

The American Revolution and the early federal republic

Economic growth

Provincial America came to be less dependent upon subsistence agriculture and more on the cultivation and manufacture of products for the world market. [Land](#), which initially served only individual needs, came to be the fundamental source of economic enterprise. The independent yeoman farmer continued to exist, particularly in New England and the middle colonies, but most settled land in North America by 1750 was devoted to the cultivation of a cash crop. New England turned its land over to the raising of meat products for export. The middle colonies were the principal producers of grains. By 1700 Philadelphia exported more than 350,000 bushels of wheat and more than 18,000 tons of flour annually. The Southern colonies were, of course, even more closely tied to the cash crop system. South Carolina, aided by British incentives, turned to the production of rice and indigo. North Carolina, although less oriented toward the market economy than South Carolina, was nevertheless one of the principal suppliers of naval stores. Virginia and Maryland steadily increased their economic dependence on tobacco and on the London merchants who purchased that tobacco; and for the most part they ignored those who recommended that they diversify their economies by turning part of their land over to the cultivation of wheat. Their near-total dependence upon the world tobacco price would ultimately prove disastrous, but for most of the 18th century Virginia and Maryland soil remained productive enough to make a single-crop system reasonably profitable.

As America evolved from subsistence to commercial agriculture, an influential commercial class increased its power in nearly every colony. Boston was the centre of the merchant elite of New England, who not only dominated economic life but also wielded social and political power as well. Merchants like James De Lancey and Philip Livingston in New York and Joseph Galloway, Robert Morris, and Thomas Wharton in Philadelphia exerted an influence far beyond the confines of their occupations. In Charleston the Pinckney, Rutledge, and Lowndes families controlled much of the trade that passed through that port. Even in Virginia, where a strong merchant class was nonexistent, those people with the most economic and political power were those commercial farmers who best combined the occupations of merchant and farmer. And it is clear that the commercial importance of the colonies was increasing. During the years 1700–10, approximately £265,000 sterling was exported annually to Great Britain from the colonies, with roughly the same amount being imported by the Americans from Great Britain. By the decade 1760–70, that figure had risen to more than

£1,000,000 sterling of goods exported annually to Great Britain and £1,760,000 annually imported from Great Britain.

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Prelude to revolution

Britain's victory over France in the Great War for the Empire had been won at very great cost. British government expenditures, which had amounted to nearly £6,500,000 annually before the war, rose to about £14,500,000 annually during the war. As a result, the burden of taxation in England was probably the highest in the country's history, much of it borne by the politically influential landed classes. Furthermore, with the acquisition of the vast domain of Canada and the prospect of holding British territories both against the various nations of Indians and against the Spaniards to the south and west, the costs of colonial defense could be expected to continue indefinitely. Parliament, moreover, had voted Massachusetts a generous sum in compensation for its war expenses. It therefore seemed reasonable to British opinion that some of the future burden of payment should be shifted to the colonists themselves—who until then had been lightly taxed and indeed lightly governed.

The prolonged wars had also revealed the need to tighten the administration of the loosely run and widely scattered elements of the British Empire. If the course of the war had confirmed the necessity, the end of the war presented the opportunity. The acquisition of Canada required London officials to take responsibility for the unsettled western territories, now freed from the threat of French occupation. The British soon moved to take charge of the whole field of Indian relations. By royal [proclamation](#) (1763) a line was drawn down the Appalachians marking the limit of settlement from the British colonies, beyond which Indian trade was to be conducted strictly through British-appointed commissioners. These steps were not in time to prevent a serious uprising under the Ottawa chief Pontiac, however; and the proclamation, which sprang in part from a respect for Indian rights, caused consternation among British colonists for two reasons. It meant that limits were being set to the prospects of settlement and speculation in western lands, and it took control of the west out of colonial hands. The most ambitious men in the colonies thus saw the proclamation as a loss of power to control their own fortunes.

The [tax](#) controversy

[George Grenville](#), who was named prime minister in 1763, was soon looking to meet the costs of defense by raising revenue in the colonies. The first measure was the [Plantation Act](#) of 1764, usually called the Sugar, or Revenue, Act, which reduced to a mere threepence the duty on imported foreign molasses but linked with this a high duty on refined sugar and a prohibition on foreign rum (the needs of the British treasury were carefully balanced with those of West Indies planters and New England distillers). The last measure of this kind (1733) had not been enforced, but this time the government set up a system of customs houses, staffed by British officers, and even established a vice-admiralty court. Sitting at Halifax, Nova Scotia, the court heard very few cases, but in principle it appeared to threaten the cherished British privilege of trials by local juries. Boston further objected to the tax's revenue-raising aspect on constitutional grounds, but, despite some expressions of anxiety, the colonies in general acquiesced.

Parliament next affected colonial economic prospects by passing a Currency Act (1764) to withdraw paper currencies, many of them surviving from the war period, from circulation. This was not done to restrict economic growth so much as to take out currency that was thought to be unsound, but it did severely reduce the circulating medium during the difficult postwar period and further indicated that such matters were subject to British control.

Grenville's next move was a stamp duty, to be raised on a wide variety of transactions, including legal writs, newspaper advertisements, and ships' bills of lading. The colonies were duly consulted and offered no alternative suggestions. The feeling in London, shared by Benjamin Franklin, was that, after making formal objections, the colonies would accept the new taxes as they had the earlier ones. But the [Stamp Act](#) (1765) hit harder and deeper than any previous parliamentary measure. As some agents had already pointed out, because of postwar economic difficulties the colonies were short of ready funds. (In Virginia this shortage was so serious that the province's treasurer, John Robinson, who was also speaker of the assembly, manipulated and redistributed paper money that had been officially withdrawn from circulation by the Currency Act; a large proportion of the landed gentry benefited from this largesse.) The Stamp Act struck at vital points of colonial economic operations, affecting transactions in trade. It also affected many of the most articulate and influential people in the colonies (lawyers, journalists, bankers). It was, moreover, the first "internal" tax levied directly on the colonies by Parliament. Previous colonial taxes had been levied by local authorities or had been "external" import duties whose primary aim could be viewed as regulating trade for the benefit of the empire as a whole rather than raising revenue. Yet no one, either in Britain or the colonies, fully anticipated the uproar that followed the imposition of these duties. Mobs in Boston and other towns rioted and forced appointed stamp

distributors to renounce their posts; legal business was largely halted. Several colonies sent delegations to a Congress in New York in the summer of 1765, where the [Stamp Act](#) was denounced as a violation of the Englishman's right to be taxed only through elected representatives, and plans were adopted to impose a nonimportation embargo on British goods.

A change of ministry facilitated a change of British policy on taxation. Parliamentary opinion was angered by what it perceived as colonial lawlessness, but British merchants were worried about the embargo on British imports. The [Marquis of Rockingham](#), succeeding Grenville, was persuaded to repeal the Stamp Act—for domestic reasons rather than out of any sympathy with colonial protests. In 1766 the repeal was passed, however, on the same day as the [Declaratory Act](#), which declared that Parliament had the power to bind or legislate the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” Parliament would not have voted the repeal without this assertion of its authority.

The colonists, jubilant at the repeal of the Stamp Act, drank innumerable toasts, sounded peals of cannon, and were prepared to ignore the Declaratory Act as face-saving window dressing. [John Adams](#), however, warned in his [Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law](#) that Parliament, armed with this view of its powers, would try to tax the colonies again; and this happened in 1767 when [Charles Townshend](#) became Chancellor of the Exchequer in a ministry formed by Pitt, now Earl of Chatham. The problem was that Britain's financial burden had not been lifted. [Townshend](#), claiming to take literally the colonial distinction between external and internal taxes, imposed external duties on a wide range of necessities, including lead, glass, paint, paper, and tea, the principal domestic beverage. One ominous result was that colonists now began to believe that the British were developing a long-term plan to reduce the colonies to a subservient position, which they were soon calling “slavery.” This view was ill-informed, however. Grenville's measures had been designed as a carefully considered package; apart from some tidying-up legislation, Grenville had had no further plans for the colonies after the Stamp Act. His successors developed further measures, not as extensions of an original plan but because the Stamp Act had been repealed.

Nevertheless, the colonists were outraged. In Pennsylvania the lawyer and legislator [John Dickinson](#) wrote a series of essays that, appearing in 1767 and 1768 as [Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania](#), were widely reprinted and exerted great influence in forming a united colonial opposition. Dickinson agreed that Parliament had supreme power where the whole empire was concerned, but he denied that it had power over internal colonial affairs; he quietly implied that the basis of colonial loyalty lay in its utility among equals rather than in obedience owed to a superior.

It proved easier to unite on opinion than on action. Gradually, after much maneuvering and negotiation, a wide-ranging nonimportation policy against British goods was brought into operation. Agreement had not been easy to reach, and the tensions sometimes broke out in acrimonious charges of noncooperation. In addition, the policy had to be enforced by newly created local committees, a process that put a new disciplinary power in the hands of local men who had not had much previous experience in public affairs. There were, as a result, many signs of discontent with the ordering of domestic affairs in some of the colonies—a development that had obvious implications for the future of colonial politics if more action were needed later.

Constitutional differences with Britain

Very few colonists wanted or even envisaged independence at this stage. (Dickinson had hinted at such a possibility with expressions of pain that were obviously sincere.) The colonial struggle for power, although charged with intense feeling, was not an attempt to change government structure but an argument over legal interpretation. The core of the colonial case was that, as British subjects, they were entitled to the same privileges as their fellow subjects in Britain. They could not constitutionally be taxed without their own consent; and, because they were unrepresented in the [Parliament](#) that voted the taxes, they had not given this consent. [James Otis](#), in two long pamphlets, ceded all sovereign power to Parliament with this proviso. Others, however, began to question whether Parliament did have lawful power to legislate over the colonies. These doubts were expressed by the late 1760s, when [James Wilson](#), a Scottish immigrant lawyer living in Philadelphia, wrote an essay on the subject. Because of the withdrawal of the Townshend round of duties in 1770, Wilson kept this essay private until new troubles arose in 1774, when he published it as [*Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament*](#). In this he fully articulated a view that had been gathering force in the colonies (it was also the opinion of Benjamin Franklin) that Parliament's lawful sovereignty stopped at the shores of Britain.

The official British reply to the colonial case on representation was that the colonies were “virtually” represented in Parliament in the same sense that the large voteless majority of the British public was represented by those who did vote. To this James Otis snorted that, if the majority of the British people did not have the vote, they ought to have it. The idea of colonial members of Parliament, several times suggested, was never a likely solution because of problems of time and

distance and because, from the colonists' point of view, colonial members would not have adequate influence.

The standpoints of the two sides to the controversy could be traced in the language used. The principle of parliamentary sovereignty was expressed in the language of paternalistic authority; the British referred to themselves as parents and to the colonists as children. Colonial Tories, who accepted Parliament's case in the interests of social stability, also used this terminology. From this point of view, colonial insubordination was “unnatural,” just as the revolt of children against parents was unnatural. The colonists replied to all this in the language of [rights](#). They held that Parliament could do nothing in the colonies that it could not do in Britain because the Americans were protected by all the common-law rights of the British. (When the First Continental Congress met in September 1774, one of its first acts was to affirm that the colonies were entitled to the common law of England.)

Rights, as Richard Bland of Virginia insisted in *The Colonel Dismounted* (as early as 1764), implied equality. And here he touched on the underlying source of colonial grievance. Americans were being treated as unequals, which they not only resented but also feared would lead to a loss of control of their own affairs. Colonists perceived legal inequality when writs of [assistance](#)—essentially, general search warrants—were authorized in Boston in 1761 while closely related “general warrants” were outlawed in two celebrated cases in Britain. Townshend specifically legalized writs of assistance in the colonies in 1767. Dickinson devoted one of his *Letters from a Farmer* to this issue.

When [Lord North](#) became prime minister early in 1770, George III had at last found a minister who could work both with himself and with Parliament. British government began to acquire some stability. In 1770, in the face of the American policy of nonimportation, the Townshend tariffs were withdrawn—all except the tax on tea, which was kept for symbolic reasons. Relative calm returned, though it was ruffled on the New England coastline by frequent incidents of defiance of customs officers, who could get no support from local juries. These outbreaks did not win much sympathy from other colonies, but they were serious enough to call for an increase in the number of British regular forces stationed in [Boston](#). One of the most violent clashes occurred in Boston just before the repeal of the Townshend duties. Threatened by mob harassment, a small British detachment opened fire and killed five people, an incident soon known as the Boston Massacre. The soldiers were charged with murder and were given a civilian trial, in which John Adams conducted a successful defense.

The other serious quarrel with British authority occurred in New York, where the assembly refused to accept all the British demands for quartering troops. Before a compromise was reached, Parliament had threatened to suspend the assembly. The episode was ominous because it indicated that Parliament was taking the Declaratory Act at its word; on no previous occasion had the British legislature intervened in the operation of the constitution in an American colony. (Such interventions, which were rare, had come from the crown.)

British intervention in colonial economic affairs occurred again when in 1773 Lord North's administration tried to rescue the [East India Company](#) from difficulties that had nothing to do with America. The [Tea Act](#) gave the company, which produced tea in India, a monopoly of distribution in the colonies. The company planned to sell its tea through its own agents, eliminating the system of sale by auction to independent merchants. By thus cutting the costs of middlemen, it hoped to undersell the widely purchased, inferior, smuggled tea. This plan naturally affected colonial merchants, and many colonists denounced the act as a plot to induce Americans to buy—and therefore pay the tax on—legally imported tea. [Boston](#) was not the only port to threaten to reject the casks of taxed tea, but its reply was the most dramatic—and provocative.

On December 16, 1773, a party of Bostonians, thinly disguised as Mohawk Indians, boarded the ships at anchor and dumped some £10,000 worth of tea into the harbour. British opinion was outraged, and America's friends in Parliament were immobilized. (American merchants in other cities were also disturbed. Property was property.) In the spring of 1774, with hardly any opposition, Parliament passed a series of [measures](#) designed to reduce Massachusetts to order and imperial discipline. The port of Boston was closed; and, in the [Massachusetts Government Act](#), Parliament for the first time actually altered a colonial charter, substituting an appointive council for the elective one established in 1691 and conferring extensive powers on the governor and council. The famous town meeting, a forum for radical thinkers, was outlawed as a political body. To make matters worse, Parliament also passed the [Quebec Act](#) for the government of Canada. To the horror of pious New England Calvinists, the Roman Catholic religion was recognized for the French inhabitants. In addition, Upper Canada (i.e., the southern section) was joined to the Mississippi valley for purposes of administration, permanently blocking the prospect of American control of western settlement.

The [Continental Congress](#)

There was widespread agreement that this intervention in colonial government could threaten other provinces and could be countered only by collective action. After much intercolonial correspondence, a Continental Congress came into existence, meeting in Philadelphia in September 1774. Every colonial assembly except that of Georgia appointed and sent a delegation. The Virginia delegation's instructions were drafted by [Thomas Jefferson](#) and were later published as [A Summary View of the Rights of British America](#) (1774). Jefferson insisted on the autonomy of colonial legislative power and set forth a highly individualistic view of the basis of American rights. This belief that the American colonies and other members of the British Empire were distinct states united under the king and thus subject only to the king and not to Parliament was shared by several other delegates, notably James Wilson and John Adams, and strongly influenced the Congress.

The Congress' first important decision was one on procedure: whether to vote by colony, each having one vote, or by wealth calculated on a ratio with population. The decision to vote by colony was made on practical grounds—neither wealth nor population could be satisfactorily ascertained—but it had important consequences. Individual colonies, no matter what their size, retained a degree of autonomy that translated immediately into the language and prerogatives of sovereignty. Under Massachusetts' influence, the Congress next adopted the [Suffolk Resolves](#), recently voted in Suffolk county, Massachusetts, which for the first time put natural rights into the official colonial argument (hitherto all remonstrances had been based on common law and constitutional rights). Apart from this, however, the prevailing mood was cautious.

The Congress' aim was to put such pressure on the British government that it would redress all colonial grievances and restore the harmony that had once prevailed. The Congress thus adopted an Association that committed the colonies to a carefully phased plan of economic pressure, beginning with nonimportation, moving to nonconsumption, and finishing the following September (after the rice harvest had been exported) with nonexportation. A few New England and Virginia delegates were looking toward independence; but the majority went home hoping that these steps, together with new appeals to the king and to the British people, would avert the need for any further such meetings. If these measures failed, however, a second Congress would convene the following spring.

Behind the unity achieved by the Congress lay deep divisions in colonial society. In the mid-1760s upriver New York was disrupted by land riots, which also broke out in parts of New Jersey; much worse disorder ravaged the backcountry of both North and South Carolina, where frontier people were left unprotected by

legislatures that taxed them but in which they felt themselves unrepresented. A pitched battle at [Alamance](#) Creek in North Carolina in 1771 ended that rising and was followed by executions for treason. Although without such serious disorder, the cities also revealed acute social tensions and resentments of inequalities of economic opportunity and visible status. New York provincial politics were riven by intense rivalry between two great family-based parties, the DeLanceys, who benefited from royal government connections, and their rivals, the Livingstons. (The politics of the quarrel with Britain affected the domestic standing of the parties and eventually eclipsed the DeLanceys.) Another phenomenon was the rapid rise of dissenting religious sects, notably the [Baptists](#); although they carried no political program, their style of preaching suggested a strong undercurrent of social as well as religious dissent. There was no inherent unity to these disturbances, but many leaders of colonial society were reluctant to ally themselves with these disruptive elements even in protest against Britain. They were concerned about the domestic consequences of letting the protests take a revolutionary turn; power shared with these elements might never be recovered.

When the British general [Thomas Gage](#) sent a force from Boston to destroy American rebel military stores at Concord, Massachusetts, fighting broke out between militia and British troops at [Lexington and Concord](#) on April 19, 1775. Reports of these clashes reached the Second Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in May. Although most colonial leaders still hoped for reconciliation with Britain, the news stirred the delegates to more radical action. Steps were taken to put the continent on a war footing. While a further appeal was addressed to the British people (mainly on John Dickinson's insistence), the Congress raised an army, adopted a *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*, and appointed committees to deal with domestic supply and foreign affairs. In August 1775 the king declared a state of rebellion; by the end of the year, all colonial trade was banned. Even yet, General George Washington, commander of the Continental Army, still referred to the British troops as “ministerial” forces, indicating a civil war, not a war looking to separate national identity.

Then in January 1776 the publication of [Thomas Paine's](#) irreverent pamphlet [Common Sense](#) abruptly shattered this hopeful complacency and put independence on the agenda. Paine's eloquent, direct language spoke people's unspoken thoughts; no pamphlet had ever made such an impact on colonial opinion. While the Congress negotiated urgently, but secretly, for a French alliance, power struggles erupted in provinces where conservatives still hoped for relief. The only form relief could take, however, was British concessions; as public opinion hardened in Britain, where a general election in November 1774 had returned a strong majority for Lord North, the hope for reconciliation faded. In the face of British intransigence, men

committed to their definition of colonial rights were left with no alternative; and the substantial portion of colonists—about one-third according to John Adams; however, contemporary historians believe the number to have been much smaller—who preferred [loyalty](#) to the crown, with all its disadvantages, were localized and outflanked. Where the British armies massed, they found plenty of loyalist support; but, when they moved on, they left the loyalists feeble and exposed.

The most dramatic internal revolution occurred in Pennsylvania, where a strong radical party, based mainly in Philadelphia but with allies in the country, seized power in the course of the controversy over independence itself. Opinion for independence swept the colonies in the spring of 1776. The Congress recommended that colonies form their own governments and assigned a committee to draft a [declaration of independence](#).

This document, written by Thomas Jefferson but revised in committee, consisted of two parts. The preamble set the claims of the United States on a basis of natural rights, with a dedication to the principle of equality; the second was a long list of grievances against the crown—not Parliament now, since the argument was that Parliament had no lawful power in the colonies. On July 2 the Congress itself voted for independence; on the 4th it adopted the Declaration.