

The American Revolution Part 1

The emergence of democracy

Up to the middle of the eighteenth century, almost all European countries were ruled by monarchs (kings or queens). The monarchs believed that God had given them the right to rule and that their people should obey them as they obeyed God. Sometimes monarchs asked noblemen for advice about how they should rule. But ordinary people had no say at all in how their countries were ran. Their duty was to pay their taxes and obey their rulers. Then a new idea emerged from the enlightenment. It was that the people of a country had the right to take part in their government. We call this 'democracy' or 'rule by the people'. In this section we shall see how this new idea produced revolution in America and later we will look at France.

Settling in the New World

After Columbus landed in America the Spaniards and Portuguese claimed that all of North and South America belonged to them. But other countries did not accept this. The French took control of Canada and the valley of the Mississippi river from New Orleans. The English took control of the east coast of North America.

English settlements



The English first settled in an area which they called Virginia in honour of Queen Elizabeth (the "Virgin Queen"). In 1620 a group called the 'Pilgrim Fathers' set sail for Virginia. Their leadership came from the religious congregations of English Dissenters (Calvinists) who had fled England for the relative calm and tolerance of Holland. Concerned with losing their cultural identity, the group later arranged with English investors to establish a new colony in North America. The colony, established in 1620, became the oldest continuously inhabited British settlement and the second successful English settlement (after the founding of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607) in what was to become the United States of America. Their ship, the Mayflower, was blown off course and arrived further north in an area called Massachusetts. The first winter was very hard and many of the settlers died. But the local Indians helped them to plant seed and they produced a good harvest. Today, Americans

celebrate the survival of the Pilgrim Fathers on Thanksgiving Day. In Canada, Thanksgiving Day is celebrated on the second Monday in October. In the United States, it falls on the fourth Thursday of November.

Thirteen colonies

Over the next century the English set up more colonies, until by 1760 there were thirteen in all. In 1760 there were two and a half million people living in the thirteen colonies. About two million of the settlers had emigrated from Europe, most of them from Britain and Ireland. They went for various reasons. Some wanted to escape from religious persecution. Others hoped to make their fortunes in a new world where land was cheap and work plentiful.

Slavery

But about half a million Americans had no such hopes. They were the slaves. They had been captured in Africa and sold as slaves to white Americans who needed labourers to grow cotton, sugar and tobacco in the hot southern colonies. They and their children and their children's children could never hope to enjoy the freedom of the new world.

How Britain ruled its American colonies

The thirteen colonies were part of the British Empire. In 1760 its king was George III. George ruled his Empire with the advice of his parliament, which was made up of wealthy landowners. George appointed a governor to rule each colony in his name. Each colony also had an elected Assembly which advised the governor about what the colonists wanted. For many years this system worked well. The colonists had a great deal of freedom. They could raise their own taxes and decide how to spend most of the money. But the governor kept them in touch with what the king wanted.

The capture of Canada

The main worry of the colonists was the fact that the French were in Canada. France and Britain were often at war. Would the French try to conquer the British colonies?

In 1756 another war broke out between France and Britain. The British won and captured Canada in 1763. This was a great relief to the colonists, but the war had been expensive. The British felt it was only fair that the colonists should pay their share of the cost, since they gained most of the benefits. King George and the British parliament planned to tax the colonies to pay for conquering Canada. The colonists protested at this. They said it was not right that a parliament in England, elected by people who lived over 3,000 miles away could tax them. They felt that they should only pay taxes imposed by an Assembly (parliament) they had elected themselves. The British ignored their protests. In 1765 the London Parliament introduced the **Stamp Act**. It put a tax on documents like contracts and wills as well as on playing cards. News of the Stamp Act caused outrage in the American colonies. Groups of men known as the 'Sons of Liberty' organised resistance to it. Their slogan was '**No taxation without representation**'.

The campaign against the Stamp Act was successful. People refused to pay the tax. King George's government decided to drop the Stamp Act but they replaced it with taxes on imported goods such as tea, glass, paint and paper. The colonists felt this was almost as bad. In protest, they organised a boycott of British goods. Boston in Massachusetts took a lead in these developments. It was a prosperous port with a population of over 16,000. Many British soldiers (who were known as 'Redcoats' because of the colour of their uniform) were stationed there. Relations were bad between the soldiers and the citizens of Boston. One reason for that was that the Redcoats, who were very badly paid, often took part-time jobs. They were willing to work for low wages and this cut the wages of the local people.

The Boston Massacre

On 5 March 1770, a dispute broke out between a group of soldiers and some citizens. The soldiers opened fire. Five people were killed and seven were injured. This became known as the **Boston massacre** and passed into American folklore as an example of British cruelty.



At last the British backed down. They removed all taxes except one on tea, which they kept to show that they had the right to tax the American colonists. The Americans then began to smuggle in tea for which the tax had not been paid.

The Boston Tea Party

Most British tea came from the East India Company. The company was in deep financial trouble and the government decided to help it by cutting the tax on tea to America. This made the company's tea cheaper than the smuggled tea. But many merchants would have lost money if smuggling ended.

In Boston people attended a protest meeting on 16 December 1773. They decided to go aboard the ships and dump the tea in the harbour. A group of men disguised themselves as Indians. They climbed onto the three tea ships in the harbour and emptied the tea into the sea. Three hundred and forty-two tea chests were destroyed. It was said at the time that the pile of dumped tea was so high in the harbour that some of it was falling back onto the ships. Later some people went so far as to give up eating fish caught in Boston harbour 'because they had drunk of the East India Tea'



The Intolerable Acts

King George was outraged when he heard about the Boston Tea Party. He wanted to punish Boston. Parliament passed Acts which closed the port and reduced the power of the Massachusetts Assembly. The Americans called these measures 'the Intolerable Acts'.

The First Continental Congress

Other colonies watched events in Boston with dismay. They decided that they must make a united stand against King George and the British parliament. In September 1774 each of the thirteen colonies sent representatives to a meeting in Philadelphia. The meeting called itself the 'Continental Congress'. The Congress decided to boycott British goods until the Intolerable Acts were removed. But at this stage they were still loyal to King George. They just wanted him to let them decide on their own taxes. They were not yet looking for independence from Britain.

The first shots are fired

Meanwhile, in Boston, some citizens were arming. They called themselves the Minutemen because they were ready to take action at a minute's notice. The British appointed General Gage to restore order in Boston. He learned that the Minutemen had a large store of arms in Concord, near Boston, and he planned to seize it. On the night of 18 April 1775, British troops set out for Concord. But the rebels learned of their plans and sent messengers to warn the surrounding countryside. The most famous messenger was Paul Revere.

At Lexington, on the road to Concord, rebels clashed with British troops. Eight Americans were killed and ten were wounded. Later that day a second battle took place in Concord. The British were forced to retreat to Boston. The Americans now placed Boston under siege. The War of Independence had begun.



(Left) A statue of Paul Revere in Boston

The ride of Paul Revere is one of the most famous events of the War of Independence. Revere was a metalworker and engraver.

He had made a famous engraving of the Boston Massacre (see opposite) and had taken part in the Boston Tea Party. Although arrested, he succeeded in spreading the news about the approaching British troops. He is a great American folk-hero today

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did many Europeans emigrate to North America after 1620?
2. How did George III rule the American colonies?
3. Why did the British want to tax the colonies after 1763?
4. What was the Stamp Act? Why did the colonists object to the Stamp Act? What slogan did they use to express their ideas?
5. What was the Boston Tea Party?
6. What were the 'Intolerable Acts'?
7. What was the First Continental Congress, and what did it decide?
8. Why was the Battle of Lexington an important turning point?

Discussion question: Do you think the American War of Independence might have been avoided? Explain your answer.