

# The Role of the Militia During the Revolutionary War

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Listen to an audio interview with Edward Ayres and Steve Clark of WCVE Ideas Station about the Virginia Militia in the Revolutionary War.



The role of the militia in the American Revolution is interpreted at Yorktown Victory Center special events. Militia re-enactors present a musket firing demonstration at an October Yorktown Victory Celebration event.



More than 3,000 militiamen, under the command of Governor Thomas Nelson, were present at the Siege at Yorktown in October 1781. *Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation Collection*

*If I was called upon to declare upon Oath,  
whether the Militia have been  
most serviceable or hurtful upon the whole;  
I should subscribe to the latter.  
– George Washington, September 1776*

Even before the struggle for American independence ended, two contrasting views of the role of the Revolutionary militia had emerged. Popular opinion, remembering the gallant stand of the Minutemen at Concord and Lexington, held fast to the ideal of the brave citizen soldier as the mainstay of defense. Other Americans however, including many Continental Army veterans, derided the militia's reputation for fleeing in the face of the enemy. The early histories of the Revolution also tended to minimize the contributions of the militia, and one acclaimed account of the war, written as late as 1929, even referred to "the utter failure of the militia system."

More recent studies however have gone a long way toward revising this predominantly negative assessment of the role played by the militia during the war for independence. Although the relative effectiveness of the Revolutionary militia varied from state to state and year to year, this newer scholarship has explored and described some of the crucial achievements of the militia that had been previously unexamined. These historians note that the role of the militia is easily misunderstood and that it has to be judged by different standards than those applied to a professional military force. As part of its long-term exhibit planning process, the Yorktown Victory Center has begun researching the role played by the militia during the Revolution, with a special emphasis on Virginia as a test case.

From the earliest years of English settlement, colonists had depended on local groups of part-time citizen soldiers to defend themselves from the Indians or at times to maintain law

and order. By the time of the French and Indian War, American colonists had come to rely more on British troops and volunteer provincial units for protection, but even though the militia system had deteriorated, Americans held fast to their faith in the concept of the citizen soldier. Beginning with the Stamp Act crisis and extending throughout the Revolution, the Americans' experience with the British Army only strengthened their hatred of standing armies as implements of monarchy and tyranny and a threat to civilian government.

Although George Washington and others frequently complained about the shortcomings of the militia, some Continental Army officers like Nathanael Greene had come to a more realistic appraisal of the value of these part-time soldiers by the end of the war. While the militia could not be counted on to stand up to trained, regular forces, it could and often did perform other important roles that were less obvious but crucial elements in the winning of independence.

The roots of the various militia systems that developed in the North American English colonies reached far back to Anglo-Saxon Britain. All able-bodied freemen could, in theory, be called up for temporary service by the king to defend their community and the kingdom from invasion. As the earliest successful English settlement in North America, the Virginia colony immediately faced the problem of how to defend itself from possible Spanish attack as well as from the native inhabitants.

The first quarter of the 17th century was a period of experimentation and improvisation as the settlers struggled to gain a foothold in the New World. During the succeeding decades, the colony's evolving militia system was refined, reorganized, and continually tested in combat. Forced to defend themselves with little or no outside help, the colonists had developed an effective and well organized militia system that by the 1670s encompassed nearly all able-bodied, adult males.

As threats to the colony diminished, the Virginia militia largely ceased to be an effective combat force. By the early 1770s, the militia's primary function was to maintain public order, and one historian has described local militia musters as something "of a joke" since many men were "untrained, unarmed, and uninterested." The situation changed dramatically in the spring of 1775 with the outbreak of open hostilities between the Americans and British forces. By the summer of 1775, the Virginia Revolutionary government had established a threepart military establishment consisting of regular full-time soldiers, a militia composed of most free white males, and a smaller, elite militia group to be called "minutemen" who were to be given extra training and provided with hunting shirts and leggings. Although some minutemen companies did see combat early on against Governor Dunmore, within a year the special minute companies had been merged back into the regular militia establishment.

By 1777 the Virginia militia's duties consisted mostly of suppressing loyalists, preventing slave uprisings, and serving as a pool of potential recruits for the Continental Army. Evidence of militia activity is scarce and usually fragmentary, but one way to learn what militiamen actually did during the Revolution is to study their applications for pensions, submitted decades after the war. Because the records from Amherst County, Virginia, are relatively complete, they provide a good example of what kinds of duties a typical militiaman might perform. Amherst militiamen played a variety of roles during the years 1775-1782, some being called up for as many as four or



Visitors at the Yorktown Victory Center are invited to train as members of a citizen militia during the Liberty Celebration in July.

five tours, which usually lasted about three months each. Many Amherst men served as guards at the barracks near Charlottesville where the British soldiers taken prisoner at Saratoga were being held. Others were called out to fight Indians on the frontier or to relieve state forces at nearby garrisons. Some tours involved nothing more glamorous than gathering provisions or driving herds of cattle.

Most Amherst militiamen saw little real action until 1780 when they were called on to provide men to fight in the Carolinas. One ill-fated company was at the Battle of Camden in August when the men broke and ran away along with the rest of the Virginia and North Carolina militia. Another company of Amherst militiamen was ordered south in March 1781 to support General Nathanael Greene, but arrived too late to take part in the Battle of Guilford Court House.

When Virginia was invaded beginning in January 1781, the Amherst militia was called out numerous times as the British seemed to march at will throughout large areas of the eastern and central regions of the state. A number of Amherst County men reported having served under the Marquis de Lafayette in the summer of that year, and some fought in the Battle of Green Spring against Lord Cornwallis. As Generals Washington and Rochambeau arrived in Virginia in September to begin the siege of Yorktown, Amherst militiamen, along with those from many other counties, were called up to support the regular army. Many of the elderly men who applied for pensions beginning in the 1820s proudly proclaimed that they were present at the “surrender of Lord Cornwallis.”

By the end of the Revolution, some Continental Army officers had learned what the militia could – and could not – reasonably be expected to do. Although the militia was seldom able to stand up alone to British regulars, it nevertheless made a number of important, even vital, contributions to winning independence.



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