

THE BLACKWELL
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE

*American
Revolution*

Edited by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole



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First published 1991

Basil Blackwell, Inc.
3 Cambridge Center
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142, USA

Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Blackwell encyclopedia of the American Revolution/edited by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55786-244-3

I. United States—History—Revolution, 1775-1783—Encyclopedias.

I. Greene, Jack P. II. Pole, J. R. (Jack Richon)

E208.B635 1991

973.3'03—dc20

91-3190
CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

The Blackwell encyclopedia of the American Revolution.

I. War of American Independence 2. United States

I. Greene, Jack P. (Jack Phillip, 1931-) II. Pole, J.

R. (Jack Richon, 1922-)

973.303

ISBN 1-55786-244-3

Typeset in 10 on 11½ pt Photina
by Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London
Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Preface

THE American Revolution was an event of the first importance in the creation of the modern world. The first large-scale anti-colonial revolt in modern history and the first political revolution animated by the concept of progress, it provided the occasion for the creation of the United States and the most extensive and ambitious experiment in republican government up to that time. As students of this event, the editors have long thought that a comprehensive, authoritative, and accessible encyclopedia devoted to that subject would be valuable for the student and the general reader alike. This volume is intended to meet that goal. The seventy-five substantive articles cover all of the major topics related to the Revolution, including its central events, the context in which it occurred, its causes, its effects, and the principal concepts associated with it. Each written by a recognized specialist on the subject, these articles are all informed by the latest scholarship. The volume is rounded out by brief biographies of the more important actors involved in the Revolution and by an extended chronological table.

The editors wish to thank the authors of the articles and biographies and to acknowledge the significant role of the editorial staff in the Reference Department at Blackwell Publishers. The enthusiasm, high competence, and high standards of the staff, most especially, Richard Beatty, the senior desk editor in charge of the project, and Caroline Richmond, the copy editor, have contributed enormously to its timely completion. The editors also wish to thank Professor Ian R. Christie for checking British surnames and titles.

Jack P. Greene
Irvine, California

J. R. Pole
Oxford, UK

18 April 1991

Illustration acknowledgments

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Contributors

John Algeo
University of Georgia

David L. Ammerman
Florida State University

Joyce Appleby
University of California, Los Angeles

Robert A. Becker
Louisiana State University

Richard R. Beeman
University of Pennsylvania

Ruth H. Bloch
University of California, Los Angeles

Colin Bonwick
University of Keele

R. Arthur Bowler
State University of New York at Buffalo

Maurice J. Bric
University College Dublin

Stuart Bruchey
Columbia University

Robert M. Calhoon
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

E. Wayne Carp
Pacific Lutheran University

Selwyn H. H. Carrington
University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad

Robert J. Chaffin
University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

Ian R. Christie
University College London

Thomas Cole
Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia

Stephen A. Conrad
Indiana University, Bloomington

David W. Conroy
Alliance of Independent Scholars

Edward Countryman
University of Warwick

Murray Dry
Middlebury College, Vermont

Jonathan R. Dull
The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Yale University Library

Clyde R. Ferguson
Kansas State University

E. James Ferguson
Queens College, Flushing, New York

Mary E. Fissell
University of Manchester

Milton E. Flower
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Alan Freeman
State University of New York at Buffalo

Sylvia R. Frey
Tulane University

Jack Fruchtman, Jr.
Towson State University

Edwin S. Gaustad
University of California, Riverside

David P. Geggus
University of Florida

Eliga H. Gould
Baltimore, Maryland

Norman S. Grabo
University of Tulsa

Jack P. Greene
University of California, Irvine

Ira D. Gruber
Rice University

Ronald Hamowy
University of Alberta

Don Higginbotham
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Herbert A. Johnson
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Pembroke College, Cambridge

Lee Kennett
University of Georgia

Craig Evan Klafter
University of Manchester

James T. Kloppenberg
Brandeis University

Isaac Kramnick
Cornell University

Douglas Edward Leach
Vanderbilt University

J. A. Leo Lemay
University of Delaware

Jan Lewis
Rutgers University, Newark

Donald S. Lutz
University of Houston

Grant E. Mabie
Oseola, Indiana

Elizabeth P. McCaughey
Center for the Study of the Presidency

Katherine M. J. McKenna
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

CONTRIBUTORS

Bruce H. Mann
University of Pennsylvania

Elise Marienstras
Institute Charles V, Université de Paris VII

Peter Marshall
University of Manchester

Glenna Matthews
Stanford University

Kenneth Maxwell
Camões Center, Columbia University

Elizabeth Mensch
State University of New York at Buffalo

James H. Merrell
Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York

Frederick V. Mills Sr.
LaGrange College, Georgia

Kurt W. Nagel
Baltimore, Maryland

James H. O'Donnell III
Marietta College, Ohio

Alison G. Olson
University of Maryland at College Park

Peter S. Onuf
University of Virginia

William Pencak
Pennsylvania State University, Ogonz

Edwin J. Perkins
University of Southern California

J. R. Pole
St Catherine's College, Oxford

Jim Potter
Institute of United States Studies, London

Jack N. Rakove
Stanford University

G. A. Rawlyk
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

John P. Reid
New York University

Hans Rogger
University of California, Los Angeles

Michal J. Rozbicki
American Studies Center, Warsaw University

Robert A. Rutland
University of Tulsa

Steven J. Sarson
Baltimore, Maryland

Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt
University of Leiden

Robert E. Shalhope
University of Oklahoma

Peter Shaw
New York, NY

Richard K. Showman
Rhode Island Historical Society

R. C. Simmons
University of Birmingham

W. A. Speck
University of Leeds

Rebecca Starr
Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education

Ian K. Steele
University of Western Ontario

Peter D. G. Thomas
University College of Wales, Aberystwyth

J. Mark Thompson
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Alan Tully
University of British Columbia

Mary Gwaltney Vaz
Cincinnati, Ohio

Maurice J. C. Vile
Canterbury, Kent

Robert V. Wells
Union College, Schenectady, New York

Franklin B. Wickwire
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Betty Wood
Girton College, Cambridge

Melvyn Yazawa
University of New Mexico

Stephen A. Young
Baltimore, Maryland

Rosemarie Zagarri
Catholic University of America

Introduction

JACK P. GREENE AND J. R. POLE

THE American Revolution was many different events. It not only looked different, but was differently experienced, from the points of view of a wide variety of active participants on both sides of the Atlantic; it presented sudden opportunities – of business profits, political and legal office, and military promotions – to the more enterprising, public spirited, or opportunistic; but its anguish and travail represented experiences of a different kind for innumerable passive participants who were caught up in and affected, more or less willingly, by its passage. In planning this *Encyclopedia* we have tried to do justice to these varieties, which are as much conceptual as experiential, and which therefore involve an ordering of concepts as well as an account of events.

CONTEXT

The political framework in which Britain's North American and Caribbean colonies developed with such rapidity in the eighteenth century was itself a crucial ingredient of the problem. We therefore begin with the structure of British politics and pass to the administration of the colonies from the point of view of the metropolitan authorities. The policies pursued by these British governments, looking at the colonies as integral but subordinate parts of a vast and scattered empire, were determined by certain preconceptions, in which British interests undoubtedly played a dominant part; and in the course of time, and of colonial economic, geographical and demographic development, they came into conflict with an increasingly aroused colonial consciousness of increasingly distinct colonial interests.

These interests, however, were so widely dispersed and so various in kind that they had very little natural inclination to see themselves as a unity. Articles on the economic and strategic importance of the colonies to the empire itself – an importance which controlled imperial policy but was of no small significance to the colonies themselves – on colonial political and demographic development, on the varieties of religious experience and on the growth of a colonial culture, are designed to give explanations of all these aspects of American development within the overall imperial framework. It was this framework that provided the colonies with their own basic unities, enabled them to identify their problems in a common language of rights and resistance and eventually to form a common cause. But we do not wish to convey an impression that we use words like “framework” or “context” in an unimaginatively rigid sense. In all history, “context” must itself be understood as a developmental concept; and

in the period of the American Revolution we are dealing with a constantly changing context, made all the more complicated by the fact that one or another of the ingredients often changes faster than or in different directions from others.

CHRONOLOGY

From this frame of reference we pass to the chronology of events, under which heading we begin with the detailed workings of British policies and colonial reactions. On both sides of the rising dispute, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the situation was complicated by differences of opinion and interest, in turn reflected in widely differing perceptions of the meaning of events. This was nowhere more apparent than in the motives people on different sides attributed to each other. American colonists accused the British authorities of tyranny; the British bitterly resented what they regarded as American ingratitude. But in Britain itself, a new wave of radicals saw their own cause represented by American resistance, while some colonial spokesmen identified themselves with the interests of British radicals. But there were also influential and experienced elements in colonial politics, often in historic positions of authority, who felt threatened by the rise of a revolutionary movement in their own provinces and sought to contain the protest within the bounds of formal political discourse. American interests were also complicated by their latent hostility to the indigenous population, whom the British were more inclined to regard as objects of imperial protection.

We have divided the chronological sections at the Declaration of Independence. From that point onwards the revolt becomes a revolution and the course of American events passes definitively into American hands. There was much for the new authorities to attend to, on many different fronts: there was, in the first instance, an army to maintain, and a war to fight; but fighting included finance and every form of economic mobilization; the responsibilities of the Continental Congress included the opening up of a new field of European diplomacy requiring the care and attention of men with no such experience, and who in most cases had never been further from home than Philadelphia. But most of the responsibility for domestic government fell to the states, which asserted their sovereignty in the loose code of continental government which, after years of foot-dragging, was established in 1781 in the Articles of Confederation. Essays under the appropriate headings deal extensively with developments in the states, from constitution-making to social attitudes and policies affecting church and state, education, poverty and crime, legal reform and slavery. Much of the wealth of the American colonies rested on the labor of slaves, already an intricate institution sustained by laws and codes of conduct. It would be a grievous error to suppose that the concept of republican government depends on a necessary basis of slave labor; but the prosperity which sustained the practice of republican government in the Chesapeake and southern colonies did rest on slave labor, as contemporaries well knew, whether they lived in those colonies or further north. The paradox occupied many minds in that generation. Both the institution of slavery and the rise of anti-slavery find their place in the pages that follow.

The Confederation achieved more than it has sometimes been given credit for, but in the opinion of many well-placed observers it was unequal to the manifold problems of continental government. The rise of the movement that led to the Constitutional Convention, the making of the Constitution and the subsequent passage of the Bill of Rights by the first Congress of the United States complete the chronological sections.

INTRODUCTION

EXTERNAL EFFECTS

No one made the mistake of imagining that an event as politically and ideologically repercussive as the American Revolution could be contained within American shores. Independence had depended vitally on French naval and military intervention as well as on French and Dutch finance. French soldiers and a number of their ecclesiastical and intellectual contemporaries had seen republican government in action and they took that experience home with them. But the external effects of the Revolution can be understood only in the context of the circumstances and histories of the different countries it affected. There could be no worse mistake than to generalize these effects into a crudely Americanized view of the domestic future of the world beyond America. The consequences were felt in spheres as diverse as the Spanish and Portuguese empires, the British slave holding colonies in the West Indies, in Ireland, Canada and in the nations of continental Europe; and often the effects within any one of these spheres were themselves diverse. We have sought to cover all these areas with appropriate geographical breadth while doing justice to the intricacy of the local scene in each case. We have represented the world-wide consequences of the Revolution but have not sought to interpret them in any immediate sense as world-wide revolutionary consequences.

INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS

The different societies of the colonies were not only in states of development, but in many cases, of differing types of development, in the generation before they were overtaken by the War of Independence. When the breach with Britain seemed inevitable, no one could be sure what it would mean for the colonies themselves. This uncertainty was a cause of profound apprehension in some circles, of equally exalted hope in others. The questions associated with the internal consequences of Independence are among the most complex and difficult in the study of the period; they can only be explained in connection with developments that were already taking place in colonial society, but it is inherently difficult to separate these from the precipitating effects of war, economic and military mobilization, and the need for new governments – to mention only a few of the issues. The effects of Independence ranged through such diverse themes as the heightened level of American national consciousness, and medical, technical, educational and legal advances, arising from immediate needs as well as from an invigorated republican ideology; they also extended to the gradually evolving concept of the new role required of women in a republic, and, after the failure of the Articles of Confederation to provide adequate governmental power, eventuated (if indirectly) in the creation of a new national Constitution. In assigning topics which encompass all these and other themes, we have sought to recognize both their diversity and their tendency to overlap one another. This section, more than any other, provides the materials and the arguments for the debate on the essence of the Revolution and what kind of revolution it was. In its own time it certainly looked revolutionary to many who were involved or who observed it. The historical perspective was shifted when it was soon overtaken by the French Revolution, which dramatically changed the whole concept. Yet that earth-shaking event may itself be considered, in no small part, as an *external* effect of the American Revolution.

CONCEPTS

As historians have sought to create in their own and their readers' minds a framework for the understanding of the American Revolution, which was very much the greatest event of its kind of which people at that time had any knowledge, they have had to recapture a conceptual world which has passed into the distance of history. This way of arranging the past itself reflects the fact that the Revolution was in large measure created by systems of thought. Men – for it was men who made these events – had developed sets of ideas associated with their forms of law and government, religion and property. For the most part, although these ideas can be generalized at a speculative level, they were rooted in very familiar ways of life. The liberties men valued were the liberties they were accustomed to, and the same was true of their institutions, such as those of political representation.

These concepts, of Liberty, Equality, Property, the Rule of Law and others, make an important contribution to our own attempt to understand the issues at stake for the Americans and for their British rivals because they played such important parts in the conceptual world of the period. It is only natural that many of them overlap with each other and often represent slightly different perspectives on similar principles, values and ideals. We have ascribed a separate essay to each of the main concepts, as we see them, and although each contributor has seen the subject in his or her own way, and we have made no attempt to impose a set of preconceived principles, we believe that these broad structures of ideas can best be understood within the context of the life of the institutions which embodied them in practice.

BIOGRAPHIES

The Revolution was made by people. They acted in ways that derived from their experiences, their circumstances and the conceptual framework of their world. And, of course, they acted collectively. But no encyclopedia would be complete without biographical information about the individuals whose personal decisions made the events of the time.

The more prominent actors select themselves. No explanation is needed for the inclusion of George Washington or Lord North in an *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*. But the editors have sought to reach for more than a conventional history, or collection of histories, of the making of events. Revolutions and wars are usually supposed to be of some benefit to the common people, but the common people usually remain unnoticed in the background. We observed above that the Revolution was *experienced* by many people – a majority, if it comes to that – who did very little to contribute to it, and many of whom undoubtedly felt that they had little at stake. Some of these people survive in journals and relatively obscure records, while other more active participants survive in folk memories as well as in formal documents. Because this is particularly true of women, who not only experienced the Revolution in the passive sense, but whose work was indispensable to the man-made world of war and politics, we have tried to recapture this dimension in a large number of short biographical sketches of relatively obscure women.

It is relevant to the recreation of the social psychology of the period to observe that this dimension was not very adequately appreciated; nor did it find much of a place in political philosophy. It is not easy to reconstruct more than a few fragments of the detail of the lives of individual women, but much can be inferred from what we know

INTRODUCTION

of the household, and the churches; moreover, a surprisingly large number of small businesses were run by women, as advertisements in the mid-century colonial newspapers testify. If some of our entries are pathetically brief, they play their part as representing – in the best sense of the word – one half of the population, most of whom are buried from historical sight. We would also recall our comment about experience; men only too often made events which women experienced. That experience is itself a part of the history of the American Revolution, and we have tried in places to capture it here.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Illustration acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>List of maps and map acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>	xii

Part 1: Context

1	The structure of British politics in the mid-eighteenth century <i>W. A. Speck</i>	3
2	Metropolitan administration of the colonies, 1696–1775 <i>Ian K. Steele</i>	9
3	The changing socio-economic and strategic importance of the colonies to the empire <i>Alison G. Olson</i>	17
4	The political development of the colonies after the Glorious Revolution <i>Alan Tully</i>	28
5	Population and family in early America <i>Robert V. Wells</i>	39
6	Socio-economic development of the colonies <i>Edwin J. Perkins</i>	53
7	Religion before the Revolution <i>Edwin S. Gaustad</i>	64
8	The cultural development of the colonies <i>Michal J. Rozbicki</i>	71
9	Ideological background <i>Isaac Kramnick</i>	84

Part 2: Themes and events, to 1776

10	The origins of the new colonial policy, 1748–1763 <i>Jack P. Greene</i>	95
11	The Grenville program, 1763–1765 <i>Peter D. G. Thomas</i>	107
12	The Stamp Act crisis and its repercussions, including the Quartering Act controversy <i>Peter D. G. Thomas</i>	113

CONTENTS

13	The Townshend Acts crisis, 1767–1770 <i>Robert J. Chaffin</i>	126
14	The British Army in America, before 1775 <i>Douglas Edward Leach</i>	146
15	The West and the Indians, 1756–1776 <i>Peter Marshall</i>	153
16	Trade legislation and its enforcement, 1748–1776 <i>R. C. Simmons</i>	161
17	Ongoing disputes over the prerogative, 1763–1776 <i>Jack P. Greene</i>	171
18	Bishops and other ecclesiastical issues, to 1776 <i>Frederick V. Mills, Sr.</i>	178
19	Social protest and the revolutionary movement, 1765–1776 <i>Edward Countryman</i>	184
20	The tea crisis and its consequences, through 1775 <i>David L. Ammerman</i>	198
21	The crisis of Independence <i>David L. Ammerman</i>	211
22	Development of a revolutionary organization, 1765–1775 <i>David W. Conroy</i>	223
23	Political mobilization, 1765–1776 <i>Rebecca K. Starr</i>	231
24	Opposition in Britain <i>Colin Bonwick</i>	240
25	Loyalism and neutrality <i>Robert M. Calhoon</i>	247
26	<i>Common Sense</i> <i>Jack Fruchtman, Jr.</i>	260
27	The Declaration of Independence <i>Ronald Hamowy</i>	264

Part 3: Themes and events, from 1776

28	Bills of rights and the first ten amendments to the Constitution <i>Robert A. Rutland</i>	271
29	State constitution-making, through 1781 <i>Donald S. Lutz</i>	276
30	The Articles of Confederation, 1775–1783 <i>Jack N. Rakove</i>	289
31	The War for Independence, to Saratoga <i>Don Higginbotham</i>	296
32	The War for Independence, after Saratoga <i>Don Higginbotham</i>	309
33	Diplomacy of the Revolution, to 1783 <i>Jonathan R. Dull</i>	321
34	Confederation: state governments and their problems <i>Edward Countryman</i>	332
35	The West: territory, states, and confederation <i>Peter S. Onuf</i>	346
36	Demobilization and national defense <i>E. Wayne Carp</i>	356
37	Currency, taxation, and finance, 1775–1787 <i>Robert A. Becker</i>	362
38	Foreign relations, after 1783 <i>Jonathan R. Dull</i>	374
39	Slavery and anti-slavery <i>Sylvia R. Frey</i>	379
40	Indians and the new republic <i>James H. Merrell</i>	392

41	The impact of the Revolution on the role, status, and experience of women <i>Betty Wood</i>	399
42	The impact of the Revolution on education <i>Melvin Yazawa</i>	409
43	The impact of the Revolution on social problems: poverty, insanity, and crime <i>Melvin Yazawa</i>	418
44	The impact of the Revolution on church and state <i>Robert M. Calhoon</i>	428
45	Legal reform and the Revolution <i>Bruce H. Mann</i>	437
46	Confederation: movement for a stronger union <i>Mark D. Kaplanoff</i>	443
47	The Federal Convention and the Constitution <i>Mark D. Kaplanoff</i>	457
48	The debate over ratification of the Constitution <i>Murray Dry</i>	471

Part 4: External effects of the Revolution

49	Great Britain in the aftermath of the American Revolution <i>Ian R. Christie</i>	489
50	The American Revolution and Canada <i>G. A. Rawlyk</i>	497
51	The American Revolution and Ireland <i>Maurice J. Bric</i>	504
52	The American Revolution and the sugar colonies, 1775–1783 <i>Selwyn H. H. Carrington</i>	508
53	The effects of the American Revolution on France and its empire <i>David P. Geggus</i>	518
54	The impact of the American Revolution on Spain and Portugal and their empires <i>Kenneth Maxwell</i>	528
55	The influence of the American Revolution in the Netherlands <i>Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt</i>	544
56	The influence of the American Revolution in Russia <i>Hans Rogger</i>	549

Part 5: Internal developments after the Revolution

57	Social and economic developments after the Revolution <i>Stuart Bruchey and Jim Potter</i>	555
58	The religious consequences of the Revolution <i>Robert M. Calhoon</i>	569
59	The cultural effects of the Revolution <i>Norman S. Grabo</i>	578
60	The effects of the Revolution on language <i>John Algeo</i>	589
61	Medicine before and after the Revolution <i>Mary E. Fissell</i>	595
62	The construction of gender in a republican world <i>Ruth H. Bloch</i>	601

Part 6: Concepts

63	Liberty <i>Elise Marienstras</i>	609
64	Equality <i>J. R. Pole</i>	616

CONTENTS

65	Property <i>Alan Freeman and Elizabeth Mensch</i>	620
66	The rule of law <i>John P. Reid</i>	629
67	Consent <i>Donald S. Lutz</i>	634
68	Happiness <i>Jan Lewis</i>	641
69	Suffrage and representation <i>Rosemarie Zagarri</i>	648
70	Republicanism <i>Robert E. Shalhope</i>	654
71	Sovereignty <i>Peter S. Onuf</i>	661
72	Nationality and citizenship <i>Elise Marienstras</i>	669
73	The separation of powers <i>Maurice J. C. Vile</i>	676
74	Rights <i>Ronald Hamowy</i>	682
75	Virtue <i>James T. Kloppenberg</i>	688
	Part 7: Biographies A–Z	695
	<i>Chronological table</i>	794
	<i>Compiled by Steven Sarson</i>	
	<i>Index</i>	828
	<i>Compiled by Meg Davies</i>	

Maps and map acknowledgments

<i>Front endpaper</i>	North America in 1763	
<i>Map 1</i>	Forts and posts occupied by the British Army up to 1775	150
<i>Map 2</i>	The location of some major Indian nations in the years leading up to the Revolution	155
<i>Map 3</i>	Campaigns around New York	300
<i>Map 4</i>	Operations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania	303
<i>Map 5</i>	The Northern Campaigns	305
<i>Map 6</i>	The Southern Campaigns	311
<i>Map 7</i>	Western land cessions and new state movements	350
<i>Map 8</i>	Approximate location of major Indian nations in 1780	394
<i>Back endpaper</i>	North America c.1796	

Note: A contemporary map of the West Indies is reproduced as figure 42 (page 509).

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