

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 after his speech 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, 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 and with cannon recently captured by the Vermont militia of Ethan Allen (the “Green Mountain Boys”) they could retake the city. General Gage evacuated 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 the only proper purpose of government is to 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. Louis XVI, France's king, was not interested in individual rights whatsoever. 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.
4. Before France could help, however, Washington had to spend a very hard winter of 1777-78 at a place named Valley Forge. His soldiers did not have enough food, clothing, or blankets, but he kept training them to be a better army.

F. The Battle of Yorktown (1781)

1. After their defeat at Saratoga, the British gave up on conquering New York first. They switched their attention to the southern colonies, where British General, Lord Cornwallis was put in charge.
2. A French fleet arrived on the Virginia coast at Yorktown, where Cornwallis was encamped. At the same time, Washington brought an army down from New York and attacked from land. Cornwallis was surrounded and forced to surrender.
3. 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.