

The morning of April 19, 1775, began with British soldiers moving through the Massachusetts darkness toward the town of Concord. Their mission was to seize military supplies that colonial resistance groups had been collecting outside Boston. Riders, including Paul Revere, William Dawes, and Samuel Prescott, spread warnings through the countryside, allowing local militia companies to assemble. A militia was a part-time military force made up of civilians who trained periodically and could be called into service during an emergency. These men were farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, laborers, and property owners who had left their homes carrying whatever weapons they possessed. By sunrise, a political argument between Britain and its colonies was about to become an open war.

Tension had been building for years because Britain and many colonists held different ideas about authority. The colonies belonged to the British Empire and benefited from British military protection, trade, and access to Atlantic markets. Colonial assemblies also handled many local affairs, leading generations of colonists to become accustomed to governing themselves. When Parliament began exercising greater control after 1763, many colonists believed traditional rights were being taken away. Parliament believed the colonies were refusing to accept responsibilities that came with membership in the empire. The disagreement became dangerous because both sides believed the other was violating the proper order of government.

Much of the trouble grew from an earlier conflict called the French and Indian War, the North American part of the larger Seven Years' War. Britain and France had fought for control of territory, trade routes, and political influence, while Native nations made alliances according to their own interests and survival. Britain defeated France, but the victory created enormous debt and left Britain responsible for defending a larger empire. Parliament decided the colonies should contribute more toward those costs. Many colonists answered that Parliament could not directly tax them because they had no elected representatives there. "No taxation without representation" meant that taxation required the consent of representatives chosen by the people being taxed.

The argument was never simply about whether a tax was expensive. The Stamp Act of 1765 placed a tax on printed materials such as legal documents, newspapers, licenses, and playing cards. Because printed paper appeared throughout commercial and legal life, the law reached into everyday business. Colonists organized boycotts, refusing to buy certain British goods, while groups such as the Sons of Liberty pressured tax collectors to resign. Parliament repealed the Stamp Act but declared that it still possessed authority to legislate for the colonies. Each side treated the retreat as temporary because the larger question of power remained unresolved.

New duties on imported goods brought another round of resistance. British troops were stationed in Boston, where their presence increased resentment and created frequent confrontations with residents. On March 5, 1770, an angry crowd surrounded several soldiers, throwing objects and challenging them. The soldiers opened fire, killing five

colonists in what became known as the Boston Massacre. Crispus Attucks, a sailor of African and Native ancestry, was among the dead and became one of the earliest people killed in the struggle. Patriot writers used the incident to show the danger of maintaining a standing army among civilians, while the soldiers' trial demonstrated that colonial resistance had not yet abandoned the idea of British justice.

The pressure briefly eased, but Parliament retained a tax on tea as a declaration of its authority. In December 1773, colonists disguised themselves and dumped East India Company tea into Boston Harbor. Parliament responded with laws colonists called the Intolerable Acts, closing Boston's port, changing parts of Massachusetts government, and strengthening royal authority. Other colonies sent supplies to Boston because they feared that punishment imposed on Massachusetts could later be used against them. Delegates from twelve colonies met at the First Continental Congress in 1774 to coordinate resistance. Georgia did not participate at that time, but colonial cooperation was becoming stronger.

That cooperation did not yet mean that most colonists wanted independence. Many still considered themselves loyal British subjects seeking recognition of their constitutional rights. They petitioned the king, organized economic pressure, and prepared local defenses while hoping Britain would change course. At the same time, Massachusetts towns collected weapons, ammunition, food, and other supplies. Special militia companies called minutemen trained to respond quickly. British General Thomas Gage, military governor of Massachusetts, received orders to restore control. His attempt to seize the supplies at Concord carried the crisis past the point where another petition could easily contain it.

Approximately seventy militiamen stood on Lexington Green when the British advance force arrived. Their commander, Captain John Parker, did not intend to begin a battle against several hundred professional soldiers. Someone fired a shot, but no one has ever established with certainty who fired first. British troops then opened fire, killing eight colonists and wounding others. The militia scattered, and the British column continued toward Concord. The fighting at Lexington lasted only minutes, but blood had replaced argument.

By the time the British reached Concord, much of the military material had been moved or hidden. At the North Bridge, a larger colonial force confronted British troops and exchanged fire. The British then began the long march back toward Boston, but thousands of militiamen were gathering along the route. They fired from behind trees, stone walls, houses, hills, and other cover before moving to new positions. British soldiers remained disciplined, but the attacks continued for miles and produced heavy casualties. The force that had marched confidently into the countryside returned exhausted and surrounded by a rapidly growing colonial army.

Militia units soon gathered around Boston and placed the city under siege. A siege is an attempt to surround a defended position and cut it off until its occupants surrender,

withdraw, or are defeated. The colonial forces possessed determination but lacked a unified command, dependable supplies, and a formal national government. The Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and began acting as a wartime government. It created the Continental Army and selected George Washington of Virginia as commander. Choosing a Virginian helped turn what might have appeared to be a New England rebellion into a broader colonial cause.

Washington arrived after another major confrontation had already revealed the nature of the coming war. On June 17, 1775, colonial troops fortified Breed's Hill on the Charlestown peninsula, although the engagement became known as the Battle of Bunker Hill. The position threatened British control of Boston, so General William Howe sent troops uphill in direct assaults against the defenses. The colonists repelled two attacks before ammunition shortages helped the British take the position on the third. Britain technically won because it occupied the ground, but more than one thousand British soldiers were killed or wounded. The battle showed that colonial troops could withstand professional soldiers when properly positioned, while also revealing how quickly ammunition and organization could decide a fight.

Victory on the hill had cost Britain far more than the ground was worth. British commanders learned that crushing the rebellion would require more than marching into a town and displaying military power. The Continental Army learned that courage could not solve shortages of gunpowder, food, uniforms, and organization. Soldiers came and went according to short enlistment terms, meaning Washington could lose experienced men just as they became useful. He also had to manage officers from different colonies who competed over rank and authority. Keeping the army alive became as important as winning any single battle.

The siege of Boston changed when artillery arrived from Fort Ticonderoga in New York. Ethan Allen, Benedict Arnold, and a small force had captured the fort in May 1775, gaining cannons and other military supplies. During the winter, Henry Knox supervised the transportation of heavy artillery across roughly three hundred miles of difficult terrain. Washington placed the cannons on Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston and its harbor. The British position became vulnerable because American artillery could now strike the city and threaten the fleet. Rather than risk destruction, British forces evacuated Boston in March 1776 and sailed to Nova Scotia.

The British departure gave the Patriots a victory, but the political purpose of the war remained unsettled. Congress sent the Olive Branch Petition to King George III in 1775, asking him to help restore peace while the colonies were already fighting his army. The king rejected the appeal and declared the colonies to be in rebellion. British authorities hired troops from several German states, many of whom came from Hesse and were therefore commonly called Hessians. They were trained soldiers whose governments contracted their military service to Britain. Their arrival made the conflict appear even more like a war being waged against the colonists rather than a family disagreement within the empire.

Thomas Paine pushed public opinion toward separation with his pamphlet *Common Sense* in January 1776. He wrote in direct language that ordinary readers could understand, attacking monarchy and arguing that an island should not rule a continent. Paine also made independence seem possible rather than reckless. His pamphlet did not create the desire for independence by itself, but it gave scattered frustration a clear political direction. Local governments began instructing their representatives to support separation. Congress appointed a committee to prepare a declaration explaining the decision.

Thomas Jefferson drafted most of the Declaration of Independence, with revisions from John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, other committee members, and Congress. Adopted on July 4, 1776, it announced that the colonies considered themselves free and independent states. Its most enduring language declared that all men were created equal and possessed rights that governments could not rightfully take away. Yet Jefferson and many other signers enslaved people, while women, Native peoples, free Black communities, poor laborers, and men without property remained outside full political equality. The declaration expressed a principle larger than the society prepared to honor it. Future generations would use its language to challenge the exclusions its authors had left in place.

Independence changed the meaning of the fighting. Defeat would no longer mean simply accepting a disputed tax or parliamentary law; Patriot leaders could be treated as traitors to the Crown. The new states also had to create governments, raise money, supply an army, conduct diplomacy, and persuade uncertain residents to support a revolution. Britain possessed one of the world's strongest navies, a professional army, experienced officers, access to international credit, and the resources of an empire. The Americans had no permanent national capital, stable currency, established military system, or reliable taxing power. Their strongest advantage was that Britain had to cross an ocean and control a vast population spread across a large territory.

Washington did not need to destroy the entire British military. He needed to keep the Continental Army from being destroyed, maintain political resistance, and make the war too expensive or frustrating for Britain to continue. Britain faced a more difficult assignment because capturing cities would not automatically end the rebellion. The British could occupy New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and other important places while Patriot governments and armies continued elsewhere. Territory had to be guarded, supply lines protected, and Loyalist supporters defended. Every British victory that failed to destroy American resistance extended the war rather than settling it.

The scale of the problem became clear around New York during the summer of 1776. Britain assembled a massive force of soldiers and ships under General William Howe and Admiral Richard Howe. New York offered an excellent harbor and access to major waterways, making it an ideal British base. Washington attempted to defend both Manhattan and Long Island even though his inexperienced army was spread too widely. In August, British forces used an ungarded route through Jamaica Pass to turn the

American left flank during the Battle of Long Island, also called the Battle of Brooklyn. The Continental Army suffered a severe defeat and withdrew into defensive positions near Brooklyn Heights.

A British assault might have trapped much of the army against the East River. Instead, weather, delay, and careful American planning created an opportunity to escape. During the night of August 29, troops quietly crossed the river to Manhattan in small boats. A helpful fog concealed the final stages of the evacuation from British observation. Washington reportedly remained until the last units crossed, protecting the army even though the battlefield had been lost. The escape showed the kind of victory he needed at that moment: survival.

Retreat continued through Manhattan, across New Jersey, and toward Pennsylvania. The British captured thousands of American soldiers at Fort Mifflin, while desertion and expiring enlistments reduced the Continental Army. Residents who had appeared sympathetic to the Revolution began seeking British protection. Congress left Philadelphia, and some observers believed the rebellion was nearly finished. Washington had lost ground, men, supplies, and public confidence. What he still possessed was a small army capable of moving.

That remaining force crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania and took the boats with it, temporarily blocking British pursuit. British commanders placed Hessian troops in Trenton and other New Jersey towns, expecting the winter to bring major campaigning to a pause. Washington understood that waiting could destroy the army because many enlistments were about to expire. On Christmas night in 1776, his force crossed the icy Delaware during a violent storm. The popular image of Hessians being helplessly drunk after Christmas celebrations is exaggerated; surprise, weather, American speed, and failures in British intelligence mattered more. Washington reached Trenton on the morning of December 26 and attacked from more than one direction.

The Battle of Trenton lasted less than two hours and ended with approximately nine hundred Hessian soldiers captured. American losses were light, and the victory gave the army weapons, prisoners, confidence, and public attention. Washington then returned to New Jersey and faced a British counterattack near Trenton. Leaving campfires burning to hide his movement, he slipped around the British force and struck Princeton on January 3, 1777. These were not enormous battles when measured by the number of soldiers involved. Their importance came from timing because they restored belief when the Revolution appeared ready to collapse.

Confidence alone could not solve the larger military situation. Britain developed a plan for 1777 intended to separate New England from the other states by controlling the Hudson River corridor. General John Burgoyne would move south from Canada through Lake Champlain toward Albany. Another British force was expected to advance from the west through the Mohawk Valley, while assistance from New York City was assumed to complete the connection. The plan required separate armies to coordinate across

forests, rivers, mountains, and long communication lines. That coordination never occurred as intended.

Burgoyne's army initially moved with success, forcing the Americans to abandon Fort Ticonderoga. The advance slowed as British supply lines stretched deeper into difficult territory. Burgoyne carried large amounts of equipment and personal baggage, making the army dependent upon roads that had to be cut or repaired. American forces destroyed bridges, blocked routes, removed supplies, and gathered militia. A British detachment sent toward Bennington to obtain horses and provisions was badly defeated. Farther west, resistance at Fort Stanwix and the bloody Battle of Oriskany disrupted the supporting advance through the Mohawk Valley.

By the time Burgoyne approached Saratoga, his army was tired, undersupplied, and increasingly isolated. American forces under General Horatio Gates occupied strong ground at Bemis Heights overlooking the route to Albany. The first major battle, Freeman's Farm on September 19, 1777, ended without a decisive American victory, but the British suffered losses they could not replace. Benedict Arnold, Daniel Morgan, and other officers pushed for aggressive action, while Morgan's riflemen targeted British officers and disrupted formations. A second battle at Bemis Heights on October 7 broke the British position. Burgoyne retreated, found escape impossible, and surrendered on October 17.

Saratoga changed the international direction of the war. France had already been secretly supplying the Americans with weapons, money, and other assistance because weakening Britain served French interests. The American victory demonstrated that the Revolution had a realistic chance of surviving. France formally recognized the United States and entered an alliance in 1778. French involvement added trained soldiers, loans, weapons, supplies, diplomatic support, and naval power. What had begun as a British effort to suppress colonial rebellion had become part of a wider international war.

That widening conflict forced Britain to protect possessions in the Caribbean, Europe, India, and other regions. Spain later entered the war against Britain as an ally of France, although it did not formally join the American alliance. Spanish governor Bernardo de Gálvez attacked British positions along the lower Mississippi and Gulf Coast, reducing British power in the region. The Dutch Republic also became involved in war with Britain. Britain still possessed great strength, but it could no longer concentrate every available ship and soldier in North America. American independence became possible partly because Britain had more enemies than one new republic.

While Burgoyne's northern campaign was collapsing, General Howe moved against Philadelphia. Washington attempted to stop him at Brandywine Creek in September 1777. British forces used a wide flanking movement, sending part of the army around the American right while another force held Washington's attention. The maneuver succeeded, and the Americans retreated after hard fighting. British troops entered

Philadelphia, forcing Congress to relocate. Capturing the city embarrassed the Revolution but did not destroy the Continental government or Washington's army.

Washington struck back at Germantown in October with a complicated plan involving several columns advancing through darkness and fog. Confusion, difficult coordination, and stubborn British resistance caused the attack to fail. Units became lost, soldiers fired without clear visibility, and a British force inside a stone house delayed part of the American advance. The Continental Army withdrew after suffering serious losses. Yet European observers noticed that Washington had attacked a professional army shortly after losing at Brandywine. The defeat showed weakness in execution while also revealing that the Americans remained willing and able to fight.

Winter brought the army to Valley Forge, about twenty miles northwest of Philadelphia. Valley Forge was not a battlefield but an encampment where roughly twelve thousand soldiers attempted to survive the winter of 1777–1778. Shortages of clothing, shoes, blankets, food, and medicine caused enormous suffering, although supplies sometimes existed in the surrounding region and failed to reach camp because of transportation, administration, currency, and political problems. Disease killed far more men than exposure alone. Washington fought with Congress and state governments for resources while preventing the army from dissolving. Enduring the winter required organization, not merely toughness.

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge and helped improve the army's training. He was a former Prussian officer who taught soldiers how to march, maneuver, use bayonets, maintain weapons, organize camps, and follow consistent commands. He began with a model company, trained those men carefully, and used them to teach others. His methods were adapted to American conditions rather than copied mechanically from European armies. The Continental Army that emerged from Valley Forge was more disciplined and coordinated. Hardship had nearly destroyed it, but training turned survival into improved military ability.

The results appeared at the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778. British forces were evacuating Philadelphia and marching across New Jersey toward New York when Washington attacked. Confusion under General Charles Lee caused an American retreat during the early fighting, but Washington reorganized the troops and established a defensive position. The battle continued in extreme heat, with soldiers collapsing from exhaustion. The British withdrew during the night and continued toward New York. Monmouth was not a clear American victory, but the Continental Army had stood in open battle against British regulars without breaking.

Stories about "Molly Pitcher" grew from the women who carried water, treated wounded soldiers, transported supplies, and sometimes assisted artillery crews during the battle. The name is often connected to Mary Ludwig Hays, though it also became a broader symbol rather than a perfectly documented account of one woman's actions. Women were present throughout the war as nurses, cooks, laundresses, messengers, spies, farm

managers, business operators, and camp workers. Some, including Deborah Sampson, disguised themselves as men and served as soldiers. Their work rarely received the pay, rank, or official recognition given to men. The armies could not have operated without labor that older histories treated as background.

Black Americans faced choices shaped by bondage, freedom, family, geography, and opportunity. In November 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to enslaved men belonging to rebels if they escaped and served the British. Hundreds joined his Ethiopian Regiment, wearing uniforms marked with a message declaring liberty to enslaved people. The proclamation did not abolish slavery throughout British territory and did not offer freedom to people enslaved by Loyalists. It was a military policy meant to weaken rebels. Even so, it recognized a truth the Revolution tried to avoid: enslaved people could influence the war by deciding whose lines to cross and whose labor to withhold.

British forces expanded similar offers during the conflict, and thousands of enslaved people sought freedom behind British lines. Some served as soldiers, pilots, guides, sailors, laborers, cooks, and intelligence sources, while others built new lives near military camps. Disease, hunger, exploitation, and recapture remained constant dangers. At the end of the war, several thousand Black Loyalists were evacuated from New York to Nova Scotia and other locations, with their names recorded in a document called the Book of Negroes. Others were abandoned, reenslaved, or taken to British territories where slavery continued. Britain offered a road out of American bondage, but it did not consistently offer equality or security.

Black men also served in Patriot forces from the opening battles through Yorktown. Some were free, some were enslaved men promised freedom, and others served as substitutes for enslavers or family members. Washington initially resisted broad Black enlistment but changed policy as the army needed soldiers and British offers drew enslaved people away. The First Rhode Island Regiment became known for recruiting Black and Native men alongside white soldiers. Black Patriots fought at places including Bunker Hill, Trenton, Saratoga, Monmouth, and Yorktown. Their service strengthened an independence movement whose declarations of equality did not yet guarantee their own freedom.

Native nations encountered the war as another stage in the struggle over land and survival. Many understood that colonial expansion threatened their territory regardless of British taxation. Several nations or factions allied with Britain because the Crown appeared more likely to restrain westward settlement, while others supported the Americans or attempted neutrality. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also called the Iroquois Confederacy, was divided, with many Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga supporting Britain while the Oneida and Tuscarora often aided the Patriots. The conflict tore apart a political confederacy that had endured for generations. Native communities were not side characters in somebody else's revolution; they were defending nations, homelands, and futures of their own.

War along the frontier became especially brutal. Patriot settlements suffered attacks at places such as Wyoming Valley and Cherry Valley, while Native towns and food supplies were targeted in return. In 1779, Washington ordered General John Sullivan to lead a campaign against Haudenosaunee communities allied with Britain. American forces burned towns, destroyed crops, and created widespread hunger and displacement. The campaign weakened some British-allied operations but did not permanently end frontier fighting. It also revealed how quickly a war described as a struggle for liberty could become a war of destruction against Native homelands.

Loyalists added another layer to the conflict. They included royal officials, merchants, farmers, artisans, tenants, enslavers, recent immigrants, religious minorities, and others who opposed independence for different reasons. Some believed rebellion was unlawful, some depended economically upon Britain, some feared disorder, and some distrusted Patriot leaders. Many people tried to remain neutral and protect their families rather than join either side. Patriots confiscated Loyalist property, demanded loyalty oaths, and sometimes drove opponents from their communities. The Revolutionary War functioned partly as a civil war within towns, churches, neighborhoods, and families.

That internal struggle became more violent when Britain shifted its main attention to the South. British leaders believed Georgia and the Carolinas contained large numbers of Loyalists who would rally to the Crown once regular troops arrived. They also hoped to recover valuable plantation regions and use Southern ports as military bases. Savannah fell to the British in December 1778. A combined American and French attempt to retake the city in 1779 ended in a costly failure. Among the allied forces were free men of color from Saint-Domingue, the French Caribbean colony that later became Haiti.

British operations moved northward toward Charleston, South Carolina, one of the most important cities and ports in the South. General Benjamin Lincoln attempted to defend it, but British forces under General Henry Clinton surrounded the city by land and sea. After a long siege, Lincoln surrendered in May 1780 with approximately five thousand troops. It was one of the largest American surrenders of the war. Britain now controlled a major base and appeared close to restoring royal authority across South Carolina. The victory encouraged Loyalists but also intensified a vicious local war.

Fighting spread through the countryside among Patriot militia, Loyalist militia, British regulars, Continental troops, and irregular bands. Men such as Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens used local knowledge to raid supply lines, gather intelligence, and attack isolated positions. British officer Banastre Tarleton led fast-moving cavalry forces and became feared among Patriots. Homes were burned, prisoners were sometimes killed, property was seized, and personal revenge became mixed with political allegiance. The Southern war could place neighbors on opposite sides with no distant army available to control the violence. Winning a battle did not guarantee control once the main force moved away.

The Continental Army suffered another disaster at Camden in August 1780. General Horatio Gates, celebrated for the victory at Saratoga, rushed his exhausted and poorly supplied force into battle against Lord Charles Cornwallis. Many inexperienced militia troops broke under the British attack, exposing the remaining Continental soldiers. Baron Johann de Kalb and his Maryland and Delaware troops fought stubbornly before being overwhelmed. De Kalb was mortally wounded, and the American army collapsed. Gates fled the battlefield, ending his reputation as the man who might replace Washington.

Congress and Washington then placed Nathanael Greene in command of the Southern Department. Greene understood that he could not afford to risk the entire remaining army in one desperate battle. He divided his forces, forced the British to chase separate threats, protected the army from destruction, and relied on militia and local commanders to wear down British control. Dividing an army can be dangerous because each part becomes weaker, but it also forced Cornwallis to move through hostile territory while guarding long supply lines. Greene was willing to lose ground temporarily if the enemy paid heavily to occupy it. His strategy treated survival and exhaustion as weapons.

A sudden Patriot victory at Kings Mountain in October 1780 had already damaged British plans. British Major Patrick Ferguson had threatened frontier settlements unless their militia stopped supporting the rebellion. In response, groups known as Overmountain Men crossed difficult mountain terrain to find him. They surrounded Ferguson's Loyalist force on Kings Mountain and attacked uphill from several directions. The battle was largely fought between Americans, with Loyalists serving the Crown and Patriots supporting independence. Ferguson was killed, and most of his command was captured or killed.

The defeat weakened Loyalist confidence and showed that British occupation had not secured the backcountry. It also prepared the way for another carefully planned American success. General Daniel Morgan took a force into western South Carolina, prompting Cornwallis to send Tarleton after him. Morgan understood Tarleton's aggressiveness and selected open ground near a place called Cowpens. Rather than hoping his militia would behave like experienced regulars, he designed the battle around what each group could realistically do. His plan gave limited assignments to men who might otherwise have been overwhelmed.

Morgan arranged his troops in several lines. Sharpshooters stood forward to fire at British officers and then withdraw. Militia formed the next line with instructions to fire two controlled volleys before falling back. Continental regulars waited behind them, and cavalry remained available for a counterattack. Tarleton interpreted the withdrawals as signs that the Americans were collapsing and drove his tired troops forward. The British advance lost order as it moved into stronger resistance.

At a critical moment, part of the American line began to withdraw after a misunderstood command. Morgan corrected the movement, turned the soldiers around, and ordered

them to fire at close range. American cavalry struck one side while militia returned against another, producing a double envelopment in which the enemy was attacked from multiple directions. The Battle of Cowpens on January 17, 1781, destroyed much of Tarleton's force. Morgan had defeated a stronger professional command through timing, terrain, discipline, and a realistic understanding of his own soldiers. It became one of the finest tactical victories of the war.

Cornwallis reacted by pursuing the Americans through the Carolinas and discarding heavy equipment to move faster. Greene conducted the Race to the Dan, moving his army toward the Dan River in Virginia while gathering boats and supplies ahead of the pursuit. The Americans crossed before Cornwallis could trap them, then rested and received reinforcements. Greene soon returned to North Carolina and prepared to fight near Guilford Courthouse. He arranged his troops in multiple lines, using some of the same logic Morgan had applied at Cowpens. The ground and troop placement would force the British to fight repeatedly rather than break one position.

The Battle of Guilford Courthouse on March 15, 1781, ended with Greene withdrawing and Cornwallis holding the field. By the usual battlefield definition, Britain had won. The victory cost Cornwallis roughly one-quarter of the soldiers he had brought into the fight, losses he could not easily replace. Greene's army remained intact and capable of returning to action. Cornwallis moved toward Wilmington to obtain supplies, while Greene turned south and attacked British positions in South Carolina. A victory that weakens the winner more than the loser can become strategically harmful, and Guilford Courthouse placed Cornwallis in exactly that condition.

Seeking a better base of operations, Cornwallis moved into Virginia. British forces had been raiding the region, destroying supplies and disrupting Patriot government. A young French officer, the Marquis de Lafayette, commanded American troops attempting to watch Cornwallis without allowing his smaller force to be destroyed. Cornwallis eventually settled at Yorktown, a Virginia port on the York River, expecting British ships to maintain communication and provide evacuation if necessary. The location appeared useful as long as Britain controlled the surrounding water. That condition was about to change.

George Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau had been considering an attack on British-held New York. News arrived that French Admiral François de Grasse was sailing toward the Chesapeake Bay with a powerful fleet. Washington and Rochambeau recognized that Cornwallis could be trapped if the French controlled the bay and the combined armies reached Virginia in time. They concealed their purpose and marched hundreds of miles south. French troops, Continental soldiers, militia, supplies, and heavy artillery converged around Yorktown. The cooperation required months of planning, money, transportation, and trust between allies who spoke different languages and followed different military traditions.

The French navy made the trap possible. At the Battle of the Chesapeake on September 5, 1781, de Grasse prevented a British fleet from gaining control of the bay. The engagement did not destroy the British navy, but it forced the British ships to withdraw and left Cornwallis without dependable escape or reinforcement by sea. Washington and Rochambeau surrounded Yorktown on land and began constructing siege lines. Artillery steadily damaged British defenses, reduced supplies, and made movement dangerous. The final campaign depended as much upon French naval power as upon American persistence.

Siege warfare moved forward through trenches dug closer and closer to the enemy's position. Two British defensive forts, called Redoubts 9 and 10, blocked completion of the allied line. On the night of October 14, French troops attacked one redoubt while American troops under Alexander Hamilton attacked the other. Both positions were captured in close fighting, allowing allied artillery to move nearer. Cornwallis attempted an escape across the York River, but a storm disrupted the effort. With his defenses collapsing and no relief arriving, he requested terms.

The British army surrendered on October 19, 1781. More than seven thousand soldiers became prisoners, and the loss shattered Britain's political willingness to continue major offensive operations in the United States. Cornwallis did not personally appear at the formal surrender ceremony, claiming illness, and sent General Charles O'Hara in his place. Washington directed O'Hara to Major General Benjamin Lincoln, who had surrendered Charleston and now received the British capitulation. Yorktown did not instantly end every battle or remove every British soldier. It made a British military victory over the United States politically and strategically unrealistic.

Fighting continued in scattered areas, especially along the frontier and at sea, while diplomats negotiated. The American navy was small, but privateers—privately owned ships authorized to capture enemy vessels—disrupted British trade and forced Britain to spend resources protecting commerce. John Paul Jones became famous for aggressive naval actions in European waters, though American success at sea depended upon many lesser-known sailors and private ships. Britain still occupied New York, Charleston, and Savannah for a time. Both sides waited to learn what the peace would contain. Military success had created leverage, but diplomacy had to turn it into recognized independence.

The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783. Britain recognized the United States as an independent nation and accepted boundaries extending west to the Mississippi River, north toward British Canada, and south to Spanish Florida. The agreement gave the United States far more western territory than its armies physically controlled. Native nations were not included as independent parties even though much of the transferred land belonged to them. The treaty also addressed debts, fishing rights, prisoners, and Loyalist property. Independence settled the relationship with Britain while opening new struggles over land, power, debt, and citizenship.

Approximately eighty thousand Loyalists may have left the United States during or after the war, although estimates vary. Some relocated to Britain, Canada, the Caribbean, or other parts of the empire, while many remained and adjusted to the new government. State laws had confiscated property and punished suspected Loyalists, creating disputes that survived the fighting. Families had been divided and communities damaged by years of accusation and revenge. Peace could stop organized armies without instantly rebuilding trust. Political separation was quicker than social repair.

The same difficulty faced soldiers returning home. Many had not been paid fully, and the Continental Congress lacked reliable power to collect taxes under the Articles of Confederation, the nation's first governing framework. Officers feared that Congress would break its promises, while ordinary soldiers returned to farms, shops, debts, and families altered by years of absence. Disabled veterans faced a society with limited medical care and little organized support. Widows and children carried losses that a treaty could not compensate. The Revolution had created a country whose government was still too weak to meet many of the obligations produced by the war.

Freedom also remained divided by race and status. Some Northern states began gradual emancipation, meaning slavery would end over time rather than immediately. Massachusetts courts interpreted the state constitution in a way that helped end slavery there, while Pennsylvania adopted a gradual abolition law. In the South, slavery remained central to wealth and labor despite thousands of Black people gaining freedom through military service, escape, individual manumission, or British evacuation. The Revolution had made liberty the language of national legitimacy. Black Americans would continue using that language against a country that celebrated freedom while holding hundreds of thousands of people in bondage.

Women faced a similar distance between participation and political recognition. They had maintained households, managed property, produced supplies, carried intelligence, followed armies, treated soldiers, and endured occupation. Their wartime responsibility encouraged discussion of women's education and their role in shaping citizens, an idea later called republican motherhood. That concept valued women as educators of future citizens but did not give them equal political power. Voting remained overwhelmingly restricted to men, often men who met property requirements. Revolutionary language had expanded expectations without distributing rights equally.

Native nations received even less protection from the settlement. Britain transferred claims to western land without obtaining Native consent, and American settlers moved toward the Ohio Valley and beyond. The United States treated military victory over Britain as if it had also conquered nations that had fought for their own reasons. Warfare continued as Native coalitions resisted invasion and defended their homelands. For many Native communities, 1783 did not mark liberation. It marked the rise of a new government prepared to expand across their land.

George Washington's importance rested partly in understanding that the army had to remain subordinate to civilian authority. After the war, he resigned his military commission to Congress rather than using the army to seize political power. That act strengthened the idea that military leaders served the republic instead of ruling it. Washington was not undefeated, and several of his battlefield decisions can be criticized. His larger achievement was keeping the Continental Army alive through defeats, shortages, political conflict, and expiring enlistments. Britain could win battles, but it could not end the Revolution while that army and the political cause behind it survived.

The significant battles form a pattern rather than a collection of disconnected names. Lexington and Concord turned resistance into war, while Bunker Hill showed that British victory could be painfully expensive. Long Island nearly destroyed the Continental Army, and Trenton restored it when morale was collapsing. Saratoga brought France openly into the conflict, changing the balance of international power. Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse exhausted Britain's Southern strategy, while the Chesapeake and Yorktown combined American endurance with French military and naval force. Each battle mattered because of what it changed after the shooting ended.

The war was therefore won through more than courage on a battlefield. Geography made British control difficult, militia kept local resistance alive, the Continental Army provided a continuing national force, and foreign assistance supplied money, weapons, soldiers, and naval power. Enslaved people weakened slaveholders by escaping and offering labor, intelligence, or military service to whichever side presented an opening toward freedom. Women maintained the society and military system behind the armies, while Native nations and Loyalists shaped campaigns that cannot be understood through a simple Patriot-versus-Britain picture. Washington's army survived long enough for British mistakes and international pressure to become decisive. Independence emerged from all of these forces working, competing, and colliding across eight years.

The Revolutionary War ended British rule without completing the Revolution's promises. It created a republic, expanded political participation among many white men, and placed equality and natural rights at the center of American language. It also left slavery alive, Native land exposed, women without equal citizenship, veterans unpaid, and the national government financially weak. The new country had defeated an empire but had not yet decided how thirteen states would function as one nation. That unfinished work led toward the Constitutional Convention, arguments over federal power, continuing westward warfare, and generations of demands that the words of 1776 be applied more honestly. The final surrender brought independence, while the meaning of that independence remained open for the people who had fought, labored, escaped, sacrificed, and survived.