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Introduction

The war for American independence began with skirmishes between British troops and colonial militiamen in Massachusetts in 1775 and turned into a global conflict involving Native American tribes, France, Spain, and other European powers. The war divided Americans into Loyalists, Patriots, and those unwilling to choose a side. Americans from nearly all walks of life participated in the Revolution, including women, Native Americans, and both freed and enslaved African-Americans. Like the members of the Continental Congress and the soldiers in the Continental Army, these groups also hoped to reap the benefits of the Revolution.

The American Revolution created the United States of America, the first modern constitutional democracy. In crafting the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and other documents related to the new government, the founding generation codified the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity advocated by the supporters of the Revolution. The Revolution did not create a utopia in the United States. In the decades immediately following the Revolution and beyond, Americans endured a struggle to define democracy, citizenship, and individual rights. Many key groups in the fight for liberty were not granted the rights afforded to other American citizens.

This resource guide divides the period of the American Revolution into four sections. The first section, “Revolutionary Origins, 1763–74,” covers events from the end of the Seven Years’ War to the meeting of the First Continental Congress. This period encompasses the origins of the Revolution, and therefore, this section discusses the political, economic, and social factors that led the thirteen colonies to seek independence from Great Britain. The next section focuses on the Revolutionary War. The war is divided into three arenas and themes: New England and the beginnings of the conflict, the war’s stalemate in the Mid-Atlantic region, and civil war in the southern colonies. The third section, “Creating a New Nation: The Political Revolution, 1776–1800,” focuses on the political events that created the United States and the first three presidential administrations. Included in this section are overviews of the Continental Congress, the Articles of Confederation, the debate and ratification of the U.S. Constitution, and the presidential administrations of George Washington and John Adams. This section concludes with a discussion of the election of 1800, the first peaceful transfer of power between American political parties. The final section, “Creating a New World: The Social Revolution,” surveys social changes brought about by the Revolution and explores the conflict’s legacies for different groups of Americans.

Section 1

Revolutionary Origins, 1763–74

NATIVE AND EUROPEAN SOCIETIES IN NORTH AMERICA

Popular memory of the American founding frequently portrays the American Revolution as inevitable—the logical conclusion of European quests for social freedom, individual liberties, and economic prosperity on North America’s shores. However, historians agree the primary causes of the American Revolution can be traced to just two to three decades earlier, largely generated by the tensions created by the Seven Years’ War.

Native American Society before European Colonization

Before the arrival of European explorers and colonizers, a diversity of Native populations inhabited every region of the North American continent. Because of that diversity, there was no sense of a unified Native identity in colonial or precolonial America. Native American identity centered on the immediate social group. Social groups included clan, tribe, village, chiefdom, and confederacy. Native groups spoke diverse languages, held different religious beliefs, and practiced varied customs and traditions. Some tribes practiced agriculture, while others relied on hunting and gathering for subsistence. Conflicts between groups occurred for many reasons, including territory, hunting or agricultural practices, differing customs, and more.

In the early years of European colonization, Native American societies were severely weakened by disease. With no natural immunity to European diseases, Native populations were devastated by smallpox and other diseases carried to the New World by colonizers. Some estimates place the population loss of Native American tribes at 90 percent—a catastrophic loss of human life that had long-reaching effects on Native society. While there is not space to discuss the astonishing diversity of Native life in North America, a closer look at two Native



The town of Pomeiock and true forme of their houses, covered and enclosed some wth mats, and some wth barks of trees. All compassed about wth small poles stuck thick together in stead of a wall.

A sixteenth-century sketch of the Algonquian village of Pomeiock in present-day North Carolina.

American groups provides a sense of the diversity present in pre-contact America and evidence that they played a vital role in the struggles of the Revolutionary era.

The Algonquian Peoples

In Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, the earliest British colonists encountered members of the Algonquian peoples, one of North America’s most populous and widespread Native language groups. Members of the group, who spoke the Algonquian language or a related dialect, included the Powhatan tribe near Jamestown and the Pequots and Narragansetts, who occupied the area settled by the Pilgrims. Before European arrival, Algonquian peoples living in settlements along the Atlantic Coast and into the interior, along the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes, practiced hunting and fishing. A few