



Molly Pitcher, photomechanical lithograph by Edward Percy Moran, 1925.

Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Hays's efforts were vital, as nearly fifty soldiers perished of dehydration that day. When her husband was injured in the battle, Hays took his place at the cannon. According to popular memory, her bravery caught the attention of George Washington, who promoted her on the spot, earning her the title of "Sergeant Molly." Another woman, Margaret Cochran Corbin, was severely wounded during the British assault on Fort Washington while fighting alongside her husband. Both Mary Hays and Margaret Corbin received U.S. military pensions in recognition of their service. Still other women disguised themselves as men and joined the fighting. One of the best examples of this was Deborah Sampson of Plympton, Massachusetts, who joined the Continental Army under a man's name, serving from May 1782 to October 1783.

Contributions by Black Americans

At the start of the American Revolution, an estimated 500,000 enslaved persons lived within the thirteen colonies.⁴⁰ The majority resided in the southern colonies, where they labored on plantations—agricultural estates focused on cash crops like rice, cotton, and tobacco that were worked by enslaved resident labor. As a system, slavery and other forms of unfreedom were evident in every British colony in North America.

Black Loyalists

For some Black Americans, the American Revolution meant freedom. One liberating force for enslaved Black Americans in the American Revolution was the

British Army, which, in order to weaken the rebellious colonies, helped to free 3,000 to 10,000 people.⁴¹ Lord Dunmore's Proclamation and the Philipsburg Proclamation both offered emancipation to enslaved people with Patriot enslavers if they agreed to serve the British Army in some capacity. The British intention was not to end slavery but rather to deprive rebellious enslavers of their labor. Enslaved peoples with Loyalist enslavers were returned.

[Boston King](#), an enslaved carpenter from South Carolina, fled to join the British Army when they occupied Charleston in 1780. King served in the British Army as a personal servant and messenger, twice narrowly escaping re-enslavement. In 1782, King and his wife Violet, also formerly enslaved, found themselves in New York City, the last British stronghold, with thousands of white and Black Loyalists. British policy determined that formerly enslaved people who escaped to British lines before the signing of the provisional peace treaty in 1782 were free; all others must be returned to their enslavers. The Kings and approximately three thousand Black Americans evacuated with the British, settling first in Nova Scotia and later in Sierra Leone.⁴²

Black Patriots

Many Black Americans, such as Crispus Attucks, who was killed in the Boston Massacre, actively supported the American Revolution. A small number of enslaved persons also won their freedom by fighting in the Continental Army despite the prejudices of Patriot leaders. Some five thousand enlisted in state militias and the Continental Army.⁴³ In 1778, Rhode Island, which had a higher proportion of enslaved people than the other New England colonies, formed a black regiment and promised freedom to those who enlisted while compensating their enslavers for their loss of "property." When militia service became compulsory, some enslaved people earned their freedom by serving in their enslavers' stead. The Black soldiers who served in the Revolution fought in racially integrated companies—the last black American soldiers to do so until the Korean War.

Jack Sisson

The names and deeds of most enslaved soldiers are yet to be recovered by history. Jack Sisson, an enslaved African American, served in the First Rhode Island Regiment. In July 1777, Sisson and forty other troops

Experiences like these led to the first major armed rebellion in the post-revolutionary United States. First, the rural communities sought relief through the legislative process by petitioning the state legislature to issue paper currency. However, the legislature, composed mainly of representatives from the merchant class, rejected this idea. Moreover, the legislature approved an additional property tax to raise funds to pay foreign debts. In a [letter](#) to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams observed that this tax would prove to be “heavier than the People could bear.”⁷⁰

Ignored by the legislature and angered by the additional tax, the farmers in western Massachusetts, many of whom were veterans of the Continental Army, modeled their revolt on the Patriot resistance to Great Britain’s high taxes and an unresponsive government. However, now the government was in Boston rather than London. The insurgents held covert meetings to plan a coordinated response. On August 29, 1786, well-organized protestors successfully prevented the county court from opening in Northampton, Massachusetts. Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin denounced the rebels and planned a militia response to future action. A few days later, on September 5th, protestors shut down the county court in Worcester. The militia, however, refused to respond since many of the militia’s members sympathized with the protestors’ plight.

Events spiraled out of control owing to the actions of Daniel Shays and Luke Day, both former Continental Army officers who led the insurgency. The rebels shut down courts throughout rural New England and illegally liberated prisoners. With the federal government unable to recruit soldiers for the army due to a lack of funds, Governor Bowdoin proposed creating a privately funded militia. Thanks to money raised by Boston-area merchants, roughly three thousand militiamen recruited from the eastern counties marched to Worcester on January 19th under the leadership of former Continental Army Major General Benjamin Lincoln.⁷¹ Meanwhile, the Shaysite army harassed merchants and tried to seize the federal arsenal at Springfield. Near Petersham, a militia unit under General Lincoln scattered the rebels and effectively ended their resistance. The leaders fled into Vermont and New Hampshire, where they were sheltered despite official demands that they return to stand trial.

Some four thousand people signed confessions acknowledging participation in Shays’ Rebellion in

exchange for amnesty, and several hundred participants were eventually indicted on related charges. Most of these were pardoned under a general amnesty that only excluded a few ringleaders. Eighteen men, including Shays, were convicted and sentenced to death. Most of these men had their convictions overturned on appeal, were pardoned, or had their sentences commuted.

Shays’ Rebellion is one example of a local-level, popular, and largely rural social movement with clear ties to the mobilization of the American Revolution that produced conflicts from the Carolinas and Georgia backcountry to the District of Maine. Many saw the rebels as dangerous to the American experiment in republican government. This agrarian unrest demonstrated the high degree of internal conflict in post-Revolutionary society and highlighted the inability of the Confederation Congress to address such challenges. This realization, coupled with frustrations regarding the limited powers of the Articles of Confederation, compelled national leaders to reconsider the nation’s future.

The Constitutional Convention, May 25, 1787–September 17, 1787

Following the Treaty of Paris of 1783, a movement for a stronger national government emerged. Shays’ Rebellion highlighted the weakness of the federal government under the Articles of Confederation, as did ongoing conflicts with the British and Native Americans on the western frontier. Furthermore, the Confederation Congress could not prevent states from disregarding or violating the Treaty of Paris. Many believed that the country’s future greatness depended on increasing federal authority.

In September 1786, delegates from five states met in Annapolis, Maryland, to address the pressing issue of how to regulate interstate commerce. James Madison, a delegate from Virginia, questioned whether the Articles supplied a viable form of government. The delegates agreed to meet the next year in Philadelphia to continue the conversation. In January 1787, the Confederation Congress directed the delegates to consider revisions to the Articles of Confederation.

In May 1787, fifty-five delegates from twelve states assembled at the Pennsylvania State House. Rhode Island, fearful the convention would strengthen the central government, refused to send a delegation

that could destroy the nation, and he counseled unity. He declared that maintaining the union translated into “greater strength, greater resource, [and] proportionately greater security from danger” than any single state or region could assert.⁸⁵ Washington believed that political parties represented a dire threat to the health of the nation, and argued that their existence allowed “a small but artful and enterprising minority” to “put in the place of the delegated will of the Nation, the will of a party.”⁸⁶

Washington felt that the threat of foreign entanglements was of paramount concern. The French Revolution had triggered a war between France and Great Britain, and the French demanded American assistance, citing their help in the Revolutionary War and the terms of the treaties between the two nations. Washington advised the United States to “steer clear of permanent Alliances.”⁸⁷ As foreign governments were naturally self-interested, Washington recommended neutrality, and suggested that the new nation pursue beneficial commercial relationships while maintaining “as little political connection as possible.”⁸⁸

The XYZ Affair and the Quasi-War with France

In 1797, the newly elected President John Adams took control of a divided nation. The challenges he faced included lingering rural unrest, war between Britain and France, fractured loyalties within his administration, and vocal opposition in the press. At the forefront of the revolutionary movement since 1765, Adams had played a vital role at each stage. However, things had been different during the Washington administration—although he cast twenty-nine tie-breaking votes in the Senate, more than any other vice president, Adams chafed at the few duties granted the vice president.⁸⁹ He [complained](#) to his wife, Abigail: “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.”⁹⁰

The war between France and Britain threatened to ensnare the United States. Concerned by the political and antireligious radicalism of the French Revolution, Adams and the Federalists favored the comparative stability of the British monarchy. Conversely, as dedicated anti-monarchists, Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans strongly supported France. In 1794, John Jay negotiated a treaty with the



A British political cartoon depicting the XYZ Affair. The U.S. is represented by Columbia, who is being plundered by five Frenchmen. The figures to the right represent other European countries.

British called the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, Between his Britannic Majesty and the United States of America, commonly known as the Jay Treaty. Crucially, the Jay Treaty averted war between the United States and Great Britain and also resolved some residual territorial issues from the Treaty of Paris of 1783 and facilitated a decade of relatively peaceful trade between the two nations.

The French were outraged by what they perceived as an Anglo-American alliance. France suspended diplomatic relations at the end of 1796 and seized more than three hundred American vessels over the next two years.⁹¹ Adams responded by sending a diplomatic mission to France while calling for a military buildup to prepare for a possible French threat. When Adams’s appointed peace commission arrived in France, three agents of the French foreign minister demanded the payment of enormous bribes to the French republic and foreign minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord before opening negotiations. This scandal, known as the XYZ Affair, enraged Americans, who refused to negotiate on such terms.

Relations between the two countries further deteriorated in May 1798 when a French privateer captured a U.S. merchant vessel near New York Harbor. Sensitive to the nation’s lack of naval might, Adams avoided an open conflict but pursued an undeclared Quasi-War with France for the next two years. American ships harassed French ships while the United States acted as an unofficial ally of Great Britain. Fearing a French attack, in May Congress authorized a provisional army

March 1, 1781 –	The Articles of Confederation are ratified by the states.
Mar. 9 – May 8, 1781 –	Siege of Pensacola
March 15, 1781 –	Battle of Guilford Court House
September 28, 1781 –	Beginning of the siege of Yorktown
October 19, 1781 –	The British surrender at Yorktown.
January 1782 –	Parliament forbids offensive action in North America.
March 8, 1782 –	Gnadenhutzen Massacre
April 1782 –	The beginning of Anglo-American peace negotiations
July 13, 1782 –	Raid on Hanna’s Town
August 19, 1782 –	Battle of Blue Licks
August 27, 1782 –	Battle of the Combahee River
November 30, 1782 –	The Peace of Paris is drafted.
1783 –	Virginia Act of 1783
July 8, 1783 –	The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declares slavery against the Constitution of 1780.
September 3, 1783 –	The Anglo-American Peace Treaty is signed.
January 14, 1784 –	Congress ratifies the Treaty of Paris.
April 23, 1784 –	The Northwest Ordinance of 1784 is approved by Congress.
May 20, 1785 –	The Land Ordinance of 1785 is adopted by Congress.
1786 –	Massachusetts prohibits intermarriage between Whites, Blacks, and Native Americans.
August 29, 1786 –	Protesters close the county court in Northampton, Massachusetts.
September 5, 1786 –	Protesters close the county court in Worcester, Massachusetts.
September 1786 –	Delegates from five states convene in Annapolis to address interstate commerce.
January 19, 1787 –	Benjamin Lincoln leads troops to Worcester, Massachusetts.
February 21, 1787 –	Congress calls for a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation.
May 25, 1787 –	The Constitutional Convention begins.

June 1798 –	The Alien and Sedition Acts
October 10, 1798 –	Matthew Lyon is found guilty of violating the Alien and Sedition Acts.
November 16, 1798 –	The Kentucky legislature approves the Kentucky Resolution.
December 24, 1798 –	The Virginia legislature approves the Virginia Resolution.
December 14, 1799 –	Death of George Washington
October–December 1800 –	State electors cast ballots in the election of 1800.
February 17, 1801 –	The House of Representatives selects Thomas Jefferson as president.
March 4, 1801 –	Thomas Jefferson is inaugurated as the third president of the U.S., and Aaron Burr becomes vice president.
July 6, 1803 –	Rev. Thomas Barnard delivers a sermon to the Female Charitable Society of Salem, Massachusetts.
1804 –	The Twelfth Amendment is ratified.
January 1, 1804 –	Haitian independence is declared.
January 1, 1808 –	Congress abolishes the importation of enslaved Africans.
1814 –	Emma Willard founds the Troy Female Seminary.