

Twenty-Five Years of Turmoil, Sacrifice, and Glory: A Condensed History of America's  
Original Grand Social Revolution from 1763 to 1789

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The American Revolution was much more than a simple war between cousins separated by a vast ocean; it was a battle for the hearts and minds of America's colonial population. While the eight years

Due to the breadth and variety of the relevant topics discussed, the history of this social revolution will be addressed in three sections. The first section will detail the political awakening and mobilization of the American colonial lower class, and the evolution of their tactics in protesting against the tyranny of the British Crown and government, before the final political break between the British government and the American colonies in 1776. The initial attempts by the colonial upper crust to stifle the grand social revolution will also be highlighted in section one. The second section will detail the experiences of America's lower class during the Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1783, and will highlight the immense suffering endured by everyday Americans during those years. The third section will detail the shared motivations and common experiences of several sub-groups encapsulated within the scope of the grand social revolution, and will include a discussion on how the different wings fared in the twilight years of the Revolutionary Era.

### **From Rabble to Rebels: The Political and Social Awakening of the Colonial Lower Class**

Beginning in the 1760s and continuing to the fateful year of 1776, the smallfolk living in the British North American colonies, especially in the northeast, played a vital role in driving the course of events toward open rebellion against British hegemony. This years-long process began as mostly disorganized opposition among the colonial lower class to British violations of their human rights, such as the ongoing practices of slavery and naval impressment in the colonies, but eventually grew in scope to include those protesting against economic and social grievances as well. The movement began as a spontaneous coalition with shared grievances, a 'motley crew' of lower-class laborers, sailors, servants, slaves, dock workers, and urban dwellers that reacted

against various injustices they encountered in their everyday lives.<sup>1</sup> This general antipathy soon congealed into outright mass rejection of unpopular British laws, British colonial government officials, and ultimately of British authority over the American colonies. The process was gradual, and as anti-British sentiment in the colonies evolved and intensified, so did the role of the colonial lower class. In fact, America's lower class became more organized, more effectively

routines at home motivated citizens to band together and collectively resist a loathed common foe: the press-gangs. Once the immediate threat subsided, however, the collective defense ceased and the mobs disbanded.<sup>3</sup> After their primary motivation of driving away the press-gangs had been achieved, the mobs found no common concerns or reasons to continue their protests.

The violent backlash against the looming imposition of the Stamp Act in the colonies during 1765 signaled a marked evolution in colonial mob tactics. In this instance, a mob of lower-class Bostonians built and destroyed effigies of Crown agents before ransacking the home

inflame the People; and be a means of extending the mischief to persons not present to Objects of it.”<sup>7</sup>

Violent opposition to the Stamp Act occurred not only in Boston, but also in New York City, where Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden’s estate was attacked by a mob on November 1, 1765.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the Boston demonstrations, the New York City attack was also presaged by an organized crowd destroying effigies that symbolized government officials supportive of the Stamp Act.<sup>9</sup> The specific targeting of wealth and its various symbols by lower-class mobs is another thread that connected several major events in the leadup to the Revolutionary War. A major symbol of wealth was stolen from Colden’s estate, namely his carriage.<sup>10</sup> Back in Boston, similar items stored inside Hutchinson’s house had also been targeted: namely his clothes, furniture, and dinnerware.<sup>11</sup> The targeting of wealth symbols by the mobs in Boston and New York City speak to a much larger theme: class conflict in the American colonies during the prelude to the Revolutionary War. The lower-class mobs may have targeted wealth because it symbolized everything that separated them from their societal betters. The specific targeting of these symbols may also indicate that there was at least some desire for a social revolution in the colonies among members of the lower class to go along with the political revolution that was quickly gaining steam during the latter half of the 1760s.

The murder of five colonists by British redcoats stationed in Boston on March 5, 1770 came on the heels of several previous violent, but isolated, clashes between lower-class

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<sup>7</sup> Governor Francis Bernard to Lord Halifax, August 15, 1765, in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Richard D. Brown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden to London, in *Revolutionary America: 1750-1815, Sources and Interpretation*, ed. Cynthia A. Kierner (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 74-75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson to a Friend, in *Revolutionary America: 1750-1815, Sources and Interpretation*, ed. Cynthia A. Kierner (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 70-71.







Nine, had dabbled before in shaping and directing the actions of lower-class mobs, such as when they previously employed Mackintosh, the nominal leader of the Stamp Act rioters in Boston.<sup>21</sup> This one-step-removed management structure utilized by the Sons created a degree of separation between the mobs and the colonial upper crust, and further served as a means of plausible deniability for the responsibility of future attacks on British soldiers and agents of the Crown. The Sons of Liberty leadership, including many who were members of the upper class, had no qualm with instigating a popular political revolution against British authority in the colonies.

However, they were not aiming to allow that political revolution to spiral out into a wider social revolution. In a private letter to a friend, wealthy colonial revolutionary Gouverneur Morris wrote: “These [mobs], simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore. In short, there is no ruling them, and now...the heads of the mobility grow dangerous to the gentry, and how to keep them down is the question.”<sup>22</sup> The lower-class mob was, certainly by 1773, no longer a

December 1773.



one's natural rights was not an act to be taken lightly. Thousands of lower-class colonials were willing to lay down their lives in order to secure independence for themselves and their communities. Although it was not the case in Worcester county, there was actual fighting in other rural colonial areas. In Maine, also in 1774, a minor local official named Samuel Thompson reinvented himself as a pro-independence religious zealot and freedom fighter.<sup>34</sup> He recruited a large band of likeminded followers from the town of Gorham and the surrounding area, and soon began terrorizing all perceived enemies of colonial independence throughout the region.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in both Worcester county and rural Maine, lower-class rural colonists took the initiative, organized into armed militias and soon found that they and many of their neighbors were prepared to risk open battle with British regulars. By the year 1775 these militias were eventually integrated into the much larger Continental Army, the highest and most rigidly

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their minds to all the possibilities of the upcoming Revolutionary War, including whether it would remain a strictly political revolution instead of a social one as well. The fact remains that this shift in socio-political attitudes was gradual, while the more radical elements of the

taxation laws in several states unfairly burdened the lower classes to the benefit of social elites, hampering popular enthusiasm for the war and likely prolonging the conflict.<sup>38</sup> These tribulations were exacerbated by the fact that most Continental Army soldiers' monthly wages soon fell into arrears during the war, dampening morale and escalating the chances of mutiny among the ranks.<sup>39</sup> This widespread failure of leadership by upper-class colonial lawmakers and military leaders led to much unnecessary suffering among the ranks of the Continental armed forces.



quality and portions were often meager. Martin recalled that on Thanksgiving Day, 1777, he was given only half a gill of rice and a tablespoon of vinegar to feast upon.<sup>48</sup> Martin consumed everything from a cow's spleen to tree bark in order to stave off starvation while on campaign, and also recalled hearing of a group of officers that killed and ate a beloved dog to keep from starving during the winter of 1780.<sup>49</sup> Enlisted continental soldiers regularly consumed hard liquor in lieu of actual food in order to distract their minds from the constant desire for calories.<sup>50</sup>

Said Martin, "If this was not 'suffering,' I request to be informed what could pass under that name."<sup>51</sup>







discriminatory militia laws that persisted for years in Virginia and other states, upheld and advocated for by influential state legislators and top military commanders alike, needlessly extended the war and caused undue hardship and suffering to many thousands of enlisted Continental soldiers.

By the year 1779, all these factors had exerted such an extreme toll on the Continental Army that several regiments began to voice their protests by disobeying basic orders and threatening to march away.<sup>63</sup> In May 1780 the supply situation had yet to improve, so several regiments of the Connecticut Line Infantry, including Joseph Plumb Martin's, went on parade and refused to disperse until they received food and other basic supplies.<sup>64</sup> According to Martin, "We therefore still kept upon the parade in groups, venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could

were bartered away for a fraction of their face value long before the war ended, only to find their way into the hands of currency speculators who could afford to hold onto them until the government chose to honor their obligation. The land grants promised to some Continental volunteers represented another renege promise by the government, as most Revolutionary War veterans either died, settled elsewhere, or sold off their land grants long before Congress made any meaningful effort to fulfill them.<sup>67</sup> Like many of his compatriots, Martin became embroiled in a land dispute after the war, as he chose to settle on previously unclaimed land in rural Maine that eventually fell into the possession of former Continental Army major general Henry Knox.<sup>68</sup> After a lengthy legal battle, Martin was forced off his land and soon fell into poverty.<sup>69</sup> After the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 was finally signed into law, Martin claimed benefits offntAi2 (T8 Tm

pensions of those who had sacrificed their youthful years, their health, and endured so much misery to secure the nation's freedom.<sup>72</sup> In the opinion of Joseph Plumb Martin, a majority of the country was guilty of being ungrateful and forgetful of a generation of sacrifice by ordinary men who accomplished extraordinary deeds.

Martin and many other men's crusade for backpay, promised land, and ultimately the respect they felt they deserved as defenders of an infant nation is best summed up by one of Martin's own phrases. He wrote, "Great men get great praise, little men nothing."<sup>73</sup> The failure of the Continental Congress, the Continental Army, and later even the United States Congress to promptly provide sufficient material support to its lower-class enand fongen, both during and af(f)3 er the war, presents a shameful example of failed leadership and renege promises over not just a few years, but the firs several decades of the nation's early history. This injuse was mainly perpetraed by upper -class lawmakers and army officers who cared little for the physical or economic wellbeing of the lower-class soldiers they lorded over. It was also, in part, a reflection of their prejudices agains e class of underprivileged people who continued to advocae against the upper class's monopoand ation of wealth, power, and social superiority during the war and after its conclusion.

### Life, Liberty, and Property: The Common Motivations of Women, African Americans, Native Americans, and Loyaand ts During the Social Revoanution

The preceding two sectionsrimarily detailed the motivations and actions of lower-class white men during the grand social revoanution. With so much to dd cusst is easy to forget the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 63.

experiences and trials faced by the

right for married women to possess personal property independently of their husband. Abigail Adams was a true pioneer in the latter sense; she flouted the patriarchal custom of coverture by running an import/export business, enlisting her husband's help to import goods from Europe to be sold in America.<sup>75</sup> Adams was forced to conceal her activities by conducting her business through male proxies like her husband, her uncle, and even her son; she also used trusted male intermediaries to conduct other business abroad.<sup>76</sup> The coverture system was loathed by women, as it made them financially beholden to their husbands in addition to reinforcing the sexist notion that females were mentally incapable of conducting their own financial affairs. Adams continued to thumb her nose at the coverture system even after she was dead; she willed away most of her personal wealth to her nieces and granddaughters, even though her husband John was still alive at the time of her death in 1818.<sup>77</sup> Adams's male relatives, including her husband John, endorsed her wishes by executing the will faithfully, thereby cementing it as a legally valid document in spite of the coverture laws.<sup>78</sup> Despite these events, the coverture system remained in place for several decades after Adams's death.

African Americans also lacked several key rights both before and after the American Revolution. Like women, they were only granted the franchise many decades after the war's conclusion. Moreover, when it came to property rights most African Americans did not even own themselves. Many enslaved African American men aimed to gain their freedom by running away to join the British Army, which by the proclamation of Lord Dunmore guaranteed their

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<sup>75</sup> Woody Holton, "The Battle Against Patriarchy That Abigail Adams Won," in *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, eds. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael (New York: Random House, 2012), 274-275.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-286.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

freedom in exchange for fighting against the colonial rebels.<sup>79</sup> Just one month after Lord Dunmore issued his famous proclamation, he reported to London that nearly three hundred slaves had already arrived to take the offer.<sup>80</sup> The famous slave-poet Phillis Wheatley challenged racial and gender norms before and during th



by founding the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in 1816. The AME “emphasized racial pride, piety, and educational uplift,” and became the largest black church in America by the time of the Civil War.<sup>85</sup> Coker set his sights primarily on helping to abolish slavery in the south, appealing to white consciences using Scripture, Lockean natural rights philosophy, and plain common sense.<sup>86</sup> Although the final victory against slavery was not won until 1865, and the prospect for true social equality among all races and ethnicities remains elusive even at the present day, the black founders of the United States of America laid the groundwork for monumental advancement in the areas of civil rights and social equality for their people.

The retention of personal property, especial(i)-2 (gh/dMC /P 7)-2 ( e)4 d Sy, tni073,etacn t4 (d S)aP 7

infighting ensued, Native territorial concerns were not addressed in the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War, and armed white settlers continued to encroach on Native American lands with increasingly brazen violations of Native territorial sovereignty.<sup>89</sup>

With so many of their male relatives off fighting in the war, both rebel and loyalist

elements when his personal property was threatened and pilfered by a hostile mob in 1769.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, many loyalists, especially upper-middle class merchants like Parker, only expressed open hostility toward the Revolution once they felt it had progressed beyond its relatively humble initial goals. Parker began to perceive the Revolution as embracing radical tactics that often included property destruction, forgiving debts owed to British-aligned merchants, and anti-immigrant biases.<sup>94</sup> These concerns eventually won out and trumped whatever initial sympathy Parker may have harbored for the plight of the colonies against British economic and political domination. Other prominent loyalists like Thomas Hutchinson and Peter Oliver eventually followed in Parker's footsteps to reach many of the same conclusions that informed their loyalism.<sup>95</sup>

The final primary motivation that guided the actions of these subgroups was also the most universal: the desire to see their families and communities largely unharmed by the ravages of war. As previously mentioned, Native Americans like Dragging Canoe and Yerry pursued radically different strategies toward rebel colonists, one of hostility and another of placation. Both these strategies were designed to preserve Native communities by halting white encroachment on their ancestral homelands, at the very least for a few years.<sup>96</sup> For their part, many in the Continental Congress wished to see the Native American tribes stay neutral during the war, and sent out messages to the Iroquois Confederacy and other Native tribes conveying

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<sup>93</sup> Keith Mason, "A Loyalist's Journey: James Parker's Response to the Revolutionary Crisis," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 2, no. 2 (1994): 139-140, <http://www.jstor.org.lib-proxy.radford.edu/stable/4249428> (accessed April 14, 2019).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-148.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-153.

<sup>96</sup> Calloway, "Dragging Canoe and the Chickamauga Revolution," 186-187.

that sentiment.<sup>97</sup> In the end both the Cherokee Nation and Iroquois Confederacy became politically divided beyond repair, mostly due to internal tensions centered on how to respond to the Revolutionary War.<sup>98</sup> In the case of the Native Americans, the well-

Loyalists also fought to protect their families and communities from the horrors of the war. As noted by Albert H. Tillson, Jr., political allegiances in rural colonial communities tended to be based on a primary attachment to local neighborhoods, not the cosmopolitan social and political elites that dominated the eastern seaboard of the continent.<sup>103</sup> Local economic and community concerns were the primary political issues in the backcountry, where charismatic leaders often swayed their neighbors to either endorse the Revolution or remain loyal to the mother country. The inverse was also true: peer pressure within the community was often powerful enough to persuade leaders to follow the majority of their neighbors.<sup>104</sup> Loyalism was more prevalent among recent Welsh and German immigrants to the backcountry, as these ethnic groups felt little genuine connection with Revolutionary leaders, and instead looked to their neighbors and families as the primary compass for their allegiance.<sup>105</sup> Undoubtedly, family and community were the main drivers that informed the actions of loyalists during the war.

Slave families were often put at the mercy of their master's political affiliations and movements during the war.<sup>106</sup> Since slave labor was a valuable commodity that both sides of the conflict attempted to control, slaves were sometimes subjected to forced transportation and separation from their families and friends.<sup>107</sup> After the Dunmore Proclamation, many slave families fled together to the relative safety of British lines.<sup>108</sup> The British, for their part, recognized that black men would only bear arms against the rebels if they knew their families would receive protection as well, so the offer of sanctuary was also extended to black non-

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<sup>103</sup> Albert H. Tillson, Jr., "The Localist Roots of Backcountry Loyalism: An Examination of Popular Political Culture in Virginia's New River Valley," *The Journal of Southern History* 4, no. 3 (Aug., 1988): 387-389, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2208995> (accessed April 15, 2019).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 395-396.

<sup>106</sup> Gundersen, "The War for Independence and Virginia's Displaced Women," 274-275.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-276.

combatants.<sup>109</sup> In total about 1,100 slaves took advantage of Lord Dunmore's offer of freedom in exchange for military service, and many brought their families to safety with them when they fled their rebel masters.<sup>110</sup>

The American Revolution represented a turning point for the entire continent. Over the period of just a few years, the levers of ultimate power in the former colonies were transferred from the hands of a foreign ruling class elite to those who resided in the newly formed United States. However, it must be noted that this political revolution did little to immediately improve the lives of the four groups discussed above. Despite Abigail Adams's entreaty to her husband John, women were mostly ignored in the new American constitution and only obtained the franchise roughly 135 years later. Similarly, Native Americans who fought on both sides of the war were abandoned by their American and the British 'allies', as neither side bothered to ensure tribal lands were protected in the Treaty of Paris.<sup>111</sup> United States policy over the next century called for repeated violations of Native American sovereignty, and even open warfare.<sup>112</sup> Both the Cherokee and the Iroquois peoples were eventually relegated to small reservations that represented a fraction of the lands they once occupied.

As for African Americans, their future after the American Revolution was a mixed bag. Northern states phased out slavery after the war, although the south clung stubbornly to the 'peculiar institution' until another war was fought eighty years later to end the practice for good. Although most northern blacks gained their freedom a few years after the Revolution, real equality remained elusive. Full legal equality was not achieved until the middle of the twentieth century, and social equality remains an open question even at the present day. Loyalists were

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 276-277.

<sup>111</sup> Martin, "Forgotten Heroes of the Revolution," 210-211.

<sup>112</sup> Calloway, "Dragging Canoe and the Chickamauga Revolution," 196-197.

also served a mixed bag of outcomes after the Revolution. Many, like Thomas Hutchinson and Peter Oliver, fled the colonies as political refugees and lived the rest of their lives in exile abroad. Some loyalist refugees, like James Parker, remained staunch conservatives opposed to constitutional democracy even into old age, and continued their verbal attacks from across the Atlantic Ocean or from Canada years after the war concluded.<sup>113</sup> Other loyalists chose to remain in the newly formed United States, and successfully reintegrated back into their local communities after the war. Their individual fates differed wildly from one case to another.

No matter the individual motivations that drove the various marginalized factions inside the grand social revolution to take the actions they did during the American Revolution, they all suffered to some degree. Their stories are worth telling because their experiences during the Revolution helped shape the character of our nation.

### Conclusion: The Ties That Bind Us

The American Revolution was an experience of collective struggle shared not just by upper-class white men blessed with control over the levers of power, but by all people who would eventually call themselves Americans. While the effort to stifle the grand social revolution that raged from the years 1763 to 1789 was partially successful, the movement still scored some major victories, such as the abolition of slavery in the north. The social revolution also helped to produce several radical state constitutions that instituted a wider franchise and more equitable representation inside state governments after the war's conclusion, both of which benefitted several factions inside the movement in the long run.<sup>114</sup> American social revolutionary Robert

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<sup>113</sup> Mason, "A Loyalist's Journey," 165-166.

<sup>114</sup> Nash, "Philadelphia's Radical Caucus," 82-84.

Coram advocated all his life, right up to his death in 1794, for the right of all people to



dreams into reality; practically all of them were dead before their most radical goals were achieved. Their ideas, however, remain very much alive and well in the modern United States of America. The spirit of the grand social revolution lives on to the present day as activists continue to strive for the ever-elusive goal of true social equality in America. As it turns out, they are simply picking up where the Founding Fathers and Mothers of the grand social revolution left off more than two hundred years ago.



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