

LEARNING MADE EASY



American Revolution

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



The battles, from
Lexington to Yorktown

The Declaration of Independence
and the U.S. Constitution

The Founding
Fathers

Steve Wiegand

Award-winning political journalist;
author of *U.S. History For Dummies*



American Revolution

by Steve Wiegand

Award-winning political journalist and history writer

for
dummies[®]
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American Revolution For Dummies®

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Introduction

John Adams once wrote that “the history of our Revolution will be one continued Lye [sic] from one end to the other.” Adams, second president of the United States, courageous statesman — and often a world-class grump — went on to sarcastically note that historians would doubtless report Benjamin Franklin “smote the Earth and out sprang George Washington.” Then Franklin electrified Washington with a lightning rod “and thence forward these two conducted all the Policy, Negotiations, Legislatures and War.”

Over the past two centuries, historians have poured out millions of words about the American Revolution, although no one to my knowledge has recounted it quite like Adams predicted. Tempting as it is to take an entirely fresh and novel approach, I’m not going to, either. But in the pages that follow, I am going to try to tell the story of one of the more remarkable events in human history: The creation of a nation unlike any other before it, born from a handful of scraggly colonies clinging to the east coast of a raw and sprawling continent.

Conceived in a war of words, and born from a war of blood against what was then the world’s most powerful empire, America was then reborn with more words. They were written on documents that still resonate, for a country that Thomas Jefferson said represented “the world’s best hope” and Abraham Lincoln redefined as the “last best hope of earth.”

I don’t think the history of the American Revolution is over yet. Now, before you jump to the not-totally-unreasonable conclusion that you are reading the work of a drooling imbecile, hear me out. It just may be that you are confusing the *American Revolution* with the *Revolutionary War*. A lot of people do. In fact, they’ve been doing it since, well, the Revolutionary War.

“There is nothing more common than to confound the terms of the American Revolution with those of the late war,” wrote Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1786. That was just five years after the fighting between the American colonies and Great Britain had ceased, and three years after the two sides had signed a peace treaty in a second-floor room of a posh Paris hotel.

Rush had served with distinction as surgeon general of the colonials’ army (even though he favored bloodletting for almost every ailment and for stomach troubles prescribed his own brand of “bilious pills” that were at least 50 percent mercury).

He was also one of 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence. In pointing out the difference between the revolution and the war, he explained the latter was “nothing but the first act of the great drama . . . it remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government.”

Rush was right (about the revolution, not the bloodletting). The American Revolution can be properly viewed as an ongoing event. It was, and is, an idea, an expedition, a continual work-in-progress. It’s about devising the best way for human beings to get along with each other; to form social structures that allow us to govern ourselves with justice and fairness and compassion; and to respect the rights and freedoms of the individual while balancing them against the common good.

Establishing such a system — what George Washington called “the last Great Experiment for promoting human happiness” — is a tall order, and one that we continue to fine-tune with every presidential edict, congressional act, and Supreme Court decision. We’re not done yet, and may never be done.

So, this book is about just the beginning of the journey, how it got started, who started it and how the route changed over those first years and decades. It’s a bumpy and sometimes confusing trip, so buckle your seat belts and keep your eyes on the road.

About This Book

This book is not a textbook, nor is it an exhaustive encyclopedia covering everything that happened during those formative decades before and after America’s beginning. Instead, I’ve tried to focus on the key events of the time, the whys and hows behind the events, and most of all, the people who made them happen. The aim is to give a basic foundation of information about the American Revolution and maybe entertain, amuse, and even irk you a bit along the way.

A word or two about the irking. This is not a completely objective, totally dispassionate, right-down-the-middle history book. There is no such thing. I’ve tried to stick to facts — or at least the most widely accepted historical interpretations of the facts — but the bottom line is that my own thoughts, biases, and interpretations will inevitably intrude. Sorry.

If there are factual mistakes, please let me know, and I’ll fix them in the next edition. If you simply don’t agree, congratulations. The freedom to disagree is one of the things the American Revolution was all about. If you take a look at Chapter 19, you can find a short list of other books on this topic. I’ve included at least a few that were written from either decidedly conservative or definitely liberal

perspectives, so you can compare this book with some you might find more comforting, or more confrontational.

Lastly, I've included some anecdotes, quotes, and personality portraits that are meant to liven up the proceedings a bit. Learning about the past is certainly an important undertaking. But it doesn't have to be dull.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you amble along the revolutionary trail, I use the following conventions:

- » *Italics* are used both to emphasize a word to make a sentence clearer and to highlight a new word that's being defined.
- » **Bold** highlights keywords in bulleted lists.

I've also tried whenever possible to use the exact language, spelling, and punctuation when quoting from letters, newspapers, or other historical documents. I think it adds to the authenticity and flavor of the topic. The few times I modernized things was when I thought the actual wording was too archaic to be easily understood.

What Not to Read

As you meander around the book, you'll encounter blocks of text in shaded boxes. They contain quotes; mini-profiles of both famous and semi-obscure people; the origins of things; factoids and numbers; and other historical debris.

You don't need to read them to get what's going on. They're just there as little extras that I've thrown in at no additional charge. Feel free to read them as you find them, come back to them later, or save them for recitation at your next poker game.

Foolish Assumptions

I'm assuming you picked up this book because you have some interest in the American Revolution (thus the cleverly selected title). If your interest is deeper than “some,” great — feel free to plow through it from beginning to end. But if “some interest” is just about right for you, no problem. Feel free to skip around to the parts that catch your fancy most, be it Chapter 14, on the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, or even Chapter 19, which lists other good books on the subject. It won't hurt my feelings. Much.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this product also comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that is a smorgasbord of information about how the American government was set up and functions, a couple of mini-bios of interesting folks, and a collection of factoids to amaze your friends and confound your foes. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and search for “American Revolution For Dummies Cheat Sheet” in the Search box.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, you'll find icons in the margins or alongside boxed sidebars that alert you to particular aspects or features of the text. Here's what they mean:



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The names, numbers, and other stats behind the news are the focus of this icon.



REMEMBER

This icon alerts you to a fact or idea that you may want to stash in your memory bank.

Where to Go from Here

Hmmm, tough question. If you're reading this introduction, I'm betting you'll take a crack at what follows. I guess the best advice I can come up with is to consider that the American Revolution isn't over. And when you read about, watch, or listen to the news, keep in mind that the way America started is a pretty important part of where it's going — or should be.

1

The Roots of Revolution

IN THIS PART . . .

Centuries before anyone whistles “Yankee Doodle,” religious and political ideas and events lay the foundation for the American Revolution.

The Old World meets the New, and it’s not always pretty.

The American colonies participate in world wars and begin to feel strains of alienation from the Mother Country.

- » Laying a foundation
- » Fighting for independence
- » Crafting a new kind of government
- » Taking the first steps as a nation

Chapter **1**

A Revolutionary Story

One of the dictionary definitions of *revolution* is “an overthrow or repudiation and the thorough replacement of an established government or political system by the people governed.” Another is “a radical, transformative change.” Yet a third is “a movement in a circular course, returning to its starting point.”

The American Revolution, I think, fits parts of all three of those definitions. Americans certainly overthrew and repudiated the established government under which they had been living. The result was certainly a radical, transformative change for them — as well as much of the rest of the world for centuries to come. And as Americans have moved through the 240-plus years since the Declaration of Independence, we have often revisited our starting point, not only to give us a sense of direction, but to provide ourselves with reassurance we are still on the right track.

But I’d add a fourth definition when it comes to the American Revolution: “The ongoing process of perfecting the best way of governing ourselves.” So, think of this chapter as providing a map for the rest of the book, which shows you where that process has taken us so far.

Setting the Stage

Before there was a United States of America, there were colonies, and before there were colonies, there were continents unvisited by Europeans, and before they could visit, the Europeans had to come through a whole lot of changes.

The changes ran the gamut from new ways of looking at religion to different kinds of governing. The two issues rarely stayed out of each other's way. **Chapter 2** takes a look at how economics, politics, and varying methods of worship combined to push Europeans, particularly those from England, Spain, and France, into a fierce competition to dominate the New World.

Progressing with Pilgrims — and for profit

As England came to dominate the portion of the North American continent now recognized as the United States, settlers took different approaches to settling. Some came to escape religious persecution in the Old World and establish their own little pieces of heaven on earth. Others came for money — or at least the profits that might be made in the new land.

Both kinds of newcomers encountered and endured a host of hardships. That's what **Chapter 3** covers, along with a look at how specific religious groups branched out to form their own distinctive colonies.

Fighting the natives and the home folks

Given the fact that Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries were almost always fighting with each other, it was probably dismally inevitable they would end up at war with the people already in America when they arrived. **Chapter 4** follows the clash of cultures in different regions of the new land between the Native Americans and the newcomers.

It also examines early efforts by the various colonies to form alliances — and early rebellions against authorities representing the home country.

Growing up fast

Britain's American colonies exploded during the first half of the 18th century, in more ways than one. There were spurts in population, economic prosperity, and political clout, all of which were positive signs that things were going well for the colonists.

But negative growth occurred as well: The population of kidnapped and enslaved Africans soared. A series of world wars, some of them directly involving America, took place. When the final war ended, British America had rid itself of the threat posed by the French Empire and was ready to confront a new threat — posed by Britain. That’s all in **Chapter 5**.

Divorcing the Mother Country

The American colonies generally came out of the French and Indian War in great shape. Millions of acres of virgin land had been won from the French and were ripe for settling. The mother country, Great Britain, was the most powerful nation on earth.

But lurking below the façade of Britain’s greatness were enormous war debts that had to be paid. And since the colonies benefitted from Britain’s protective cloak, British officials thought it natural that the colonists help pick up part of the bills. As **Chapter 6** shows, the colonists thought otherwise. A series of taxing efforts by Parliament resulted in a series of downright surly responses from Americans.

Warming up for war

For five-plus years, America and Britain had managed to confine their differences to rhetorical battles and bloodless economic boycotts. But the conflict takes a decided turn to the violent in **Chapter 7**. There’s a massacre in Boston, along with a tea party.

Then a group of Americans from 12 of the 13 colonies get together in Philadelphia to compare notes and ask the king to knock it off. But tensions grow, until on a crisp clear morning in April 1775, a shot is fired — and heard ’round the world.

Declaring independence

Even after the shooting began at Lexington and Concord, many Americans and Britons held out hope that some kind of reconciliation could be reached before too much more blood was shed. But as **Chapter 8** reveals, the American leaders hedged their bets by setting up an army and picking the best general they could find to lead it — even if no one realized they were making such a good pick at the time.

More battles were fought, and the chances of accommodation dimmed. A scuffling writer newly arrived from England fanned the flames for a complete break from Britain. In July 1776, America declared its independence, in what is one of the most important political documents in human history.

Winning a war, the hard way

It certainly looked like a mismatch: the most powerful country on earth, with one of the most experienced and professional military organizations, versus a collection of 13 disorganized colonies that had to basically start from scratch to build an army and navy — and had very few raw materials to start with.

America did have at least one thing going for it, in the person of a military leader who had limited military skills but seemingly unlimited determination. As **Chapter 9** shows, George Washington would need every bit of that determination to win a war against Great Britain. This chapter follows the course of battles; the hardships endured by the American forces; the British leaders' uncanny knack for making blunders at critical times; and how things wound up after more than six years of fighting.

Making it a global affair

The American Revolutionary War didn't just occur in America. In fact, it was actually a world war, involving at least a half-dozen nations fighting on several continents. **Chapter 10** follows the action from India to the Caribbean, and explains how Britain having to fight on fronts all over the globe greatly hampered its efforts to hold on to its American colonies.

The chapter also takes a look at the American rebellion from the British perspective, as well as the leadership team King George III put together to fight the war and the flak he got from those in the British government who opposed it. That opposition, plus the timely and invaluable aid America received from France, led up to remarkably favorable peace treaty for the new United States.

Fighting among ourselves

While the Revolutionary War was a worldwide conflict, it was also a domestic civil war. Many Americans opposed independence from Britain, for a wide variety of reasons. **Chapter 11** examines how the difference of opinions had tragic consequences, pitting neighbor against neighbor and even splitting families.

The chapter also looks at how the war and the struggle for independence affected various groups of Americans, including women, African Americans, and Native Americans, and what roles these groups played in the fight. Finally, it covers how the war effort was exploited for financial gain by some Americans, how neglect and exploitation nurtured resentment among the men fighting the war — and why they continued to fight.

War's Over — Now Comes the Hard Part

Winning the war was only part of the American Revolution. Now a collection of 13 once-dependent colonies had to form some kind of independent nation. **Chapter 12** covers the awkward period between the Battle of Yorktown, which ended the major fighting, and the gathering in Philadelphia to create a government system Americans could live with.

Sorting out the Founding Fathers

Before getting to Philadelphia and the Constitutional Convention, **Chapter 13** examines the controversy among historians as to who deserves the title Founding Fathers or whether the term is meaningful. Then it gives you mini-profiles of ten, uh, “significant contributors” to the American Revolution.

Drafting new rules — and selling them

It was a long, hot summer of debating, arguing, writing, rewriting, and re-rewriting. The result, as **Chapter 14** explains, was the U.S. Constitution, a blueprint for a new system of government. But coming up with the document was only half the battle. In **Chapter 15**, the other half is waged: selling the idea to the American people and then drafting a Bill of Rights to sweeten the deal.

Getting Government Off the Ground

The men who drafted the Constitution were reasonably thorough about establishing the legislative branch of the new government. But they left some sizeable blanks to fill in when it came to the executive and judicial branches. **Chapter 16** fills in the blanks (or at least explains how they filled in the blanks), and covers getting the government financed. I also throw in the rise of party politics and say goodbye to George Washington.

Picking fights over presidents and parties

Choosing George Washington for president was easy; choosing his first two successors was pretty messy, mostly because of the convoluted process established by the Constitution. **Chapter 17** covers the mess, along with the rise of political parties in America and a feud with France.

Sorting out the Revolution's results

The American Revolution made an impact far beyond the new country's borders. A very brief **Chapter 18** summarizes some of the Revolution's effects elsewhere, as well as the reverberations it has had on U.S. history, and what should be kept in mind about it as the 21st century moves on.

For further reading. . . .

Think of **Chapter 19** as a mini-bibliography. I list some books on the American Revolution from various perspectives and on various parts of the topic. It's designed to whet your reading appetite — after you memorize this book, of course.

The Good Stuff at the Back of the Book

If you like lists — and who doesn't? — there are three of the *For Dummies* hallowed Parts of Tens chapters in the back of this tome. **Chapters 20, 21, and 22** provide things you didn't know about the Founding Fathers; some unsung heroes of the American Revolution; and pithy quotes from or about the struggle for independence.

As an added bonus, **Part 6** contains The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and a timeline of 25 key events during the first half century of the American Revolution. Enjoy.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding the state(s) of things in Europe
- » Charting changes in Church and State
- » Traveling West to go East
- » Figuring out colonization

Chapter 2

Here Comes Europe

Like a well-mixed salad, many great events are the result of seemingly disparate ingredients. The American Revolution was no exception. Combine greed, God, and government with self-absorbed kings, virgin queens, rebellious monks, and daring pirates. Add generous portions of sugar and tobacco. In a century or two, you've got the makings of a revolution.

In this chapter, the preceding ingredients are blended, more or less, into a recounting of institutional changes in post-Medieval Europe — particularly Spain, France, and England — that helped shape events down the road in America. I also touch on how European powers came to explore, exploit and tentatively settle in the New World.

If you don't like salad, think of this chapter as sort of an inventory of ideas, issues, and actions that helped shape the character of the American colonies, which in turn laid the foundations of the American Revolution. And don't worry if it all seems a bit disconnected. It will come together. Eventually.

Shaking Up the Old World

As Europe meandered from the Middle Ages, it began wrestling with some major changes in the way people worked, worshipped, and governed themselves.

Trading economies

The economy of Western Europe during much of the Middle Ages was basically a collection of small and generally self-sufficient systems. They revolved around lowly peasants producing just enough food and manufactured items to subsist on, and using the rest to pay powerful nobles for letting them use the land and for providing military protection from outside threats.

But the various religious-sparked Crusades into the Middle East introduced Europeans to all kinds of nifty new products, including silks, dyes, exotic fruits — and an entire condiment-shelf's worth of spices that not only made food more palatable, but helped preserve it. To get this stuff, Europeans traded things like wool, timber, and metals.



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This trading, in turn, led to the rise of *city-states*, particularly in Italy. Instead of vast-but-isolated agriculture-based tracts ruled by almost-omnipotent families, the city-states were urban areas whose economies often centered on producing particular goods or served as trading centers. Although powerful dynastic families often ruled them, the power might be shared by guilds of people who specialized in producing goods or trading them. Business ability and market skills made this *merchant class* less dependent on the whims of barons or dukes. Trade with other parts of the world intensified, and so did the quest for new markets and more products.

Another factor in this economic shift — and keep in mind it was gradual and uneven in its geography and timespan — was a morbidly drastic change in Europe's labor market. The various “Black Death” plagues — bubonic, pneumonic, septicemic — of the 14th century killed as many as 25 million people, about one-third of the continent's entire population. That meant fewer workers, which meant that labor was more valuable. Life got marginally better for some people who could parlay their skills into jobs instead of virtual slavery.

Rocking religion

At about the same time, religion and the role it played in people's lives was facing big-time convulsions. For centuries, the Rome-based Catholic Church had dominated most of Europe, and the church's popes felt free to interfere in the politics and policies of kingdoms, duchies, and just about anywhere else they felt like interfering.

But in the early 14th century, French kings, who were tired of papal intrusions into secular affairs, began to pick their own popes. Over the next century, it wasn't unheard of for Europe to have three or four “popes” at the same time. It took until the early 15th century for the various factions to sort it out and agree to return to a system of one pope at a time.