

V. The Revolutionary War (1775-1781)

A. The Battle of Lexington and Concord (April, 1775)

1. It turned out Patrick Henry was right. Just a month later the first shots of the war were fired.
2. General Gage had sent troops to capture militia supplies in a town near Boston called Concord.
3. On their way there, they encountered a group of Massachusetts militia called “minutemen” at the town of Lexington.
4. It is impossible to know exactly what happened, but someone fired a shot, and a battle followed.
5. The militia could not stop the British army, which was much larger, but the night before, colonial riders – including the famous Paul Revere – had relayed a warning to the militia that the British were coming, and their supplies were secreted away.

B. More Trouble in Boston

1. As the militia converged on Boston, General Gage realized that the hills surrounding the city were important in defending it. He sent troops to occupy Bunker Hill.
2. It turns out that the militia had already taken the hill, and they fought a long, hard battle to defend it, and neighboring Breed's Hill.
3. The militia only lost the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 19, 1775) because they ran out of ammunition.
4. A second continental congress had recently assembled, however, and created a new army with George Washington as its leader.
5. Washington's force managed to take over the hills south of Boston called “Dorchester Heights,” and with cannon recently captured by the Vermont militia of Ethan Allen (the “Green Mountain Boys”) they could retake the city. General Gage negotiated to evacuate Boston.
6. It was a heartening development, but now the real war would begin.

C. The Declaration of Independence

1. In order to explain why the colonies had rebelled and what they stood for, the congress asked Thomas Jefferson to write a declaration.
2. In this famous document, Jefferson explained that all governments must protect the “unalienable rights” of individuals to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”
3. When government attack peoples' rights, according to Jefferson, it is also a right of the people to “alter or abolish” their government, and create a new government that protects them.
4. The Declaration of Independence was approved by representatives of all thirteen colonies on July 4, 1776, which is considered the birth date of the United States.

D. Two Great American Victories

1. When the British first sent a large army to America in 1776, they wanted to cut the colonies in half, by conquering the Hudson River corridor.
2. Washington could not prevent them from capturing New York City with his still untrained army. He retreated through New Jersey and crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania just as the river was starting to freeze over.
3. The enemy did not follow. They chose instead to make camp at Trenton, New Jersey, for the winter.

4. On Christmas night, 1776, Washington crossed the Delaware again, this time to launch a surprise attack, which was a great success. This Battle of Trenton became famous around the world.
5. In 1777, the American generals Thomas Gates and Benedict Arnold also won a great victory, capturing 5000 British soldiers at Saratoga, New York. This prevented the British from achieving their goal of splitting the colonies.

E. Alliance With France

1. The victories at Trenton and Saratoga were closely watched by the nations of Europe. France in particular was looking for an opportunity to get revenge on Britain for Britain's victory over it in the colonial wars.
2. As a divine right monarch, France's Louis XVI had no interest whatsoever in radical notion of the individual rights of the common man. (Students of European history will remember, that he would soon be executed by French commoners in the French Revolution.) His only goal was to humble Great Britain.
3. When Louis saw that Americans could fight successfully against the British, he believed they were worthy allies to help him fulfill his political aims.
4. Before France could help, however, Washington had to spend a very hard winter of 1777-78 at a place named Valley Forge, outside of Philadelphia, which the British had conquered along with New York.
5. It was a dark time. His soldiers did not have enough food, clothing, or blankets. But Washington kept training the men, with the help of European military experts, including the Prussian officer Baron von Steuben, to forge them into a better army.

F. The Battle of Yorktown (1781)

1. After their defeat at Saratoga, the British gave up on conquering New York first as a means of severing New England from the rest of the colonies. They switched their attention to the southern colonies.
2. Under General Clinton they conquered Georgia and South Carolina, and were progressing through North Carolina from 1778 to 1780.
3. Clinton returned to New York, because the American officer Benedict Arnold, now in charge of the fort at West Point in New York, had decided to betray America, and Clinton wanted to handle this important case of treason personally.
4. He left another British General, Lord Cornwallis in charge in the South. Meanwhile the American commanders did their best to draw out the "war of attrition" by a calculated retreat through the southern states, forcing Cornwallis to divide up his forces.
5. Cornwallis managed to advance into Virginia, but then received orders to make for the coast and return to New York. Clinton feared an imminent French attack on New York since the French fleet had been spotted off the coast of New England.
6. This was a miscalculation. In a move coordinated by Washington, the French fleet moved on the Virginia coast at Yorktown, where Cornwallis was waiting to be transported to New York. At the same time, Washington brought an army down from New York and attacked from land. Cornwallis was surrounded and forced to surrender.
7. The surrender at Yorktown demoralized the British, and led to the Peace of Paris of 1783, where Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States.