manhattan. It was made of lead and was gilded to shine like pure gold. Over the next few years, the statue dominated the green, symbolizing loyalty to the king.

On July 9, 1776, the newly written **Declaration of Independence** was read aloud at a public gathering in New York City. The reading of the Declaration spelled doom for the King George statue. In a burst of patriotism, angry New Yorkers swarmed Bowling Green. They flung ropes around the statue and pulled it down. They cut off the king's head and set it aside, planning to impale it on a spike later. Then they chopped the rest of the statue into pieces. In the midst of all the chaos, someone stole the head; to this day, it has never been found. Many of the remaining lumps of lead were melted down to make bullets to fire at British soldiers.

What caused the conversion of these colonists from loyal British subjects to unruly vandals? Actually, their change in attitude was gradual and cumulative. Trouble had been brewing in the colonies for years.

By 1776, most colonists belonged to one of three groups, based on their views of British rule. One group was the Loyalists, who staunchly supported the British government. A second group was the Patriots, who opposed British rule and believed the colonists should separate from Britain immediately and by any means necessary. These were the people who tore down the statue of the king. The third group was the Moderates. The Moderates were unhappy with aspects of British rule, but they were cautious about the possible effects of severing ties with Britain. They hoped that the problems could be resolved peacefully. A peaceful solution was a tall order, though, given the growing antagonism between Britain and the colonies.



George III was king of Great Britain from 1760 to 1820. He was only 22 when he came to the throne and lacked many of the qualities of a good leader. He was said to be immature, stubborn, and unsure of himself. Nevertheless, he was determined to be a strong ruler.



Colonists protested the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765. The law placed a tax on every piece of paper sold in the colonies. To organize protests against the law, colonial leaders formed the Sons of Liberty, a group dedicated to resisting British rule. Here, protesters have hung a colonial stamp agent on a "liberty pole."

5.2 The Road to Revolution

The toppling of the King George statue came on the eve of the American Revolution. But there had been discontent in the colonies for more than two decades. Some problems dated back to a war that took place in North America from 1754 to 1763. That war was part of a worldwide struggle between France and Britain for territory and power. Because many American Indians fought on the side of France, colonists called it the French and Indian War. Britain won the war, but that victory set it on a collision course with its 13 American colonies.

Britain Imposes New Regulations and Taxes Britain now had to control a much larger empire in North America and wanted to prevent further conflict with the tribes who had been France's allies. Therefore, Parliament passed the Proclamation of 1763, which declared that colonists could not settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. However, many colonists continued to move west.

To help keep peace on the western frontier, Britain built a long chain of forts and sent more troops. It thought the colonies should help pay for this protection, but the colonists believed they could defend themselves. They also mistrusted having a large British army in their midst during peacetime.

Nevertheless, Parliament decided to raise revenue from the colonies to pay for the troops. At the time, citizens in Britain paid heavier taxes than they did in the colonies, and Parliament thought the colonists should pay their share. In 1764, it passed the Sugar Act, which placed customs duties on sugar and other non-British imports. In the past, such sales taxes were designed to regulate trade and encourage colonists to buy British goods. Also, these taxes were not enforced. The Sugar Act was the first tax by Parliament that was enforced by Britain. Colonial protests were limited, though, because the law mainly affected merchants in New England and the Middle Colonies.

In 1765, however, Parliament caused an uproar throughout the colonies by taking a new step to raise revenue. It passed the **Stamp Act**, which required colonists to buy a stamp for every piece of paper they used. Newspapers and documents had to be printed on stamped paper. Even playing cards had to carry a stamp. Stamp taxes were already common in Britain, but this was the first stamp tax that Parliament levied on the colonists. Furthermore, unlike the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act affected a wide range of people throughout the colonies.

The colonists argued that as British citizens they could be directly taxed only by their elected representatives. They were represented in the colonial legislatures but not in Parliament. They recognized that Parliament could regulate trade, but they saw its direct taxes as **tyranny**, or unjust use of government power. Patrick Henry, a Virginia lawyer and legislator, railed about "dying liberty." "No taxation without representation!" became the rallying cry for colonial protests.

After months of colonial unrest, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766. At the same time, however, it passed the Declaratory Act reaffirming its right to govern the colonies. The act stated that the colonies "have been, are, and of right ought to be, subordinate unto, and dependent upon the imperial crown and Parliament of Great Britain." Parliament declared that it could make laws binding the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." Over the next several years, it imposed new taxes and regulations, causing colonial resentment to rise.

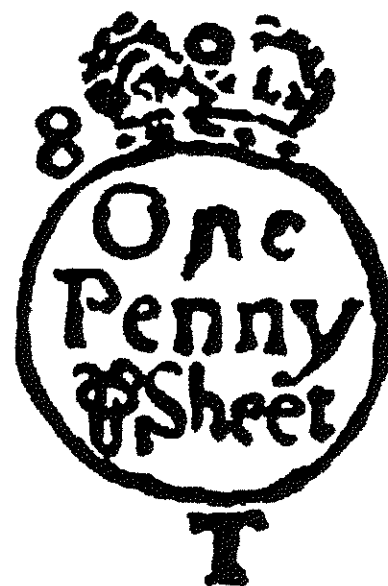
The Colonies Increasingly Resist British Authority The colonists were not used to Parliament asserting its authority. For 150 years, Britain had maintained an unofficial policy of salutary neglect, or healthy disregard, letting the colonies pretty much run themselves. While each colony had a royal governor, it also had its own legislature, laws, and taxes. Although the colonists were subject to British laws, they often ignored the inconvenient ones. During this long period, they had come to believe that they had the ability and right to manage their own affairs.

In 1767, Parliament passed the Townshend Acts, a set of customs duties on British glass, lead, paints, paper, and tea. Since the colonists had admitted Britain's right to regulate trade, Parliament thought they had little reason to protest. However, these duties were intended to raise revenue, so the colonists saw them as direct taxes in disguise. Samuel Adams of Boston was one of the key leaders who rallied colonists to defy the British.

One main form of protest was a **boycott**. This was a peaceful protest in which people refused to buy or use British goods. By boycotting British goods, the colonists hoped to influence British merchants to put pressure on Parliament to change its policies.

Relations with the British were very tense in Boston. On March 5, 1770, a group of residents confronted British soldiers on the street. A fight broke out, and the soldiers opened fire, killing five colonists. Samuel Adams called the killings a massacre. Paul Revere, a local silversmith, made an engraving that showed soldiers firing at peaceful, unarmed citizens. Prints were distributed throughout the colonies, and the event became known as the Boston Massacre.

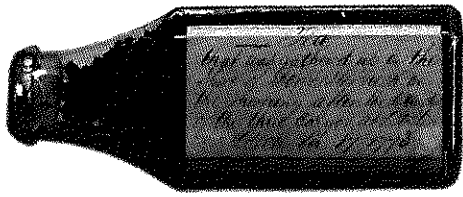
On the same day as the Boston Massacre, Parliament repealed most of the Townshend duties, partly in response to colonial boycotts. Parliament retained the tea tax, though, to reaffirm its authority. The repeal of most of the Townshend duties appeased many colonists, so tensions died down. Adams tried to keep the spirit of protest alive, however, by organizing groups of letter writers—known as **committees of correspondence**—to spread news about British actions to towns throughout Massachusetts. Eventually, committees of correspondence formed in every one of the colonies.



The Granger Collection, New York

The British government produced tax stamps like this one for the American colonies in 1765 and 1766. Many colonists considered the stamps an unjust form of taxation.

The Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, began with a street fight and ended with the deaths of five colonists. The incident was sparked by public anger over the Townshend Acts and other British policies.

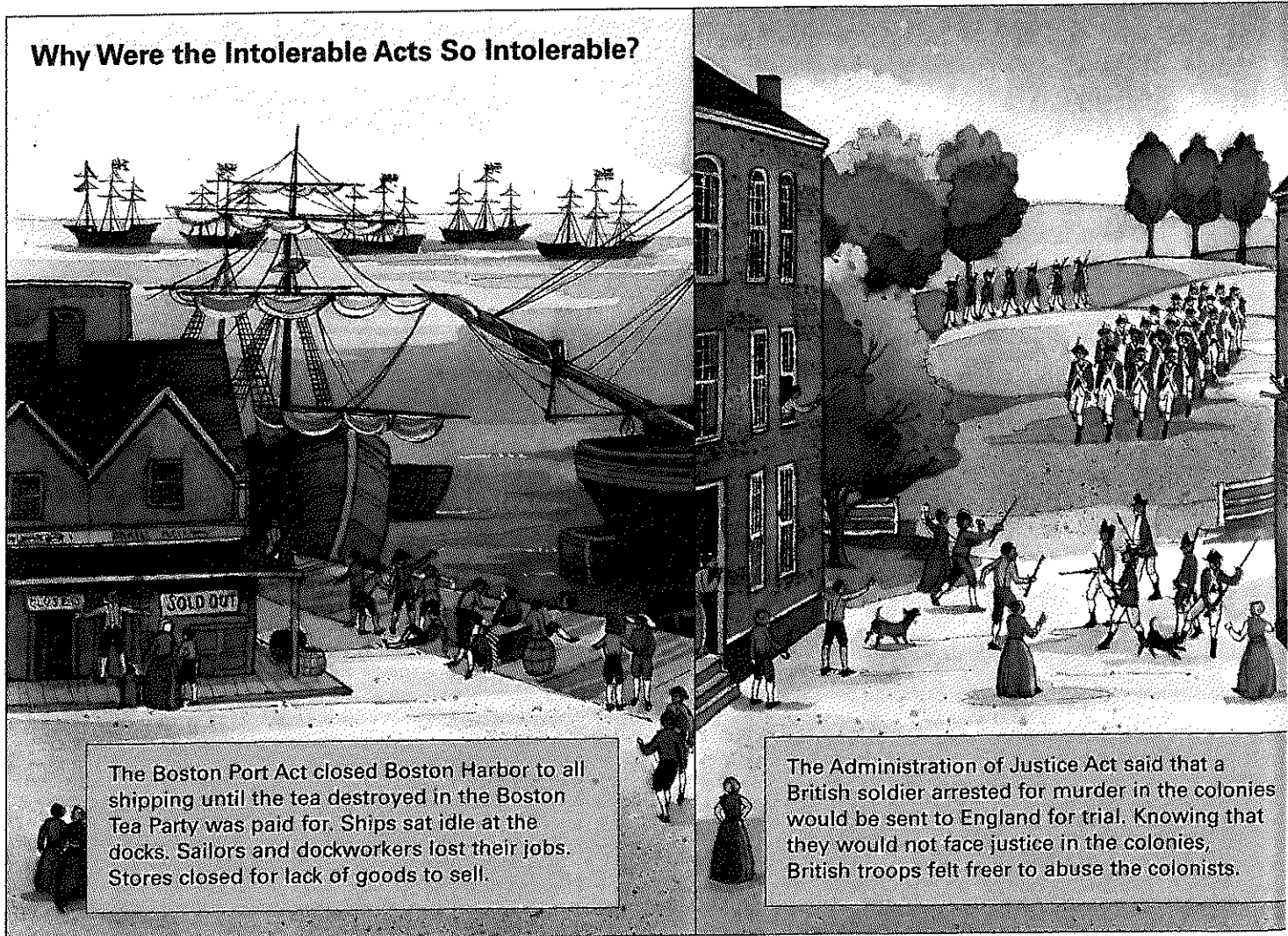


This bottle of tea leaves was collected from the Boston Tea Party of 1773, a protest in which colonists dumped British tea into Boston Harbor. Lawyer John Adams called the action “so bold, so daring, so firm . . . I can’t but consider it as an epoch in history.” British officials were incensed and slapped harsh sanctions on Boston.

In 1773, Parliament unintentionally sparked new protests by passing the Tea Act, which gave the British East India Company the sole right to sell tea in the colonies. The act was intended to help the struggling company, but angry colonists saw this complete control of the tea trade as a threat to colonial merchants. Committees of correspondence spread the word to boycott the company’s tea. Some colonists took stronger action by destroying tea shipments, most famously in Boston. On the night of December 16, men dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded three British tea ships in Boston Harbor. They broke open the tea chests and threw about 90,000 pounds of tea into the water.

This protest, which became known as the **Boston Tea Party**, brought down the wrath of the British government. In 1774, Parliament passed a series of laws so harsh that the colonists called them the **Intolerable Acts**. These laws closed Boston Harbor, shut down the civilian courts, and placed Massachusetts under firm British control. More troops were sent to Boston.

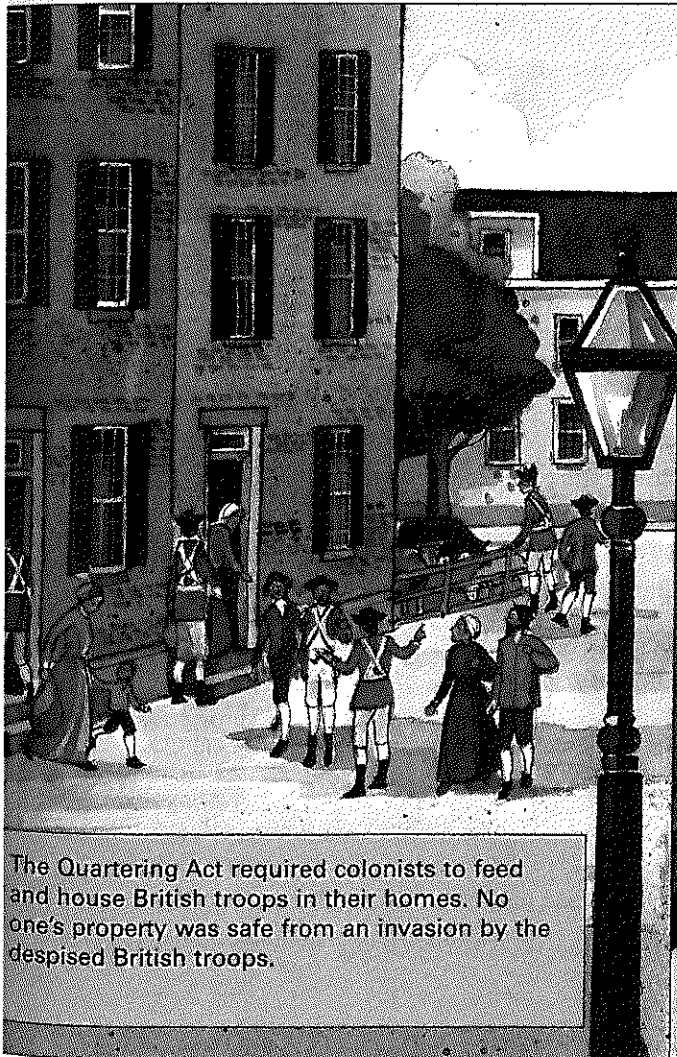
These measures prompted anger throughout the colonies. George Washington, a Virginian, called the policies “repugnant to every principle of natural justice.” Many men and women throughout the colonies began to think of themselves firmly as Patriots working together to oppose British rule.



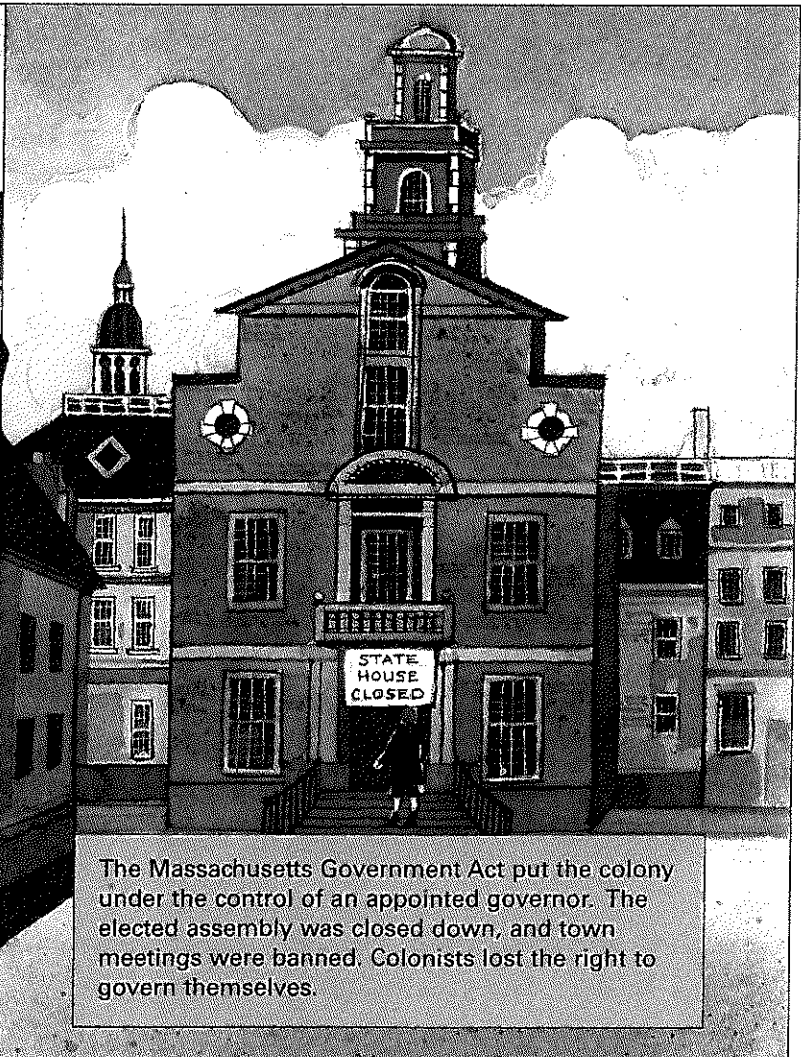
The Fighting Begins After the Intolerable Acts, the colonists organized another boycott of British goods. They also began to set up **militias**. These were groups of men, mostly local farmers and laborers, who volunteered to be soldiers during emergencies. In New England, the militias called themselves Minutemen because they claimed that they could be ready to fight in 60 seconds.

On the evening of April 18, 1775, the Minutemen were called into action. About 700 British soldiers were marching from Boston to seize a stockpile of Patriot munitions in Concord, Massachusetts. In the early morning, they reached the village of Lexington, where 70 to 80 Minutemen were waiting for them. No one is sure who fired first, but a shot rang out. The British then unleashed a volley of bullets, killing 8 colonists and wounding 10.

The British continued six miles to Concord, where they ran into several hundred Minutemen. In a short battle at Concord's North Bridge, the colonists routed the British and sent them fleeing back to Boston. During their retreat, the British were constantly assaulted, losing over 200 men. News of the battles quickly spread throughout the colonies. Within days, militia troops by the thousands were camped around Boston, daring the British to fight again.



The Quartering Act required colonists to feed and house British troops in their homes. No one's property was safe from an invasion by the despised British troops.



The Massachusetts Government Act put the colony under the control of an appointed governor. The elected assembly was closed down, and town meetings were banned. Colonists lost the right to govern themselves.

Differing Viewpoints

5.3 Four Perspectives on the Colonial Rebellion

The battles at Lexington and Concord signaled that the colonies had rebelled against Britain. But not all colonists supported this rebellion. The three main groups—Loyalists, Patriots, and Moderates—had different views about relations with Britain. The British government had its own perspective.

The British Government The king and Parliament were united in their belief that the British government had the right to control the American colonies. They believed that all citizens of Britain, no matter where they lived, were represented by Parliament and had a duty to obey British law and pay British taxes. Former Prime Minister George Grenville put it this way:

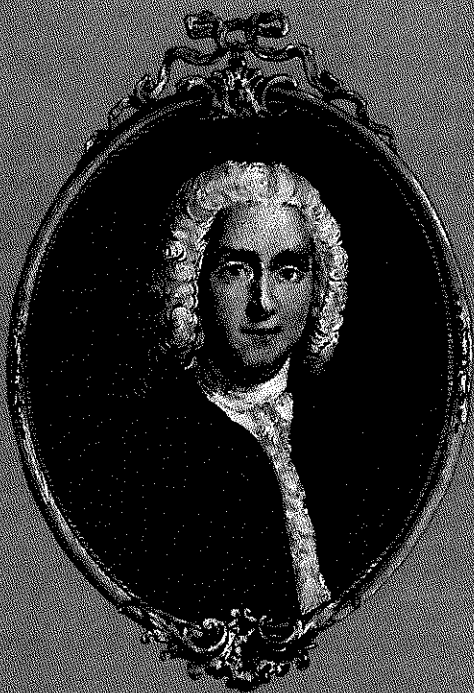
Protection and obedience are reciprocal. Great Britain protects America; America is bound to yield obedience . . . The nation [Great Britain] has run herself into an immense debt to give them their protection; and now, when they are called upon to contribute a small share toward the public expense, an expense arising from themselves, they renounce your authority.

—George Grenville, from a speech in 1766

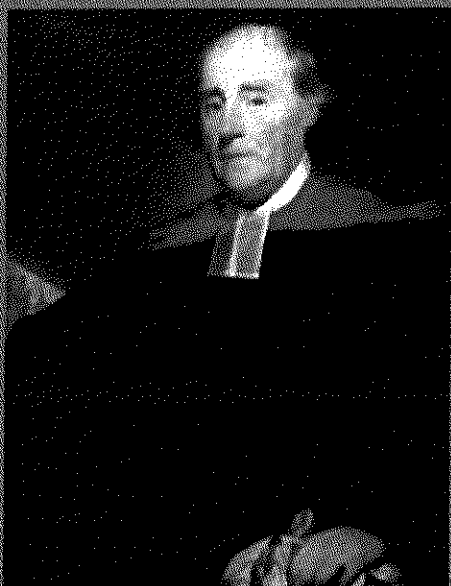
The Loyalists Loyalists wanted to remain subjects of the British Empire. This group included religious leaders, wealthy landowners, and government workers. Some Loyalists were motivated by strong beliefs, such as the view that the king's power came from God and that Britain was treating the colonies fairly. Others were motivated by self-interest, fearing the loss of property or government jobs if a rebellion succeeded. Many, like the minister William Smith, simply felt that the colonies were better off under British rule:

That much of our former felicity was owing to the protection of England is not to be denied; and that we might still derive great advantages from her protection and friendship . . . is equally certain . . . We have long flourished under our Charter Government. What may be the consequences of another form we cannot pronounce with certainty; but this we know, that it is a road we have not travelled, and may be worse than it is described.

—William Smith, Anglican minister, 1776



George Grenville served as British prime minister from 1763 to 1765. He favored taxing the colonies and approved the Stamp Act.



William Smith, a Loyalist, was a minister in the Church of England. He was also the first president of the University of Pennsylvania.

The Moderates Moderates may have disagreed with British policy, but they were not openly rebellious. For some, it was mainly a matter of practicality. Perhaps they lived too far away from the conflicts to feel the impact or were too busy with everyday tasks to get involved in politics. For others, principles were the key factor. For example, Quakers did not wish to fight because of their religious beliefs. In general, Moderates sought peaceful solutions to the problems between Britain and the colonies. The following statement by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania was typical of Moderate thinking:

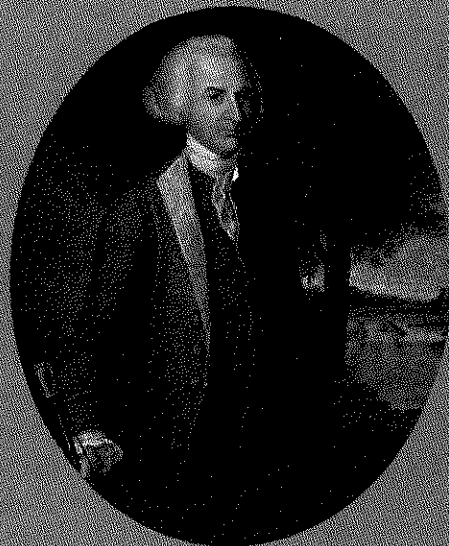
Every government at some time or other falls into wrong measures. These may proceed from mistake or passion. But every such measure does not dissolve the obligation between the governors and the governed. The mistake may be corrected; the passion may subside. It is the duty of the governed to endeavor to rectify the mistake, and to appease the passion.

—John Dickinson, lawyer and colonial delegate, 1767

The Patriots Patriots were those who had come to believe that the colonies must free themselves from British rule, through armed struggle if necessary. Some were merchants who were angry about British taxes. Some were lawyers who thought the colonies should have more say in making their own laws. Others were working people who believed independence would improve their economic condition. Abigail Adams of Massachusetts cited both economic hardship and the threat to liberties:

We are invaded with fleets and Armies, our commerce not only obstructed, but totally ruined, the courts of Justice shut, many driven out from the Metropolis [Boston], thousands reduced to want, or dependent upon the charity of their neighbors for a daily supply of food, all the Horrors of a civil war threatening us on one hand, and the chains of Slavery ready forged for us on the other.

—Abigail Adams, from a letter written in 1774



John Dickinson, a Moderate, tried to mend relations with Britain. He later was a delegate to the Continental Congress.



Abigail Adams, wife of Boston lawyer John Adams, was a Patriot and an astute political thinker. She also supported women's rights.

5.4 Declaring Independence

As the conflict between Britain and the colonies escalated, colonial leaders came together in Philadelphia to discuss options. The first meeting of this Continental Congress, in 1774, had recommended boycotts and other actions to protest the Intolerable Acts. At the Second Continental Congress, held in 1775 after the battles at Lexington and Concord, delegates decided to form a new Continental Army. As a commanding general, they chose George Washington, a leading officer in the Virginia militia. The colonies had not declared independence, however. Most colonists still hoped for a peaceful solution.

Colonists Extend an Olive Branch While the Second Continental Congress was in session, the war around Boston continued. In June 1775, the two sides clashed at the Battle of Bunker Hill. The British won the battle, but they paid a heavy price. More than 1,000 British troops were killed or wounded, while the colonial forces suffered 450 casualties. To some colonists, the high British casualties were proof that the British were not invincible.

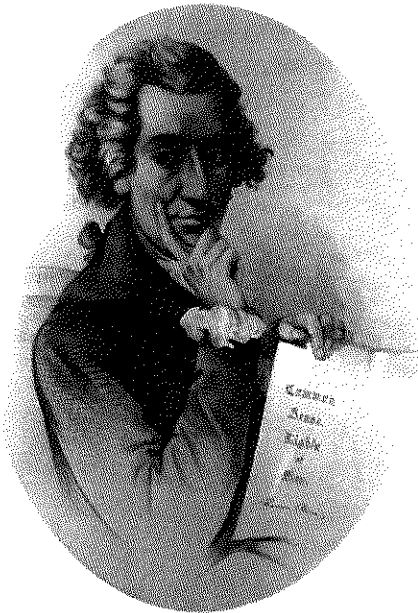
Still, Congress hesitated to break with Britain. In July 1775, it sent a petition to King George III affirming loyalty to him, asking for help in addressing their grievances, and expressing hope for a peaceful settlement. This letter came to be called the Olive Branch Petition because olive branches symbolize peace. However, the king refused to receive the petition, having heard the news of Bunker Hill. He proclaimed that the colonists were in “open and avowed rebellion” and that Britain would “bring the traitors to justice.”

Thomas Paine Writes *Common Sense* Not all colonists supported the Olive Branch Petition. To some, it made no sense to ask for peace while colonists in New England were being killed. This was certainly the opinion of Thomas Paine, a recent immigrant from Britain. Early in 1776, Paine published *Common Sense*, a 47-page pamphlet that made a fervent case for independence. It declared that nobody should be ruled by a king. Paine wrote, “Monarchy and succession have laid . . . the world in blood and ashes.”

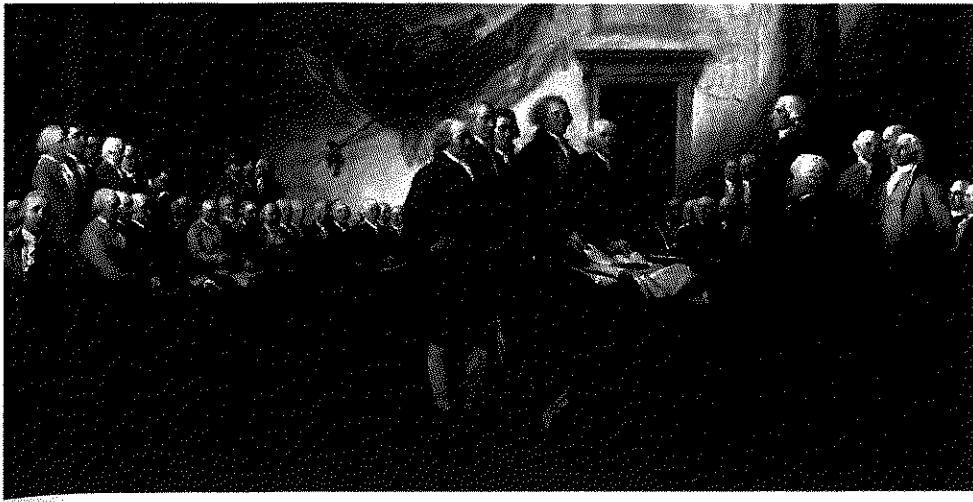
Paine mocked the idea that Britain should rule the American continent. He argued that British rule had only brought harm to the colonies, declaring that colonial trade had suffered under British control and that the colonies had been dragged into Britain’s conflicts with other European countries.

Paine even proposed the kind of government Americans should set up: a representative democracy giving roughly equal weight to each colony. His pamphlet was hugely influential. Within three months, 120,000 copies of *Common Sense* had been sold. Paine’s persuasive words fired up the colonists and hastened the movement toward independence.

Enlightenment Ideas Inspire Change Paine’s pamphlet helped spread ideas that were already popular among Patriot leaders. Those ideas stemmed from the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement of the 1600s and 1700s that greatly influenced the colonies. Enlightenment thinkers stressed the value of science and reason, not only for studying the natural world, but also for improving human society and government.



In his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine made the case for independence. “Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation,” he wrote. “The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, ’TIS TIME TO PART.”



John Trumbull's painting *Declaration of Independence* shows the drafting committee presenting the document. Actually, there was no formal presentation or signing ceremony. Trumbull's purpose was to memorialize the members of Congress. He took great care to paint their faces accurately. This is one of four revolutionary scenes he painted for the Capitol.

The writings of English philosopher John Locke particularly influenced Patriot thinking. Locke believed that people enjoyed natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Furthermore, he said that governments and citizens are bound by a social contract. People agree to obey their government if it respects their natural rights. If the government fails to do so, people have the right to overthrow it.

The Colonies Declare Independence As their meeting continued in Philadelphia, many members of the Second Continental Congress had these Enlightenment ideas in mind. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution proposing independence for the colonies. The Lee Resolution led to formation of a committee to draft a declaration of independence. This committee was made up of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert R. Livingston of New York, and John Adams of Massachusetts.

The task of crafting the words went to Thomas Jefferson. A gifted writer, Jefferson was also a strong believer in natural rights. The Declaration of Independence reflects this thinking when it lists "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as "unalienable rights" that governments were created to protect.

The Declaration of Independence also states that governments should derive their powers from the consent of the governed, that is, from the people. It asserts that people have the right to alter or abolish a government when it becomes "destructive" of their rights. To illustrate how destructive Britain's rule had been, the Declaration includes a long list of abuses by the king and his government over the years. It then concludes,

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 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.

On July 2, Congress voted for independence by passing the Lee Resolution. Then on July 4 it formally approved the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was later written on parchment for delegates to sign. In effect, they were signing a formal declaration of war against Britain.

George Washington and his troops crossed the icy Delaware River on December 25, 1776. In Trenton, German mercenaries were sleeping off a Christmas feast. Taking them by surprise, Washington and his men captured 918 Germans and killed 30, while suffering only 4 casualties.



5.5 Fighting for Independence

At the war's start, the Patriots' prospects were not promising. Britain had a professional, well-trained army of about 40,000 soldiers. It also employed 30,000 German **mercenaries**, professional soldiers for hire. The Continental Army, on the other hand, was constantly short of soldiers. General Washington seldom had more than 20,000 troops at one time. He had to supplement his regular troops with militia forces. Many of them would fight for a while and then go home to take care of their farms and families.

The Americans Get Off to a Shaky Start In the summer of 1776, it looked as if Britain might force a quick end to the war. Soon after the Declaration of Independence was signed, the British massed their forces for an attack on New York City. Washington's army tried to hold them off, but the outnumbered, inexperienced Americans were no match for the British professionals. Suffering heavy losses, the Continental Army was forced to retreat.

The battle for New York City was the first of many American losses in the weeks that followed. Time and again, the Americans had to pull back as British forces pursued them out of New York, through New Jersey, and across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

By December 1776, Congress had fled Philadelphia in despair. Many of Washington's troops had gone home. Of the few thousand who were left, many were weak and ill. But Washington would not give up. Instead, he planned a surprise attack on German mercenaries wintering in Trenton, New Jersey.

Late on December 25, about 4,000 Americans crossed the ice-choked Delaware River to march on Trenton. There they took the 1,400-man force of Germans by surprise. The mercenaries surrendered after only a brief fight. A week later, the Americans defeated a British force at Princeton, New Jersey. Nathanael Greene, one of Washington's most trusted officers, wrote modestly to Thomas Paine, "The two late actions at Trenton and Princeton have put a very different face upon affairs." Indeed, the two victories gave Americans hope that the cause of liberty was not dead.

Victory at Saratoga Brings Foreign Assistance Burgoyne's march was dogged by problems. The army's route crossed rugged terrain, and the heavily laden troops had to chop down trees, build bridges, and lay out log roads through swamps. Along the way, there were several battles with militias.

When the British reached Saratoga Springs 30 miles north of Albany, militia troops were there to meet them. Meanwhile, British reinforcements from New York had failed to arrive. Finding himself surrounded, Burgoyne surrendered on October 17, 1777. This decisive American victory in the **Battle of Saratoga** was a major turning point in the revolution. Until then, the Americans had fought alone. The defeat of Burgoyne encouraged France to enter the war against Britain. French support became critical to the revolution's success.

Washington's Army Winters at Valley Forge In the winter of 1777–78, the British still occupied Philadelphia. Washington and his army made camp at nearby Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. During that harsh winter, about one fourth of Washington's troops—2,500 men—died from disease and exposure.

Still, Washington held his ragtag army together and continued to train them for battle. When the British abandoned Philadelphia to return to New York City, Washington's forces were ready. In June 1778, they attacked the British at Monmouth, New Jersey. The battle was a draw, and the British escaped to New York. This was the last major clash in the North.

The War Shifts to the South Having stalled in the North, the British turned to the South. In December 1778, they captured the key port of Savannah, Georgia, and gained control over the Carolinas. But they did not keep their grip for long.

Wherever they went, the British were harried by American troops fighting in a style that later came to be called **guerrilla warfare**. Such fighting features small, mobile groups of soldiers who attack swiftly and then shrink back into the landscape. The South, with its tangle of deep woods and swampy terrain, was perfect for guerrilla warfare. The most successful of these fighters was Francis Marion, known as the Swamp Fox. His band of guerrillas frustrated the British by attacking without warning and quickly fading back into the swamps.

Meanwhile, regular American forces in the South engaged the British. After a long season of battles, Lord Charles Cornwallis, the British commander, brought his troops to Yorktown, Virginia.

Women played an active role in the war. They worked in the military camps and ran the farms while their husbands, fathers, and brothers fought. Here, the wife of American general Philip Schuyler and her children and slaves burn the family wheat fields to deny food to the advancing British army.



The Granger Collection, New York

In the fall of 1781, American troops converged on Yorktown, joined by French soldiers and naval forces. In total, more than 16,000 troops surrounded the 8,000-man British army. The **Battle of Yorktown** began on October 6 and lasted about two weeks. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered.

The War Ends Yorktown was the last battle of the war, but it took Britain several months to accept defeat. Peace talks began in Paris in 1782, and in September 1783, American and British representatives signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the war. In this treaty, Britain recognized American independence. It also gave up its claims to all lands between the Atlantic coast and the Mississippi River, from Canada south to Florida.

Victory had come at a great cost. At least 6,500 Americans were killed in combat, while another 10,000 died from disease. An additional 8,500 died as British prisoners.

Even so, most Americans savored their victory and looked forward to healing the nation's wounds. That was a big challenge in itself. But Americans faced an even larger and more daunting task: to begin creating a society that embodied the ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity set forth in the Declaration of Independence. As a first step, they would struggle with the practical issues of forming a government based on the consent of the governed.



This painting by John Trumbull, commissioned by Congress in 1817, shows the British surrender at Yorktown. At the center is American general Benjamin Lincoln leading the British troops. On the right are General Washington and his troops. On the left are French, Polish, and Prussian soldiers. Foreign allies were critical to the American victory.

Summary

Beginning in the 1760s, many American colonists grew increasingly unhappy with British rule. Eventually they rebelled and declared independence. During the revolution, American forces wore down and defeated the larger and more experienced British army. In 1783, the United States became an independent country.

The Stamp Act After the French and Indian War, Britain passed the Stamp Act to raise revenue in the colonies. Protests against “taxation without representation” led to its repeal.

Differing loyalties Patriots like Samuel Adams resisted all efforts by the British to exert more control over the colonies. Loyalists, in contrast, supported British rule. Moderates had mixed feelings but hoped the differences with Britain could be settled peacefully.

The Intolerable Acts Following the Boston Tea Party, Britain cracked down on resistance with laws known in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts. Boston became an occupied city.

Lexington and Concord Tensions between colonists and British troops in Massachusetts led to armed conflict in Lexington and Concord. These battles helped spark a wider war.

Declaration of Independence On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. It asserted that the colonies were “free and independent states.”

Saratoga The Continental Army suffered defeats in the early days of the war. But victory at Saratoga in 1777 turned the tide and brought France into the war as an American ally.

Yorktown The British defeat at Yorktown in 1781 ended the long war. Two years later, Britain recognized American independence in the Treaty of Paris.