

# Life of A Private

By the 18th century Great Britain had established a series of American colonies along the American coast. While each colony had strong economic or political ties to Britain, they lacked strong bonds to one another. These American colonies were economically bound to Britain through the mercantile system, which restricted colonial trade. There was also an absence of banks and scarcity of gold and silver coins in the colonies which financially constrained the colonists. Many transactions in British America were conducted by credit and trade.

## What led to the American Revolution?

Great Britain increased its American empire after the defeat of the French in the Seven Year's War in 1763 (also known as the French and Indian War in America). Soon afterward, the British Parliament angered the colonists by restricting westward settlement and requiring the colonists to provide quarters or lodging for the British soldiers remaining in the colonies. Colonists were further



King George III, from the studio of Allan Ramsay – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

angered when the British Parliament began taxing the colonists directly to help pay down the imperial war debt. Taxes were first levied on common household items imported into the colonies. Colonists responded to these unpopular British policies through boycotts and smuggling.

Colonial resentment increased rapidly with the passage of the Stamp Act of 1765. This act required that certain items such as newspapers and legal documents be printed on paper bearing an embossed tax stamp. The paper was to be purchased from a government agent, who ensured that the tax was collected. Colonists responded through riots and intimidation of British officials. The Stamp Act was quickly rescinded. Rather than raise revenue, it had the adverse effect of uniting the once separate American colonies.

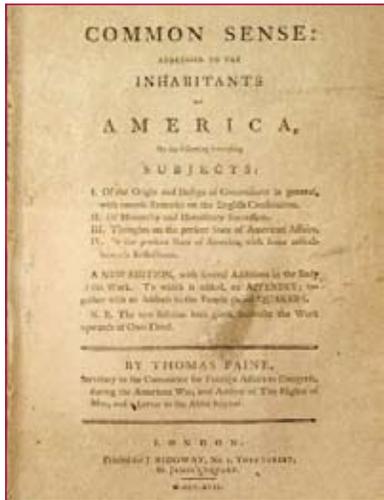
On July 2, 1776, Congress passed a resolution declaring independence from the British crown and on July 4th adopted the Declaration of Independence, principally written by Thomas Jefferson. This document expressed to the world America's reasons for declaring permanent separation from Great Britain. Jefferson drew on political ideals set forth earlier by philosophers such as John Locke. These included the “natural rights” of the people and their government's duty to protect these rights. The Declaration of Independence stated that men are endowed with certain unalienable rights such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.



British regiment marching



1776 Declaration of Independence broadside – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation



Common Sense by Thomas Paine – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

## How did Americans react to the Declaration of Independence?

By 1776 there were over 2.5 million people in the American colonies. Their views on independence varied depending on their individual circumstances and affiliations. Somewhat more than one-third of the American people were rebellious to some degree. These “patriots” wanted to separate from British rule. The pamphlet *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine and published in January 1776, was widely read by everyday Americans and influenced many to side with separation from Great Britain. About 20 percent of the population was “loyalists” who thought the colonies should remain loyal to King George III and Parliament. Many loyalists had family members in Britain or did business that depended on British imports. Many felt that independence was treason. The remaining Americans were neutral and did not want to be involved in the war. Certain groups remained neutral because pacifism was part of their religious beliefs. Some Native Americans tried to remain neutral for as long as possible due to the risks entailed by involvement in the conflict. Others wavered depending on the circumstances.

## How was the American army created?

Each colony already had militias, formed for local defense, which required only a short-term commitment on the part of the soldier. They were required to train for several days per month and often provided their own equipment. American leaders quickly realized that local militias alone would not be effective in opposing a large, well trained force such as the British army. This led the Continental Congress to create a standing army, later known as the Continental Army. Militias were used to supplement these regular troops, and in such situations, militia troops served under Continental officers.

While serving with the Continental Army, militiamen were to be treated the same and received the same pay and rations as Continental soldiers. Militias often became a pool of soldiers from which the Continental Army recruited. All free males between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to serve.



Militiaman and his family



Recruiting new soldiers

## Why did men join the Continental Army?

Men joined the Continental Army for a variety of reasons. For the young men who made up the bulk of the Continental Army, soldiering not only gave them steady employment, but also the opportunity for excitement and adventure. Recruitment bonuses in the form of cash and the promise of land were also powerful incentives to join. A strong sense of patriotism motivated many to defend their homes and land. By the end of the war most soldiers in the American army were young, relatively poor men who joined because they were unemployed and had no property.

During the beginning of the war most soldiers made a commitment to stay in the army for a year. Later many soldiers enlisted for three years or the duration of the war. Privates, the lowest ranking soldiers, were the most numerous and

did the bulk of the fighting. They also performed a variety of other tasks including gathering firewood and guard duty. For their service, privates were initially paid about six and one half dollars per month.

Common soldiers rarely rose up the ranks to become officers. As the army reflected the class structure of the country, many of the officers came from the better educated and wealthier men in the country. Honor and pride drove most of these men to become officers in the Continental Army.

## With what supplies were the Continental soldiers provided?

During enlistment, Continental soldiers were promised their basic needs would be met. Each man was to receive food rations that contained salted meat, hard bread, and dried food. Each year the soldiers were to be issued clothing, arms, ammunition, a haversack, canteen, blanket, and knapsack. In reality, most soldiers would be issued arms, ammunition, a uniform, and other items as available.

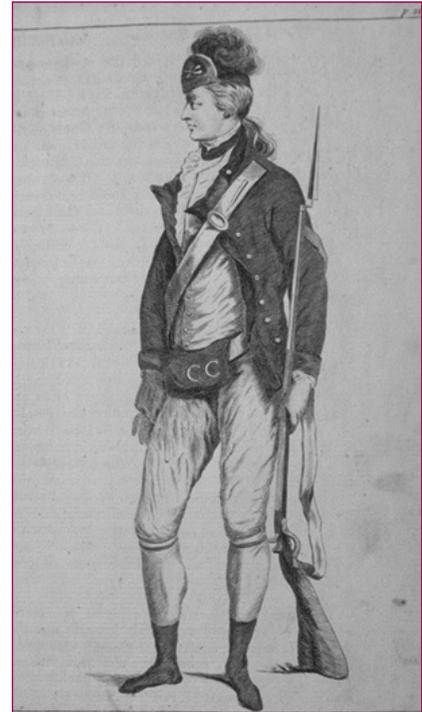
During the campaign season (spring through fall) each six-man group (called a mess), was to share a common tent, while officers would stay in nicer quarters. Shortages of canvas often created a shortage of tents, causing crowding (often eight men to a tent) and forcing other soldiers to sleep in makeshift quarters. Even when tents were available during a campaign, soldiers often marched ahead of the supplies and had to sleep in makeshift brush shelters. When the winter season began, soldiers often built log cabins for winter quarters. These cabins were built to house up to twelve men. Although they provided more shelter than a canvas tent, the living conditions within these cabins were just as unpleasant.

## What challenges did the Continental Army face?

Supplying the Continental Army was a monumental task. The colonial system of dependence on imported British manufactured goods, including muskets, led to difficulties in procuring supplies. The quartermaster's department was formed to procure and distribute the supplies necessary for the new Continental Army. The department appealed to the states and to private citizens for help with food, clothing, blankets, and other needs, but supplies were often inadequate. The new department was disorganized and faced problems with cooperation from the state governments.



1780 Virginia paper money – Jamestown Yorktown Foundation



Revolutionary War soldier with musket – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation



Powder horn and musket – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

Lack of gold and silver meant that supplies could not be easily purchased from Europe or elsewhere. Even when supplies arrived, the transportation system was often inadequate to bring the supplies to the army. Transportation difficulties occurred due to the British blockade, poor roads, and uncooperative wagoners. Supplies were often delivered late or were spoiled or damaged.

As a result, soldiers received much less than their promised rations and sometimes had to survive on what they could forage or impress from farmers. The inability of Congress and the states to raise funds for the war effort contributed greatly to the soldiers' hardship. Soldiers' pay rarely came on time, and when it did it was



A young American soldier of the Revolution

often in the form of paper currency issued by the states or Congress. This paper money became increasingly worthless due to inflation or devaluation. Since most of the soldier's supplies came from Europe, the soldiers would often supply their own needs or go without.

Initially, the Continental Army lacked uniformity in drill, discipline, and maneuvers. The poorly trained Continental Army was at a huge disadvantage early in the war when facing the well equipped, well trained British army. In February 1778, Baron von Steuben, a Prussian officer offered his services to General Washington. Due to von Steuben's efforts, the Continental Army greatly improved as a professional fighting force and was more successful in battle.

## Did women play a role in the military?

Thousands of women were associated with the Continental Army in a variety of roles. Women could not officially enlist, but many were present in military camps due to personal ties with soldiers in the army. They performed essential support services for the soldiers and officers like nursing, laundry, and clothing maintenance. This enabled them to earn money and draw rations from the army. They generally were not issued tents and typically found or made their own shelter in an area to the rear of the camp. They sometimes had children accompanying them, and when the army moved they marched with the baggage train; they were usually not permitted to ride.



Women sewing and washing clothes for the soldiers

Some refugee women and children also followed the army for safety and support, having no means of survival after being displaced from their homes by fighting. General Washington discouraged his officers from allowing large numbers of refugees to accompany troops, because they were a hindrance and could be disruptive to military order.

## Were African Americans in the Continental Army?

On the eve of the American Revolution about one-fifth of the population of the 13 colonies or about half a million people, was African American. Some African Americans were free, mainly in northern colonies, but the majority were enslaved.

In 1775 Lord Dunmore, Virginia's royal governor, issued a proclamation declaring,

“...all indented servants, negroes and or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty's troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this colony to a proper sense of their duty, to His Majesty's crown and dignity.”

Thousands of African-American men fled to the British Army, while thousands more African-American women and children also sought refuge with the British.

Possibly as many as 8,000 African Americans served in the Continental Army in some capacity. Early in the war, most colonies objected to blacks serving as armed soldiers, often due to a fear of an uprising. By 1777, the need for new troops spurred Congress to authorize the enlistment of free and enslaved blacks. Free blacks enlisted, motivated by the same needs and lured by the same incentives as other recruits. Some slaves were sent as substitutes for their masters, in order to fulfill recruitment quotas, and were promised freedom in return for their service.



African Americans fought and filled noncombatant roles in the Continental Army.

Black and white soldiers lived and fought together in the Continental Army, although many blacks were assigned noncombatant roles such as wagoners for the quartermaster, cooks, musicians, river pilots, or jobs requiring skills like carpentry, bricklaying, or blacksmithing. A few all-black units were formed, like those in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

James Armistead, a slave from New Kent County, Virginia received his master's permission to join Lafayette's forces as the fighting moved into Virginia in 1781. During the siege of Yorktown, he provided invaluable service to the Continental Army by acting as a spy, while working in the British camps of Benedict Arnold and Lord Cornwallis.

The American Revolution did not significantly improve life for the majority of enslaved African Americans, although some men did gain freedom for their military service. As the British evacuated port cities at the conclusion of the war, they were only able to take a portion of the blacks seeking protection, abandoning many who were later returned to slavery.

## How was the Continental Army able to defeat the British?

Without the leadership of George Washington the Continental Army would likely have fallen apart early in the war. General Washington's example and encouragement motivated his men to defend their new country. Under his influence, the men of the Continental Army felt a strong commitment to patriotic beliefs and principles.

France, and to a lesser extent Spain and Holland, lent their aid to the American cause. As early as 1776, France sent money to help finance the war effort. The French government was not yet prepared to openly support the American cause, but covertly supplied gunpowder, ammunition, uniforms, and supplies to the Continental Army. As ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin worked to create a strong French alliance, which provided essential support to the American cause.



King Louis XVI of France, from the studio of Joseph Boze – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

The French government realized that the United States would be a

worthwhile ally after the defeat of the British and Hessian troops at Saratoga, New York in October 1777.

France and the United States signed treaties on February 6, 1778, which recognized the United States as an independent nation, and France agreed to join the war against Great Britain.



Map showing British (red) and American (blue) lines at Yorktown

By 1781, the war had shifted to the south. British troops under Lord Cornwallis moved into Virginia after long campaigns in the Carolinas. Cornwallis brought his troops to Yorktown and awaited resupply from British-occupied New York. The Battle of the Capes left the Chesapeake Bay in French hands, removing the possibility of British reinforcements and eliminating the option of retreat by sea. During the siege of Yorktown, Cornwallis' troops endured continuous allied bombardment for several weeks and suffered from disease, casualties, and lack of supplies.



Surrender at Yorktown – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

On October 17, 1781, the British indicated their desire to meet to discuss surrender. A drummer mounted a British parapet, and an officer waved a white flag to signal his intent. A cease fire ensued, and the Articles of Capitulation were signed on October 19, 1781. The British troops ceremoniously laid down their weapons in a formal act of surrender.

## What happened after the American victory at Yorktown?

Fighting did not completely end after the siege of Yorktown. Skirmishing continued until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. Benjamin

Franklin and John Adams negotiated the treaty with the French and British governments. Upon the treaty's signing, Britain recognized the United States as an independent government. Terms of the treaty expanded the western border of the United States to the Mississippi River. As this land opened to the United States, citizens were encouraged to move westward into areas previously restricted by the British government. Land warrants, issued as recruitment incentives by the Army, spurred many veterans to seek opportunities in the west or to sell their claims to others.

Congress ordered George Washington to dismiss the continental troops, as there was no desire to keep a standing army in America during peacetime. The soldiers then returned to their peacetime occupations.



1783 land warrant – Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation

## What is the legacy of the American Continental Army?

The American Revolution exposed the weakness of the American militia system. Local militias were unable to defeat the large professional British army alone. The American Continental Army's victories at Trenton and Princeton, and its soldier's willingness to reenlist, saved the American Revolution from collapse in 1776. After Valley Forge in 1777, the Continental Army's training from Baron von Steuben allowed it to match British forces on the battlefield which convinced France to aid the American colonists. With the help of France, the American Continental Army defeated Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown which led to victory for the American cause.

The American Continental Army was comprised of Americans who were largely younger and poorer than the men of the militias. A large percentage of the Continental soldiers were European immigrants or African-American. It was led by officers such as George Washington who were devoted to the American cause. Washington convinced his officers and men to defer to civilian authority. At the war's end the soldiers returned to their homes and became American citizens. The Continental Army dispelled American prejudices and fears against a professional standing army and set a standard for the "citizen soldier" that would be the model for American armies in generations to come.



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P.O. Box 1607, Williamsburg, VA 23187

