

The Steps to Revolution

Text from the Walking Timeline at Yorktown

1764-1772

Failing to raise money with the Stamp Act, Parliament passed the Townshend Acts in 1767, placing duties on glass, lead, paints, papers and tea, which could only be legally imported from Great Britain. The colonists at once adopted nonimportation agreements, to prevent the British from collecting taxes. Parliament withdrew all duties in 1770, except that on tea.

After years of conflict, no progress toward a compromise had been made between Britain and her American colonies. Each remained convinced of its own position and became more distrustful of the other. The colonists believed that they had twice defeated British tax schemes and were confident that they could do so again. The duty on tea, however, signaled Britain's intention to uphold its right to tax. Faced with continuing resistance, Parliament became more determined to use force, if necessary, to assert its authority.

1770

Having doubled in only twenty years, the population of Britain's thirteen North American colonies exceeds two million.

1773-1774

The events that followed the passage of the Tea Act demonstrated how irresolvable the conflict had become, and marked the turning point in relations between Britain and the colonies. Parliament's harsh response to the Boston Tea Party served to unify all thirteen colonies. There was a feeling of desperation in America, as none of the traditional ways of obtaining justice seemed to work.

Realizing the need for a unified defense of their rights, all the colonies sent delegates to the First Continental Congress in September 1774 to forge a common plan of action. Political leaders were kept informed of news through an effective system of correspondence, as they

worked to develop new governing institutions. Widely read political pamphlets motivated Americans to take a stand, and prepare to defend themselves. Armed struggle appeared inevitable.

May 1773

The Tea Act gives the British East India Company a monopoly on sales. In protest, patriots in New York and Philadelphia force ships to return to England without unloading their cargoes of tea.

"There will be no such thing as selling it, as the people would rather buy so much poison, than the tea with the duty thereon."

-- Abraham Lott, New York merchant, commenting on the Tea Act, 1773

December 1773

Patriots dressed as Indians board ships in Boston harbor and dump more than 300 chests of tea overboard to prevent its unloading and sale.

"The Ministry could not have devised a more effectual Measure to unite the Colonies... Old Jealousies are removed, and perfect Harmony subsists between them."

-- Samuel Adams, Massachusetts patriot, commenting on the Tea Act, December 1773

March 1774

The Parliament passes the Boston Port Act, closing the harbor to all seaborne trade as punishment for the Boston Tea Party.

"We must punish, control, or yield to them."

-- Lord North, British prime minister, referring to the citizens of Boston, March 1774

May 1774

Virginia's House of Burgesses supports Boston by observing a day of fasting and prayer. Virginia calls for a unified colonial response through a boycott of British goods.

September 1774

"We ask but for Peace, Liberty and Safety."

-- First Continental Congress petition to King George III, September 1774

"The dye is now cast, the Colonies must either submit or triumph."

-- King George III to Lord North, September 1774

October 1774

The First Continental Congress declares that Americans are entitled to the rights of “life, liberty, and property.” It forms the Continental Association, an agreement calling on the colonies to stop all imports from Britain, and providing for local committees to enforce its provisions.

November 1774

Yorktown residents stage a southern tea party, boarding the ship *Virginia* and dumping chests of tea into the York River. Throughout the colonies, local leaders begin to prepare for military resistance and develop new political institutions to replace British authority.

1775-1776

When the British began sending soldiers to New York and Boston in the late 1760's, the colonists suspected that these troops might be used against them and they began preparation to defend themselves. In April 1775, their fears were confirmed by news of the fighting at Lexington and the lives lost by both sides during the bloody British assault on Breed's and Bunker Hill in June made a peaceful compromise more and more unlikely.

In Philadelphia, the Second Continental Congress voted to organize an American army under George Washington even as they authorized military resistance, the delegates made one last attempt for reconciliation. In sending the Olive Branch Petition to the King in June. George III, however, refused to read it and declared the Americans rebels. By early 1776, popular opinion in the colonies in favor of independence was growing, partly influenced by Thomas Paine's pamphlet, Common Sense.

February 1775

Parliament declares Massachusetts in a state of rebellion. British General Gage is authorized to use force to control the colony.

“The die is cast....it seems to me the Sword is now our only, yet dreadful, alternative...”
-- Abigail Adams in a letter to a friend, February 1775; her letters and writings frequently expressed strong political views and she was an early advocate of greater political rights for women

March 1775

"I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

-- Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775, urging the Virginia Revolutionary Convention meeting at St. John's Church in Richmond to authorize arming a militia force to defend colonial rights

April 1775

British troops, attempting to capture colonial military supplies, exchange gunfire with Massachusetts minutemen at Lexington and Concord. Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, seizes the colony's store of gunpowder at Williamsburg.

"The barbarous Murders on our innocent Brethren on Wednesday the 19th Instant, has made it absolutely necessary that we immediately raise an Army to defend our Wives and our Children..."

-- Joseph Warren, president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, from a broadside printed shortly after the battles of Lexington and Concord, April 1775

"Our men had very few opportunities of getting good shots at the Rebels, as they hardly ever fired but under cover of a Stone wall, from behind a tree, or out of a house; and the moment they had fired they lay down out of sight until they had loaded again, or the Column had passed."

-- Lt. Frederick MacKenzie, British officer, describing the retreat from Lexington to Boston, April 19, 1775

May 1775

Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys capture Fort Ticonderoga, New York, and its heavy artillery from the British. Second Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia.

June 1775

Battle of Bunker and Breed's hills, Boston. British win the struggle but suffer heavy losses. George Washington is appointed commander-in-chief of the Continental forces. Congress enacts Articles of War.

July 1775

"Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and...[we are] resolved to die freemen rather than live slaves."

-- Declaration of the Second Continental Congress on the necessity of taking up arms, July 1775

November 1775

Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, issues an emancipation proclamation, offering to free "all indented servants [and] Negroes" who will fight alongside the British.

December 1775

British soldiers under Governor Dunmore's command are defeated by Virginia troops at the Battle of Great Bridge, Virginia. The governor is forced to flee his base at Norfolk. An American assault on Quebec, led by generals Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold, is repulsed and Canada remains under British control.

January 1776

Thomas Paine's Common Sense is published in Philadelphia. It wins thousands over to the idea of American independence.

"Reconciliation...like an agreeable dream, has passed away and left us..."

-- Thomas Paine, American Patriot and pamphleteer, in Common Sense, January 1776

April 1776

Captain John Barry, commanding the brig Lexington makes the first capture, during battle, of a British warship by a regularly commissioned American cruiser.

May 1776

France begins secretly sending money and military supplies to the colonies.

"No free government or the Blessing of Liberty can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to Justice, Moderation, Temperance, Frugality, and Virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental Principles."

-- George Mason, Article 15, Virginia Declaration of Rights, 1776

June 1776

The Virginia Revolutionary Convention passes George Mason's Declaration of Rights, the first bill of rights to be adopted in America. Virginian Richard Henry Lee introduces a resolution to the Continental Congress, called for independence.

1789

As the French Revolution begins, the National Assembly adopts the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. It is heavily influenced by Virginia's 1776 Declaration of Rights.

"[The Constitution is] intended to endure for ages to come and consequently to be adapted to the various crises of human affairs."

-- John Marshall, Chief Justice Supreme Court, 1819

1791

Poland adopts its first and the world's second written national constitution, which states that government authority begins with "the will of the people." Before it can be implemented, a Russian-led invasion kills the new plan and the perceived threat it poses.

1810 – 1825

Under the leadership of Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin, regions of Central and South America rebel against Spain and declare their independence. Several of the new republics, including Venezuela and Argentina, subsequently adopt Constitutions based on that of the United States.

1848

A series of democratic revolutions break out in Europe. Some European nations adopt written Constitutions.

"The most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."

-- British Prime Minister William Gladstone's assessment of the U.S. Constitution, 1878

1990

A number of Eastern European nations, recently free from Soviet domination, begin drafting new democratic constitutions. Many emerging democracies look to the U.S. Constitution as a leading example and adopt rights that limit the power of the government over individuals.