By the mid-1700s, settlers had established thirteen colonies in America. The colonies, all under British control, were located along the Atlantic shore, extending from present-day Maine in the north to Georgia in the south. Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire were the New England Colonies; the Middle Colonies were Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware; and the Southern Colonies included Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

The Atlantic Ocean served as a 3,000-mile-wide buffer between Britain and its colonies. Letters from Britain to the colonies took five weeks to arrive, moving slowly across the Atlantic on sailing ships. This great gap in distance and time allowed the colonists to develop self-sufficiency (the ability to provide for one’s own needs) and considerable self-confidence.

During the first half of the 1700s, Britain was preoccupied with struggles in Europe and basically ignored its colonies. While the British king appointed governors for each colony, the colonists elected representatives to legislative assemblies. These assemblies held most of the power to make laws for the colonies. The king could overrule the assemblies’ actions but rarely took any notice of what they were doing.
British general Charles Cornwallis (right) surrenders his sword to U.S. general George Washington after losing to the Americans at Yorktown, Virginia. (© Bettmann/Corbis.)
In the early 1750s, Britain turned its attention toward America. The British were worried because France had claimed a great deal of land in North America and French settlers were developing a profitable fur trade. Britain and France had been battling for dominance in Europe for centuries; now the battle moved across the Atlantic and became a struggle for dominance in North America. This battle, which lasted from 1754 to 1763, is known as the French and Indian War. The war pitted the French and their Native American allies against the British army and the colonial militias. During and after the war, Britain reasserted its authority over the colonies. Britain began meddling in the colonies’ politics and started taxing colonists to help pay for defending the colonies against other European colonial powers and the Native American populations. The colonists so resented Britain’s interference that they revolted and declared their independence from the British. The American Revolution, the colonists’ battle to achieve independence, lasted from 1775 to 1783. During this period, the colonists created the Articles of Confederation, America’s first constitution. The colonists finally won their struggle against the British. The Treaty of Paris (1783) officially recognized their independence, and with that, the United States of America became the newest nation of the world.
French and Indian War

During the French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years’ War, Britain and France battled for dominance in North America. Both countries had long hoped to claim North America for their own. France claimed the land north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River, territory reaching far into what is now Canada. The area within the later United States included lands of the future states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. The French maintained a profitable fur trading empire that stretched beyond the boundaries of their land claim to include the Ohio River valley, a region west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Ohio River valley included all or parts of present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and the far western parts of Pennsylvania and New York. There were Native Americans living on this land; some of them had lived there for centuries, and others had been forced to move into the region to make way for the colonial settlements in the east. The Native Americans did not want white settlements to spread across the Appalachian Mountains. However, the French who did not try to settle in the region stayed on good terms with the Native Americans by constantly giving them gifts and treating them as trading partners.

British fur traders and colonists began to come into the Ohio River valley as early as 1740. Both the French and the Native Americans resisted. The French built new forts to defend their interests. By 1755, the French and their Native American allies had escalated their hostile attacks against the British traders and colonists. To aid the colonists, Britain sent soldiers under General Edward Braddock (1695–1755) to the Ohio Valley. The band of soldiers included regular British troops and recruits from the colonies. A young Virginian named George Washington (1732–1799) was a member of Braddock’s force.

General Braddock, aided by Washington, marched on Fort Duquesne, a newly built French fort near present-day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Combining their forces, the French and the Native Americans soundly defeated the British army soldiers and colonial militiamen. Braddock was fatally wounded. Washington survived, but two of his horses were...
killed, shot out from under him. After two more years of defeat, Britain redirected its war effort to focus on the French forts located along the Saint Lawrence River, a waterway that begins above northwestern New York and flows through southern Quebec. British leaders then sent the full force of the British army to North America. After capturing several forts, the British defeated the French in the Battle of Quebec in 1759. Montreal, located at the southwestern tip of Quebec, fell to the British in 1760, sealing control of French-held Canada for the British.
On February 10, 1763, British, French, and Spanish officials signed a treaty ending the French and Indian War. The French surrendered to Britain all the land they had claimed north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River and gave up their claim to Canada stretching from Newfoundland to Lake Superior. The Spanish had aided France during the war, and because they were on the losing side, they were forced to give up Florida to Britain. However, treaty negotiations gave Spain control of all lands west of the Mississippi River south of the Canadian border. Despite the treaty, Native Americans led by Chief Pontiac (c. 1720–1769) continued to fight against British positions in the Ohio Valley. However, Pontiac and his men were soon defeated.

Consequences of the war

By winning the French and Indian War, the British widened their empire in North America, at least for the short term. The war had been significant for the colonists, too. Up to twenty thousand ragged colonial militiamen had gained valuable battle experience fighting side by side with British soldiers. The militiamen had come from different colonies and diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, but they found that they shared similar ideas and had a common goal: They all wanted to live a life free from government oppression, or domination.

One of the main reasons the colonists had fought the war was to gain access to the land west of the Appalachian Mountains; after the war ended, they looked forward to establishing settlements in the region. The hostile French presence had been removed, and for the time being, the Native Americans had been subdued. All the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River appeared open for settlement. Colonists from Pennsylvania to North Carolina eagerly made preparations for the trek over the Appalachian Mountains to the vast open lands beyond.

Proclamation of 1763

Eight months after winning the French and Indian War, Britain issued the Proclamation of 1763. The proclamation prohibited colonists from establishing settlements beyond the
Appalachians until negotiations with the Native Americans might open up the lands. The new law was Britain’s attempt to keep peace and avoid more costly wars with the Native Americans. Britain hoped that the Native Americans would appreciate the proclamation and allow British fur traders to continue doing business in the area without fear of attack. The proclamation was also part of Britain’s strategy to slow colonial expansion; the British recognized that the colonies were becoming increasingly difficult to govern and hoped that the proclamation would help them control their North American empire.

The Proclamation of 1763 caught land-hungry colonists completely off guard. Shocked and angered by the new law, thousands of colonists traveled defiantly over mountain trails to cross the Appalachians. They believed that Britain had no right to restrict their plans, and soon they were settling in present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee, delighted by the rich farmland they found there.

The British, who were feeling proud and arrogant because of their victory over France, were in no mood to be challenged by the disobedient colonists. Parliament (the British government) decided to keep approximately ten thousand British soldiers stationed in the colonies. The British soldiers were called redcoats because they wore bright red jackets as part of their uniform. Officially, the redcoats’ mission was to protect the colonists, but the colonists suspected that the soldiers were really there to enforce the will of the king. This belief stirred up further rebellion among the colonists. They continued to follow trails over the Appalachians, and more and more of them crowded onto a path toward revolution (a fundamental change in political organization).

A huge debt

At the close of the French and Indian War in 1763, Britain controlled a worldwide empire but had acquired a huge debt. Other countries and individuals had loaned the British government money to fight its battles. Half of Britain’s enormous debt came from the costs of fighting the French and Indian War.
Britain needed to raise money to pay off its debt, and in the spring of 1764 members of Parliament decided to gather some of the needed funds by taxing the colonists. Up until this time, Britain had provided tax-free protection for the American colonies, fighting battles against Native Americans, pirates on the high seas, and foreign powers that sought to claim land in North America. In return, Britain expected the colonies to purchase British-made goods and to provide a continuous supply of tobacco (a crop that was not grown in Britain). Britain also expected the colonies to build ship parts in support of the vast British navy and to provide sailors to work on the ships traveling between the colonies and Britain.

On April 5, 1764, Parliament enacted the Sugar Act, which put import duties on sugar and molasses, two products that the colonies had been importing from the West Indies (islands south of Florida). Import duties were taxes on goods brought into the colonies from a foreign country. The Sugar Act was Britain’s first attempt to directly tax the colonies. The act also allowed British officials to search the homes of colonists suspected of not paying the tax. Colonists strongly resisted paying import duties; fearful of pushing the colonists past the breaking point, Parliament opted to lower the fees. Over the next ten years Britain enacted numerous policies that further angered the colonists.

Quartering Act and Stamp Act (1765)

British prime minister George Grenville (1712–1770) insisted it was reasonable and just that the colonists help pay for their protection. Under his leadership, Parliament passed two acts despised by the colonists: the Quartering Act and the Stamp Act. The Quartering Act (1765) required colonists to provide food and housing (quarters) for British soldiers stationed in the colonies; in fact, the colonists had to invite the redcoats into their own homes. The Stamp Act, passed on March 22, 1765, required colonists to pay a tax on many types of legal documents and sales documents, on newspapers and pamphlets that were the colonists’ only source of news, on marriage licenses, and even on playing cards. Colonists could not purchase these various types of paper without paying a tax; each paper item would then be stamped to signify that the buyer had paid the added fee.
These new laws reached into colonists’ pocketbooks and, in the case of the Quartering Act, into their homes. The colonists protested that the legislation was unfair. Colonists had no representation in Parliament, where the tax acts were created; therefore, they argued, Parliament had no right to tax them. Soon a rallying chant was heard throughout the colonies: “No taxation without representation!” Many colonists refused to provide food and shelter for redcoats, and they expressed their opposition to the Stamp Act by damaging the homes of those who were supposed to collect the tax for the British government. Some of the Stamp Act officials were hung in effigy; that is, the colonists made crude likenesses (effigies) of the tax collectors and hung the figures on poles to intimidate and humiliate the officials. The colonies were on the brink of revolution.

Protests heat up

On May 29, 1765, Patrick Henry (1736–1799) of Virginia introduced to the colony’s legislature the Virginia Resolutions, which strongly questioned Parliament’s right to tax the colonists. Later that year, from October 7 to October 25, twenty-seven representatives from nine colonies gathered in New York City for a meeting called the Stamp Act Congress. They produced a proclamation insisting that, as British subjects, colonists could not be taxed by the British without their consent.

Continuing the formal protest begun by the Stamp Act Congress, many colonial legislatures adopted “nonimportation agreements.” These were agreements to stop importing (bringing into America) British goods. For example, colonies stopped importing woolen clothing made in England. Colonists instead used homespun wool from homegrown sheep to make less attractive but functional, warm, and durable clothes. Some colonists began holding meetings and rallies supporting the nonimportation agreements; the men in these groups called themselves the Sons of Liberty, and the women were the Daughters of Liberty. These groups were especially strong in northern cities, where manufacturers welcomed the opportunity to produce replacement goods and make greater profits.

By 1766, the nonimportation agreements had their desired effect: British manufacturers missed the profits they used
to make from the colonies, and British workers were losing their jobs because there was less demand for the goods they produced. In addition, it was clear to British officials that they could not collect the stamp tax from angry colonists without endangering themselves. Pressured by these circumstances, Parliament repealed, or formally abandoned, the Stamp Act. However, as a show of its continued power over the colonists, Parliament issued the Declaration Act, which affirmed that Parliament could indeed pass laws for the colonies. Nevertheless, the American colonists were the definite winners in the Stamp Act conflict. They successfully forced the British government, the most powerful government in the world, to back away from enacted legislation.

**Townsend Acts and the Boston Massacre**

Stubbornly and in desperate need of revenue (income), Parliament passed another set of taxes on the colonies on June 29, 1767. The Townsend Revenue Acts, as they were called, imposed import duties on glass, lead, paper, paint, and tea. With their victory over the Stamp Act fresh in their minds, the colonists did not see any reason to pay these taxes. Instead, they continued the nonimportation practices they had used before, opting to manufacture replacement products or simply do without the goods they usually bought from Britain. Resourceful Bostonians found that they could smuggle tea into the harbor at cheap prices and avoid the new tax. These various forms of resistance effectively undermined Britain’s tax legislation and authority.

The British government sent the redcoats to Boston in October 1768. They were put in charge of enforcing the Townsend Acts and controlling the worst colonial offenders, the rebels of Massachusetts. Seeing redcoats on the streets of Boston aroused discontent and anger among the city’s residents.

After a year and a half of tension, violence erupted between citizens of Boston and British troops. On March 5, 1770, a mob of about sixty colonists with clubs confronted ten redcoats. Provoked, the redcoats fired their guns into the crowd, wounding or killing eleven colonists. Word of the so-called Boston Massacre shocked both the colonists and the British. British troops were withdrawn from Boston, and Parliament repealed the Townsend Acts, except the tax on tea.
In spring 1770, people in some of the colonies began to form the Committees of Correspondence. The purpose of the committees was to share news with each other and to effectively respond to any new British policies. Samuel Adams (1722–1803), a rebellious Bostonian and second cousin of future U.S. president John Adams (1735–1826; served 1797–1801), established the Massachusetts committees. Soon all the colonies had committees, and information was shared throughout colonial America. The Committees of Correspondence were the first step toward forming independent colonial legislatures.

**Boston Tea Party and the Intolerable Acts**

With Bostonians smuggling much of their tea into the city's harbor, the East India Company, a British trading company, was unable to sell its tea to the colonists. Britain decided to award the East India Company sole authority
to sell tea to the colonies. The British government allowed the company to sell its tea at a price that was competitive with the price of smuggled tea, even with the tax included. This move enraged colonists, who recognized that the British intended to rule the colonies and continue taxing them. On December 16, 1773, the colonists took action. Thinly disguised as Native Americans, they boarded three East India Company ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor. Crowds on the shore cheered on the rebels.

The incident in the harbor came to be known as the Boston Tea Party. It outraged the British and prompted Parliament to pass the Coercive Acts in spring 1774. The colonists immediately renamed these new laws, calling them the Intolerable Acts. The Intolerable Acts included (1) the Boston Port Bill, which closed the port of Boston until all the tea destroyed in the “party” was paid for; (2) the Massachusetts Government Act, which replaced the elected colonial government council
with officials appointed by Parliament; (3) the Administration of Justice Act, which allowed British officials accused of a crime in the colonies to be taken back to Britain for trial (colonists believed this act was designed to let the accused officials escape punishment); and (4) another Quartering Act (similar to the Quartering Act of 1765), which required that colonial taverns and vacant buildings be used to house the redcoats.

Quebec Act

Passed at the same time as the Intolerable Acts, the Quebec Act expressed the British government's policies regarding French settlers who were living in present-day Canada, north-east of the Great Lakes. This region east of Lake Superior had been under British control since the end of the French and Indian War. The Quebec Act proclaimed that the area under the governor of Quebec extended south to the Ohio River, encompassing present-day Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana—an area of land long coveted and recently occupied by the colonists. The act allowed French settlers to live there just as they had lived in Europe, governed by nonelected officials and without trial by jury. It also permitted French settlers to worship as Roman Catholics. From the British point of view, the Quebec Act gave French settlers much of what they had been requesting since their defeat in the French and Indian War.

American colonists abhorred the Quebec Act. They saw it as a grab of land—land that they had already begun settling—and a harsh knock against elective government and trial by jury. Most of the colonists were Protestants, so they were also unhappy that the new legislation allowed Roman Catholicism into the area. The original settlers who established the American colonies were Protestants who had left Europe to escape persecution by Roman Catholic leaders; more than a century later, at the time of the Quebec Act, Protestant colonists were still not inclined to welcome Catholics as neighbors. (Protestant religious sects came into existence in the 1500s and 1600s, when European members of the Roman Catholic Church disagreed with Catholic teachings and split away from the Church to form their own religious groups.) Furthermore, Protestants at the time tended to view Catholics as “papists,” a term of contempt that referred to people who
pledged their loyalty to the pope. Protestants doubted that Catholics could be completely loyal to their own country or government if they were under the pope’s command.

First Continental Congress

The Intolerable Acts and the Quebec Act angered the colonies and roused them to action. Local colonial leaders called for a meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at that time the largest city in America. Twelve of the thirteen colonies (Georgia declined to attend) sent representatives to Philadelphia. The delegates first thought they would meet in the Pennsylvania State House (later known as Independence Hall), the building where the colonial Pennsylvania government met. However, colonists were concerned that representatives of the British government stationed in Pennsylvania might overhear their discussions so they, instead, accepted the invitation of the Carpenters’ Company, an association of master builders, to meet at their privately owned and newly completed Carpenters’ Hall, about two blocks from the State House. There they had privacy and could discuss their dissatisfaction with British rule. The representatives knew that they were engaged in rebellious, potentially revolutionary debates; during these debates, representatives made statements against the British king, an action that was punishable by hanging. Undaunted, the representatives carried on with their meeting, the First Continental Congress. The meeting lasted from September 5 to October 26, 1774, and before it ended, the delegates made plans to gather again in 1775.

The First Continental Congress laid the foundation for cooperation among the colonies. The delegates discussed how to deal with the British oppression of Massachusetts under the Intolerable Acts and the rage of many colonists over the Quebec Act. Massachusetts delegate John Adams, who would later become the second president of the nation, convinced the majority to take a firm approach. The delegates pledged support for Massachusetts and agreed to stop all trade with Britain as a protest against the Intolerable Acts. They drafted letters to the British people and to King George III (1738–1820; reigned 1760–1820), expressing their grievances, their desire for the repeal of the Intolerable Acts, and their hope that they could return to a peaceful and harmonious union with Britain.
Abigail Adams’s Letter: “Remember the Ladies”

Abigail Adams (1744–1818) and her husband, John Adams, exchanged many letters through the years. John was a Massachusetts delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and in 1796 he would be elected the second president of the United States. Abigail, a wealthy, educated woman, took a great deal of interest in her husband’s work. In a letter to her husband dated March 31, 1776, Abigail took it upon herself to speak up for women, hoping that he and his fellow delegates would keep women’s needs in mind as they debated the issues of government and individual rights. Her letter is perhaps the earliest known statement urging civil rights for women.

In the 1700s, women did not attend political meetings and did not work outside the home. Most girls received their schooling at home and lived with their parents until they were married. Husbands had almost total control over their spouses as wives could not own property or participate in community politics. Abigail Adams wanted women to have more freedom and the opportunity to participate in political events, and she recognized that the revolution occurring in America might make these goals possible. When Abigail penned her letter, the American Revolution had been under way for about a year, and the Continental Congress was under heavy pressure from many colonists to declare America’s independence from Britain and begin forming a new government. Abigail added some extra pressure on her husband by bringing up the subject of women’s rights, threatening a women’s rebellion if he failed to heed her words:

“...remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment [start] a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

Abigail Adams, wife of Massachusetts delegate and future president John Adams, urged her husband to keep in mind the civil rights of women. (© Hulton Archive/Getty Images.)
The growing national unity of many colonists was most evident by a statement made by Virginia delegate Patrick Henry. It was at the First Continental Congress that he uttered the famous line, “I am not a Virginian, but an American.” This was a revolutionary thing to say, because until then colonists had always thought of themselves as, for instance, Virginians or Pennsylvanians, not as Americans.

War begins; Second Continental Congress convenes

Despite the efforts made at the First Continental Congress, Massachusetts colonists doubted that they would receive a positive response from Britain. Determined to rid themselves of British rule, they formed a “minute-man” militia, a military force made up of local citizens. They were known as minutemen because they claimed they could be dressed, armed, and out their front door within one minute if called upon to defend their colony against the British. People who supported the rebel cause and no longer felt any loyalty to Britain were called Patriots.

The Massachusetts militia immediately began stockpiling guns, gunpowder, and various other supplies. They stored the supplies in Lexington and Concord, towns northwest of Boston. In April 1775, General Thomas Gage (1721–1787) of the British army sent troops to capture the militia’s supplies. On April 19, Gage’s troops and local minutemen fired shots on each other, the opening shots of the American Revolution.

With war already in progress, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775. This time, all thirteen colonies were represented. Many delegates still hoped they could work out a solution with Britain so that ties would not be severed. They again drafted letters to the British people.
and the British king, repeating their grievances. They hoped that the British would address their concerns quickly and that fighting would continue only a short time. Nevertheless, they also considered the possibility of a hostile response, and they spent part of the meeting making plans to form an American army and navy and prepare for war.

While the Second Continental Congress was in session, Patriots captured British strongholds in northern New York. They captured Fort Ticonderoga on May 10 and Fort Crown Point on May 12. Both yielded large stores of guns and gunpowder for the Patriots. On June 14, 1775, the Continental Congress named the militiamen in Massachusetts the
Continental Army. The Continental Congress called on other colonies to quickly supply militias to increase the army’s numbers.

The British tried to regroup in Boston, but the Continental Army, determined to oust the British, surrounded the city. About fifteen hundred Americans dug in at Bunker (Breed’s) Hill. The Battle of Bunker Hill played out on June 17, 1775. Although the British won the battle, they were shocked to suffer so many casualties (soldiers wounded or killed) at the hands of American sharpshooters.

On July 3, George Washington assumed command of the Continental Army at Boston. The Second Continental Congress had wisely chosen Washington, a man with incredible leadership abilities, as general and commander in chief of the army. Two days later, on July 5, the Continental Congress sent the Olive Branch Petition to King George III, asking him to cooperate in a peaceful settlement. George III refused to receive the petition. Instead, on August 23, 1775, he proclaimed the colonies to be in a state of rebellion. He urged colonists to end their rebellion or face inevitable defeat by the powerful British army.

**Common Sense**

In late 1775, many colonists and colony leaders were still reluctant to declare independence from Britain. The approximately three million colonists could be divided into three groups, each with a different perspective on the situation: The Loyalists supported Britain and the king; the Patriots were ready to fight for independence; and the rest of the colonists intended to hold their support back and see how the rebellion unfolded. People who belonged to the third group held back for several reasons. First, loyalty to Britain was deeply embedded in many colonists. Second, rebellion against King George III was very dangerous. In Ireland, rebels seeking independence from Britain were hanged or brutally murdered by British troops. Third, not all colonists shared a sense of unity. Each colony operated independently of the others, and many colonists were only interested in local issues, not the broader revolutionary cause. Additionally, 96 percent of the colonists lived in rural settings, where they were busy with the everyday activities of providing food and shelter. News traveled slowly by word of mouth, occasional newspapers,
and pamphlets. Therefore, many colonists took a long time to decide how they felt about the war.

On January 19, 1776, colonist Thomas Paine (1737–1809) published a pamphlet titled *Common Sense* that urged colonists to side with the Patriots. Paine had immigrated from an impoverished life in Britain and had been in the colonies for a little over a year. Enraged by British attacks on Lexington and Concord, Paine called for America to completely separate itself from Britain. Calling King George III the “Royal Brute of Great Britain,” he charged that Britain had protected the colonies from foreign enemies only for its own interests and profits, not for the colonists’ interests. Paine charged that Britain had not been a good “parent country”: “Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families…. Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation…. ‘ITS TIME TO PART….’” He pleaded for colonists to form a representative form of government, a republic.

Within six months, *Common Sense* had sold five hundred thousand copies, reaching a large portion of the population. Its powerful words shocked colonists into a realization that they had been supporting a corrupt king. *Common Sense* convinced many colonists who were previously undecided or leaning to the Loyalist side to give their support to the Patriots. Reading *Common Sense* persuaded many to boldly push their Continental Congress representatives for a declaration of independence from Britain.

**Declaration of Independence**

By June 1776, the Continental Army had been fighting British troops for more than a year, and the Continental Congress delegates meeting at the Pennsylvania State House decided that they must take the revolutionary, dangerous step of declaring independence from Britain. On June 7, Virginia
delegate Richard Henry Lee (1732–1794) made a motion (official proposal) that the colonies become free and independent states. While Lee's suggestion was still being fiercely debated, Congress appointed a committee to write a statement of independence in case the delegates passed Lee's motion. Two of the delegates involved in the debate were Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and Virginia's Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). Jefferson, a brilliant young lawyer, took on the responsibility of writing the declaration. Agonizing over every word, Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence at his desk in a rented room near the State House.

Jefferson began the Declaration by stating that the colonies were separating from Britain to form their own country. Then, writing the most famous words of the declaration, he began to explain why he and his fellow colonists desired their independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed [provided] by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . .” (Jefferson meant that certain rights are so basic they cannot be denied or taken away.) Jefferson went on to state that all governments have a responsibility to protect these rights and that the British government had failed to do so in the colonies. Jefferson asserted that this failure on Britain’s part gave the colonists the right to establish a new government for themselves.

Jefferson also included a list of twenty-seven grievances, or complaints, against the British king. Some of the most important grievances included the following: The king had interfered with the colonies’ ability to make their own laws; the king sent over judges from Britain who depended on him for their jobs and pay; the king had halted settlement of lands west of the Appalachian Mountains; he ordered colonists to feed and house British soldiers in their own homes; he taxed colonists without their consent; he interfered with the right to a fair trial by jury; he approved the Quebec Act; and he was hiring foreign fighters such as the Hessians from Germany to fight with the British army against the colonists. Jefferson pointed out that repeated requests had been made to the king to right these wrongs and that the king had refused to listen.

Jefferson concluded the declaration by saying that he and his fellow representatives were acting under the authority of all the colonists to “solemnly . . . Declare That these United Colonies
are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved [freed] from all allegiance [loyalty] to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and ... Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved. . . .”

Jefferson and the other representatives who signed the declaration put their full support behind the quest for independence, as the last line of the document indicates: “For the support of this declaration . . . we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

On July 2, 1776, after almost a month of debate, the Continental Congress passed Lee’s motion to make the colonies

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**American Bald Eagle Icon**

As the Second Continental Congress debated how to create a new national government, its members also needed to select a national icon. They selected the bald eagle, because it was a species of bird that was unique to North America. Most delegates also felt that the bald eagle was a good symbol of the country’s bold spirits, freedom, and power.

Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin, however, was not pleased with the selection. In a letter to his daughter, he criticized the bald eagle: “He is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly. You may have seen him perched on some dead Tree near the River, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the Labour of the Fishing Hawk; and when that diligent Bird has at length taken a Fish, and is bearing it to his Nest for the Support of his Mate and young Ones, the Bald Eagle pursues him and takes it from him.”

Franklin supported the “much more respectable” wild turkey. Although admitting that it could be “a little vain & silly,” Franklin called the wild turkey “a Bird of Courage, [which] would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on.”

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An American bald eagle, the national symbol of the United States. (Library of Congress.)
free and independent states. The delegates adopted the Declaration of Independence two days later, on July 4. On that historic occasion, Franklin rose in the assembly room and somberly declared that he and his fellow delegates must present a united front: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” After pausing to reflect on what they had done, the delegates ordered that the declaration be read to the public. On July 8, Colonel John Nixon (1733–1808) of the Continental Army climbed onto a wooden platform behind the Pennsylvania State House and read the Declaration of Independence to an attentive crowd. News of the event soon spread to all the colonies. Colonies henceforth would be known as independent states.

On August 3, 1776, fifty-six delegates representing all thirteen states signed the Declaration of Independence. The signers included Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Massachusetts representative John Adams. John Hancock (1737–1793), the president of the Continental Congress at that time, signed first with a signature so large that he noted was large enough for King George III to read, clearly demonstrating his defiance of British rule.
Articles of Confederation: The first constitution

Immediately after introducing the Declaration of Independence to the public, the Continental Congress delegates began to create a working government for the new United States of America. A year earlier, in July 1775, Benjamin Franklin had presented a plan that he called the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union. Believing it too radical because Franklin proposed a strong central government rather than a league of states, the Continental Congress had paid little attention to his idea, but the plan was recirculated and debated in 1776. It provided a foundation for building a government that could serve all the states.

All the delegates were loyal to their home states and therefore anxious to create a government that would be fair to the people they represented. They moved forward cautiously as they worked to unify the country, carefully debating various issues. However, they were forced to move more quickly in September 1777, when troops under British commander General William Howe (1729–1814) stormed into Philadelphia. The Continental Congress delegates fled the city, moving west and relocating temporarily in York, Pennsylvania, where they resumed their discussions. By November, they produced the first draft of the Articles of Confederation, a highly revised version but with the same name as Franklin’s earlier plan. On November 15, 1777, the Continental Congress agreed to the Articles of Confederation, which included a preamble (introduction) and thirteen articles (sections).

The delegates had declared independence from Britain to rid the colonies of the oppressive (dominant and often brutal) centralized government of King George III. They wanted their new government to have less influence over their daily lives, and they wanted the states to have more control over their own affairs. Therefore, they drafted the Articles carefully, deliberately creating a weak central government that could not rule over the states. Congress was given only a few powers. For example, it was authorized to conduct foreign affairs. This meant Congress could declare and manage wars, make treaties and alliances, appoint foreign ambassadors, and negotiate loans from foreign powers. The Articles also gave Congress the power to assemble an army and a navy. In addition, Congress was given the responsibility of coining money and establishing a postal system.
To handle its designated duties, Congress set up departments for foreign affairs, war, finance, and postal services.

At the time, Congress was the only federal branch of government authorized by the Articles. There was no executive (presidential) branch. The government also lacked a judicial branch (judges) to administer the law and carry it out through a system of courts. The Articles called for a unicameral (single-house) representative assembly (later the country would shift to a bicameral system that included two legislative bodies, the House of Representatives and the Senate). In this assembly, each of the thirteen states had one vote. It took a minimum of seven votes to approve a decision; it took nine to declare war or pass major legislation, and thirteen to alter the Articles. Decisions to raise an army or regulate trade could only be sent to the states as suggestions. Each state retained its own court system. Any dispute that crossed state lines had to be settled with negotiations; these usually failed, because one state rarely cooperated with another state.

The Articles severely limited Congress in several ways. First, they gave Congress no way to raise money, no way to tax Americans. Congress could merely ask for money from the states. Delegates reasoned that if the Confederation had no required way to raise money it could never endanger the states. Second, Congress could not regulate foreign trade or trade between states. The individual states had to negotiate all trade matters with foreign countries. Thirdly, Congress had no real power to raise an army without cooperation from the states.

The Articles established a friendship league rather than a strong central government. In this way, the states kept a large degree of independence from each other and the new central government. However, the friendship among states proved hard to establish and harder yet to maintain. By the end of 1778, all the states except Delaware and Maryland had signed the Articles. There was disagreement over how to allocate lands west of the Appalachians, and this was the chief obstacle preventing the final two signatures. Massachusetts, Virginia, and New York claimed large blocks of western lands. Pennsylvania, already a large state, and the small states of New Jersey, New Hampshire, Delaware,
and Maryland had no claims on western lands. Delaware and Maryland refused to sign the Articles until all claims were given up to Congress to be allocated for the common good. Delaware signed in 1779. When it appeared certain that all western land claims would be turned over to Congress, Maryland signed on March 1, 1781. On that day, the Articles were ratified (formally approved) and officially in force.

**Treaty of Paris**

Around the same time that delegates debated the Articles of Confederation, a turning point occurred in the American Revolution. In October 1777, British troops surrendered to the Continental Army at Saratoga, New York. This American victory convinced France that the revolutionaries were destined to finally win their independence from Britain. France and Britain had been rivals for centuries, so France had been hoping that the British would lose the war in America. Now that the revolutionaries were close to victory, France decided to come to their aid.

On February 6, 1778, France completed negotiations for an alliance with the Continental Congress to provide critical military aid and loans to the Continental Army. France’s help proved crucial to the army’s ultimate success. The French provided supplies that kept General George Washington’s troops well fed, clothed, and armed. In addition, a fiery young French nobleman, Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), brought French forces to America to aid Washington. The decisive action of the war occurred on October 19, 1781, at Yorktown, Virginia, when British troops under General Charles Cornwallis (1738–1805) found themselves hopelessly surrounded on the Yorktown Peninsula. Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington, giving the Americans a great victory.

The battle at Yorktown did not end the war. Thirty-two thousand British troops remained in the colonies, in Wilmington, Delaware; Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and New York City. Washington took his army to New York City to keep an eye on the ten thousand British soldiers remaining there.
Britain had suffered military adversity not only in America but all around the world, in places such as India and the West Indies and on islands off the coast of Spain. British leaders realized they could not easily replace Cornwallis’s army and continue the battle in America. They were not close to victory; in fact, it seemed likely that they would lose more than they would gain by staying in the fight. Britain’s leaders were also aware that the British people had grown weary of the war’s financial costs.

On January 5, 1782, the British began withdrawing troops from occupied areas in America. Tens of thousands of colonists who had remained Loyalists fled with them. Three Americans were sent to Paris, France, to negotiate a peace treaty: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay (1745–1829). Britain, still bitter rivals with France, tried to negotiate its way back into favor with the Americans to disrupt the recently established relationship between the United States and France. Amazing the Americans, the British granted all lands east of the Mississippi River, north to the Great Lakes, and south to Florida to the fledgling nation, the United States of America. The Americans agreed to stop persecuting Loyalists and to return their property. They also promised to repay debts long owed to British creditors.

On September 3, 1783, the United States and Britain signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the American Revolution and making American independence official. Americans gained priceless territory and freedom, greater rewards than they could have imagined in 1763 at the end of the French and Indian War. The treaty was a stunning victory for the Americans. For an emerging country, the United States had a remarkably strong start.

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