

The American War for Independence, 1775–1783

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines the major events associated with the American War for Independence (1775–1783) and its most important consequences. The discussion will break down into four parts:

1. The War's Early Years (1775–1777)

One year before members of the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence, they approved the creation of a professional army—the Continental Army—and named George Washington as its commander-in-chief. He assumed command of the colonial forces outside Boston and began efforts to force the British to evacuate the city.

Washington positioned artillery, including cannons captured from Fort Ticonderoga in New York, at Dorchester Heights, which overlooked the fortified positions of the British, and Boston Harbor, where British supply ships were anchored. The British could not return fire on colonial positions because they could not elevate their cannons. They realized that they were in an untenable position and withdrew from Boston. On March 17, 1776, the British troops evacuated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, ending their nearly year-long siege.

Although 16,000 volunteers originally enlisted under Washington, it took several years for the Continental Army to become an effective fighting force. Until then, most American fighters were members of local militias. It was clear that militiamen would struggle when pitted against the professional officers and soldiers of the British Army—the largest military force that North America had ever seen.



This 1775 etching shows George Washington taking command of the Continental Army at Cambridge, Massachusetts, after his appointment by the Continental Congress.

By July 1776, the same month that the United States declared independence, Great Britain deployed 32,000 troops under General **William Howe** to Staten Island, New York. One month later, Howe landed his forces on Long Island and easily routed Washington's army in the Battle of Long Island (August 27). The Continental

Army was significantly outnumbered and lacked military experience and discipline. They performed only slightly better during the Battle of Harlem Heights on September 16th, an important holding action that enabled the Continental Army to avoid capture in New York City. A few weeks later, on October 28th, General Howe's forces defeated Washington's army again at the Battle of White Plains and, shortly thereafter, the British secured the surrender of Forts Mifflin and Red Bank on the Hudson River. The humiliated Continental Army retreated to New Jersey as the British secured New York City, which remained under their control for the rest of the war.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Howe

British general and commander-in-chief of the British forces in America at the outset of the American Revolution.

Washington's only successes during this period were the result of breaking with conventional military tactics, which called for fighting only during the summer months, and avoidance of risks (which his situation required him to take). After losing New York, Washington's greatest concern was encouraging enlistment in the Continental Army, which numbered only 3,000 men by December of 1776.

Intent on sustaining the revolution, Washington launched surprise attacks against British forces in their winter quarters. In Trenton, New Jersey, he led his soldiers across the Delaware River and surprised an encampment of Hessian soldiers.



DID YOU KNOW

Contrary to popular myth, which suggests that the Hessians were hungover from Christmas celebrations, most of the mercenaries were ready and able to fight during the Battle of Trenton.

Washington's men overwhelmed the garrison during the early hours of December 26, taking over 900 captive. On January 3, 1777, the Continental Army achieved another much-needed victory at the Battle of Princeton before marching to a winter encampment at Morristown, New Jersey. Washington's successful gambles ensured that the war would continue into 1777.

2. Philadelphia, Saratoga, and a Change in Strategy (1777–1778)

In August 1777, General Howe transferred 15,000 British troops to the Chesapeake Bay and moved to capture Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the Continental Congress convened. The British defeated Washington's soldiers in subsequent battles at Brandywine Creek and Germantown and took control of Philadelphia. The Continental Congress fled westward, first to Lancaster and ultimately to York, Pennsylvania. The British occupied Philadelphia during the winter of 1777–78, while Washington's forces settled into harsh winter quarters northwest of the city at Valley Forge.

A victory by revolutionary forces at Saratoga, New York, offset the loss of Philadelphia. During the fall of 1777, a British army led by General **John Burgoyne** marched south from Montreal. British forces from New York City, along with another army from Fort Oswego (situated on Lake Ontario) led by Colonel Barry St. Leger, planned to meet with Burgoyne's forces at Albany, effectively severing New England from the rest of the American colonies.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Burgoyne

British general who surrendered his forces to the Continental Army at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, prompting the French to sign a treaty of alliance with the Americans.

The British campaign ended in disaster. General Howe decided to take Philadelphia instead, using troops that would participate in the New York campaign. St. Leger's forces, which consisted of British regulars, Loyalist fighters, and Iroquois allies, failed to capture a key fort in the Mohawk Valley (due in large part to resistance led by Benedict Arnold) and retreated to Quebec. Burgoyne's army met stiff resistance from Continental soldiers and colonial militias. His army was surrounded at Saratoga and, on October 17, 1777, he surrendered his five thousand soldiers to the Continental Army.

The American victory at Saratoga forced Great Britain to alter its strategy of dividing the colonies in two and isolating northern and southern resistance efforts. Revolutionary diplomats used the battle to convince France to recognize American independence. On February 6, 1778, France signed documents creating a military alliance with the United States. Still smarting from their defeat by Great Britain during the French and Indian War, the French supplied the United States with gunpowder and money, as well as soldiers and naval forces that bolstered American forces during the remainder of the war. The French also contributed military leaders, including the **Marquis de Lafayette**, who arrived in America in 1777 as a volunteer and soon became an officer in the Continental Army and a key aide to General Washington.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Marquis de Lafayette

A French aristocrat and military officer who fought with the Continental Army during the War for Independence.



George Washington (left) and the Marquis de Lafayette (right) at Valley Forge

With France's entry into the war, the American Revolution assumed global proportions. Great Britain now had to fight the French in the Caribbean, while continuing to battle the insurgents in the American colonies. Following France's lead, Spain joined the war against Great Britain in 1779, though it did not recognize American independence until 1783. The Dutch Republic also began to support the American revolutionaries and signed a treaty of commerce with the United States in 1782.

By 1778, Great Britain's plan to isolate and subjugate the northern colonies failed. In June, British forces in Philadelphia evacuated and returned to New York City in order to better defend that city. At the same time, they turned their attention to the southern colonies. They expected more support from southern colonists (who remained loyal to the Crown), enslaved people seeking freedom, and Native American allies. Moving southward also meant that British forces would be closer to their naval bases in the West Indies, which was imperative now that France—and its navy—had entered the war on the side of the United States

3. The War in the South (1778–1781)

From 1778 to 1781, the southern colonies bore the brunt of the fight between Continental soldiers and the British Army. This stage of the war included significant bloodshed between revolutionary and Loyalist paramilitary forces.

Great Britain initially achieved great success. In December of 1778, the British captured Savannah, the capital of Georgia. After securing Georgia, they turned their attention to South Carolina. In April of 1780, eight thousand British soldiers besieged American forces in Charleston. After six weeks of fighting, the British forced the surrender of the city and its defenders—the largest American loss during the war. The British established a military government in Charleston under the command of General Sir Henry Clinton. From Charleston, Clinton ordered General **Charles Cornwallis** to subdue the rest of the Carolinas.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Charles Cornwallis

British general who surrendered to the combined American and French forces at the Battle of Yorktown in Virginia in 1781, effectively ending the American Revolution.

As the British and Loyalist supporters consolidated political control in Georgia and South Carolina, much of the surrounding countryside descended into civil war. The violence hit South Carolina particularly hard. The colony had been starkly divided between the backcountry, which harbored revolutionary partisans, and the coastal regions, where Loyalists remained a powerful force. The arrival of the British allowed local resentments and antagonisms to boil over with murderous consequences. Revenge killings and the destruction of property by revolutionary and Loyalist paramilitary groups were common throughout the southern countryside from the late 1770s into the early 1780s.

Continental regulars fared poorly as General Cornwallis moved through the Carolinas. Following the disaster at Charleston, the Continental Congress placed General Horatio Gates in charge of American forces in the South. At the Battle of Camden in August of 1780, Cornwallis forced General Gates to retreat into North Carolina. After the defeat, Congress placed General Nathanael Greene in command.

Similar to what Washington discovered in his battles against General Howe's forces in and around New York City, Greene realized that to defeat General Cornwallis, he did not have to win a single battle. So long as he remained in the field, he could continue to destroy isolated British forces. Greene, therefore, decided to divide his troops to wage war. His strategy worked. At the Battle of Cowpens on January 17, 1781, American troops under General Daniel Morgan decisively defeated a British garrison led by Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Morgan's casualties amounted to only 12 killed and 60 wounded, while the British lost 110 killed and 702 captured.

Determined to destroy Greene's army after the embarrassment at Cowpens, Cornwallis chased Greene's army to North Carolina. At the Battle of Guilford Courthouse in March of 1781, the British prevailed but suffered extensive losses. Cornwallis decided to move his army to Virginia.

In the summer of 1781, Cornwallis assembled his army—approximately 8,500 strong—at the small port of Yorktown, Virginia, on Chesapeake Bay. He expected the Royal Navy to resupply and reinforce his forces and thought that it would keep the coast clear of enemy ships.

Sensing an opportunity, a combined French and American force of 16,000 men invaded the peninsula in September of 1781. Washington raced south with his forces, as did French troops under the command of Lafayette and the Comte de Rochambeau. Meanwhile, a French fleet sailed north from the West Indies and defeated a British naval force at the Battle of the Capes on September 5th. The French ships prevented Cornwallis from escaping by sea.

In October 1781, the American forces began the Battle for Yorktown. Outnumbered almost two-to-one and with no viable escape route, Cornwallis surrendered on October 19th.



DID YOU KNOW

Counting both land and sea forces, more Frenchmen than Americans participated in the Yorktown campaign.



BRAINSTORM

Which was more significant for American victory during the War for Independence: the leadership of George Washington or the alliance with France? Why?

4. War's End (1781–1783)

In light of the American victory at Yorktown, Parliament voted to suspend military operations and begin peace negotiations with the United States. As British forces began to evacuate the colonies, both sides—Patriots and Loyalists—took account of the war's effects.

The War for Independence extracted a high price from the countryside. Soldiers from both armies had relied upon colonial farmers for their food. Not all farmers were happy to cooperate, and military officials and soldiers sometimes forced locals to provide all that they could. Having an army march through an area was not a good thing, regardless of which side the inhabitants supported. Accounts describe cattle that lay dead in the fields, broken household furniture, and fruit trees chopped down in the wake of an army's passage.

The War for Independence exacted significant human costs. Over 20,000 Americans died, and many others were displaced. As many as 100,000 Loyalists were forced to leave the country, losing everything (including their land) in the process.

During the war, all of the states passed **confiscation acts**, which gave revolutionary governments the right to seize Loyalist land and other property. To ferret out Loyalists, revolutionary governments also passed laws requiring men to take oaths of allegiance to the new states. Those who refused lost their property and were often imprisoned or forced to work for the local revolutionary government.



TERM TO KNOW

Confiscation Acts

State laws that granted revolutionary governments the right to seize land and other property owned by Loyalists.

Nevertheless, American victory in the War for Independence resulted in important gains, namely sovereignty and territory.



The United States formally gained independence in 1783, following the signing of the Treaty of Paris. In addition to recognizing the United States as a sovereign nation. The treaty established the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes as the new nation's boundaries.

The treaty was not without its shortcomings, however:

- The treaty ignored native land claims.
- Neither party adhered to all provisions of the treaty.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Treaty of Paris stipulated that the Americans return confiscated property to Loyalists, but the United States government never did so. In return, the British refused to fulfill their promise to evacuate forts in the Ohio River Valley.

- The treaty failed to address trade.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Upon achieving independence, trade with British colonies in the Caribbean became illegal. The United States could trade directly with Great Britain but was denied access to colonies that remained under British control.

Additional Resources

Visit the [National Park Service's Valley Forge National Historical Park](#) to learn more about life in camp and the experience of a Revolutionary War soldier.



SUMMARY

Great Britain scored repeated victories during the American War for Independence and occupied significant towns and cities, most notably New York City and, for a time, Philadelphia. Yet, under the

leadership of Washington, Greene, and other Continental officers, American forces were able to remain in the field and, on occasion, such as at Trenton and Saratoga, defeat British armies. The entrance of France—Britain’s arch-rival in the contest of global empire—into the war further turned the tide in favor of the revolutionaries. Formal recognition of the United States as an independent nation was accomplished two years later with the Treaty of Paris.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Confiscation Acts

State laws that granted revolutionary governments the right to seize property and land owned by loyalists.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Charles Cornwallis

British general who surrendered to the combined American and French forces at the Battle of Yorktown in Virginia in 1781, effectively ending the American Revolution.

John Burgoyne

British general who surrendered his forces to the Continental Army at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, prompting the French to sign a treaty of alliance with the Americans.

Marquis de Lafayette

French aristocrat who volunteered to fight in the American Revolution, becoming a key aide to George Washington, a commander of forces at the Battle of Yorktown, and eventually, a leading member of the French Revolution.

William Howe

British general and commander in chief of the British forces in America at the outset of the American Revolution.



DATES TO KNOW

May 1775

The Second Continental Congress approves the creation of the Continental Army.

July 1776

The Declaration of Independence justifies American independence from Great Britain; Britain sends 32,000 troops to New York.

August–October 1776

Britain secures New York and Washington retreats to New Jersey.

December 1776

George Washington launches a surprise attack in Trenton, New Jersey.

1777

Britain occupies Philadelphia; American victory at Saratoga offsets the loss of Philadelphia.

1778

The Franco-American alliance signed; Britain captures Savannah.

1779

Charleston falls to the British; the Battle of Camden is a major British victory.

January 1781

The Battle of Cowpens ends with an American victory.

October 1781

General Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown.

1783

The Treaty of Paris is signed; England recognizes American independence.