

AMERICAN VOICES

GEORGE WASHINGTON, describing his first night in
the Wilderness in March 1748

(from *The Diaries of George Washington*):

. . . We got our Supper and was lighted into a Room and not being so good a Woodsman as ye rest of my Company stripped myself very orderly and went into ye bed as they called it when to my Surprize I found it to be nothing but a Little Straw-Matted together without Sheets or anything else but only one thread Bear blanket with double its weight of Vermin such as Lice, Fleas &c. I was glad to get up (as soon as ye Light was carried from us) I put on my Cloths and lay as my Companions. Had we not been very tired I am sure we should not have slep'd much that night I made a Promise not to Sleep so from that time forward, chusing rather to sleep in ye open Air before a fire. . . .

When they said, “Don’t let the bedbugs bite” in colonial America, they meant it, as seventeen-year-old George Washington discovered during his first foray into what was then the “wilderness” of colonial Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley. Besides showing what life was like in the “West” for young George, this passage also demonstrates that he, like many Americans of his day, was not well schooled in spelling and grammar, which often had tremendous local variations.

Who fought the French and Indian War?

No. It was not the French against the Indians.

At the end of the seventeenth century, North America was an extremely valuable piece of real estate, teeming with the beavers so prized by the hatmakers of Europe and claimed in part by the Dutch, the French, and the Spanish, as well as by the king of England. The people in Canada and America were pawns in a larger chess game. Between 1689 and the War for Independence, the major European

powers engaged in a series of wars, usually fought under the guise of disputes over royal succession. In fact, they were wars of colonial expansion, fought for territory, raw materials, and new markets for exports.

EUROPEAN WARS FOUGHT IN THE COLONIES

Date	European Name	Colonial Name
1689–97	War of the League of Augsburg	King William's War
1702–13	War of the Spanish Succession	Queen Anne's War
1740–48	War of the Austrian Succession	King George's War
1756–63	Seven Years War	French and Indian War

In the first three of these, the colonists played supporting roles. Most of the fighting was limited to sporadic surprise attacks by one side or another, usually joined by their respective Indian allies. Colonial losses, especially in New England and Canada, were still heavy, and the costs of these wars created a serious inflation problem, particularly in Massachusetts, where paper money was printed for the first time to finance the fighting. By the time the first three wars had been played out, England and France were left standing as the two major contenders, and England had acquired a good portion of Canada from France. In the last of the four wars, however, these two rivals fought for absolute dominion over North America. And it was the French and Indian War that most shaped America's destiny.

The conflict started inauspiciously enough for the Anglo-American cause when a young Virginian was dispatched by Virginia's Governor Dinwiddie to the Pennsylvania backwoods in 1753 to tell the French that they were trespassing on Virginia's territory. During an evening in which the French drank some brandy and the young Virginian did not, he learned that the French had no intentions of leaving the territory. With this important intelligence, the young Virginian spent a few difficult weeks returning to Virginia where he delivered his report. He

wrote a small book, *The Journal of Major George Washington*, describing his adventure. All London soon agreed that the young author was a man of courage and intelligence.

Soon after, this inexperienced twenty-two-year-old son of a planter was made an officer and sent back with a militia force of 150 men and orders to build a fort. To his dismay, the new lieutenant colonel found the French already occupying a fort they called Duquesne (on the site of Pittsburgh). Though outnumbered, the young commander, along with some Indian allies, attacked a French work party, took some prisoners, and hastily constructed a fort that was aptly named Necessity. Surrounded by French forces, he surrendered, and the French sent him packing back to Virginia, where he was still hailed a hero for taking on the sworn enemies of England. Without realizing, George Washington had ordered the shots that began the French and Indian War.

It was during that skirmish with the French that Washington had his first taste of battle and famously wrote his brother, Jack, "I can assure you. I heard Bullets whistling and believe me there was something charming in the sound." When King George II heard this tale, he remarked, "He would not say so had he been used to hear many."

How differently world history might have turned out had the French decided to do away with this green soldier when they had cause and opportunity! Instead, twenty-two years later, the French would again come to the aid of George Washington in his war of revolution against England.

Bad went to worse for the English and their colonial allies in the war's early years. The 90,000 French in America, vastly outnumbered by 1.5 million English colonials, were better organized, more experienced fighters and had the most Indian allies. To the Indians, the French were the lesser of two evils; there were fewer French than English, and they seemed more interested in trading for beaver pelts than did the English, who were pushing the Indians off their lands. For many Indians, the war also provided an opportunity to repay years of English treachery. The Indians' rage exploded in the viciousness of their attacks, which were met with equal savagery by the British. Scalp taking was a popular British tactic, and the British commander, General Edward Braddock, offered his Indian allies five pounds sterling for the scalp of a French soldier, one hundred pounds for that of a Jesuit missionary, and a grand

prize of two hundred pounds for the hair of the powerful Delaware chieftain Shinngass.

For the English side, the great disaster of this war came in 1755, when 1,400 redcoats, under General Braddock, marched on Fort Duquesne in a poorly planned mission. A much smaller force of French slaughtered the English, leaving George Washington, Braddock's aide-de-camp, to straggle home with 500 survivors. The English suffered similar defeats in New York.

This colonial war became linked to a global clash that commenced in 1756, the first true world war. Things went badly everywhere for the English until there was a change of leadership in London, with William Pitt taking over the war effort in 1758. His strategy emphasized naval warfare and the conquest of North America, which Pitt viewed as the key to overall victory. He poured in troops and found talented new commanders in James Wolfe and Jeffrey Amherst. One of Amherst's novel tactics, when negotiating with some attacking Indians, was to give them blankets from the smallpox hospital. A string of victories between 1758 and 1760 gave the English control over the American colonies and, with the fall of Montreal in 1760, all of Canada.

In 1763, the Treaty of Paris brought peace and, with it, a complete British triumph. The English now owned all of Canada, America east of the Mississippi Valley, Florida, and a number of Caribbean islands. France lost its American colonies, except for a few islands in the French West Indies, and France's overseas trade had been crippled by the British navy.

Colonial Americans, now fully blooded in a major armed conflict, took pride and rejoiced at the victory they had helped win for their new king, George III, who had taken the throne in 1760. George Washington, who played no small part in the fighting, rode back to Williamsburg, Virginia, to resign his command. A career as a professional soldier no longer interested him.

What do sugar and stamps have to do with revolutions?

In the short space of thirteen years, how did the colonies go from being loyal subjects of King George III, flush in their victory over the French,

to becoming rebels capable of overthrowing the most powerful nation on earth?

Obviously, no single factor changes the course of history. And different historians point to different reasons for the Revolution. The established traditionalist view is that the American Revolution was fought for liberties that Americans believed they already possessed as British citizens. The more radical political and economic viewpoint holds that the Revolution was simply a transfer of power from a distant British elite to a homegrown American power class that wanted to consolidate its hold over the wealth of the continent.

History is a boat big enough to carry both views comfortably, and a mingling of these perspectives brings an approximation of truth. It is safe to say that British bungling, economic realities, a profound philosophical revolution called the Enlightenment, and historical inevitability all played roles in the birth of the American nation.

As for the British bungling: In the immediate aftermath of the Seven Years War, England had an enormous wartime debt to pay. In London, it was naturally assumed that the colonies should chip in for some of the costs of the defense of America as well as the yearly cost of administering the colonies. To do this, Parliament enacted what it thought an entirely reasonable tax, the so-called Sugar Act of 1764, which placed tariffs on sugar, coffee, wines, and other products imported into America in substantial quantities. A postwar colonial depression—economic doldrums typically following the free spending that accompanies wartime—sharpened the act's pain for American merchants and consumers. Almost immediately, negative reaction to the tax set in, an economic dissent that was summed up in a new political slogan, "No taxation without representation." James Otis, one of the most vocal and radical leaders in Massachusetts, wrote that everyone should be "free from all taxes but what he consents to in person or by his representative."

In real terms, the representation issue was a smokescreen—a useful slogan for galvanizing popular protest, but not really what the new breed of colonial leaders wanted. They had the wisdom to see that getting a handful of seats in Parliament for the colonies would be politically meaningless. Growing numbers of American politicians saw a wedge

being driven between the colonies and Mother England, and they had their eyes on a larger prize.

Resistance to the sugar tax, in the form of drafted protests from colonial legislatures and halfhearted boycotts, failed to materialize. Until, that is, Parliament tightened the screws with a second tax. The Stamp Act of 1765 set stiff tariffs on virtually every kind of printed matter from newspapers and legal documents to playing cards. One member of Parliament, protesting the new tax plan, used the phrase “Sons of Liberty” to describe the colonists, and it was quickly adopted by men in every colony. While the Sugar Act reflected Parliament’s power to tax trade, the Stamp Act was different. It was a direct tax, and the protests from America grew louder, stronger, and more violent. Riots broke out, the most violent of which were in Boston, where the house of Governor Thomas Hutchinson was destroyed by an angry mob. In New York, the home of the officer in charge of the stamps was also ransacked. A boycott of the stamps, widely joined throughout the colonies, was followed by a general boycott of English goods. Hit hard by the economic warfare, London’s merchants screamed, and the law was repealed in 1766.

But it was a case of closing the barn door after the horses had scattered. In America, forces were gathering that most London politicians, ignorant of American ways, were too smug to acknowledge.

What was the Boston Massacre?

Having been kicked once by the colonial mule, Parliament failed to grasp the message of the Stamp Act boycott, and in 1767 thought up a new set of incendiary taxes called the Townshend Acts, once again placing itself directly behind the mule’s hind legs. Once again, an American boycott cut imports from England in half. The British answer to the Americans’ protest was a typical superpower response—they sent in troops.

Soon there were 4,000 British redcoats in Boston, a city of 16,000 and a hotbed of colonial protest. These troops, however, did not just idly stand guard over the populace. In a town already hard-pressed for jobs,

the British soldiers competed for work with the laborers of Boston's waterfront. Early in March 1770, a group of ropemakers fought with a detachment of soldiers who were taking their jobs, and all around Boston, angry encounters between soldiers and citizens became more frequent. Tensions mounted until March 5, when a mob, many of them hard-drinking waterfront workers, confronted a detachment of nine British soldiers. The scene turned ugly as snow and ice, mixed with stones, began to fly in the direction of the soldiers. Confronted by a taunting mob calling for their blood, the soldiers grew understandably nervous. It took only the word "fire," most likely yelled by one of the crowd, to ignite the situation. The soldiers shot, and five bodies fell. The first to die was Crispus Attucks, the son of an African father and a Massachusetts Natick Indian mother, a former slave who had gone to sea for twenty years to escape slavery.

It did not take long for the propagandists, Samuel Adams chief among them, to seize the moment. Within days the incident had become the Boston Massacre, and the dead were martyred. An engraving of the shootings made by Henry Pelham, a half-brother of the painter John Copley, was "borrowed" by silversmith Paul Revere, whose own engraving of the incident got to the printer first and soon became a patriotic icon. As many as 10,000 marched at the funeral procession (out of Boston's population of 16,000).

In the wake of the killings, British troops were withdrawn from the city. With the Townshend Acts repealed (coincidentally on the day of the Massacre), a period of relative calm followed the Massacre and the trial of the soldiers—defended by John Adams, who wanted to ensure fairness—most were acquitted and two were branded and discharged—but it was an uneasy truce at best.

What was the Boston Tea Party about?

In the thick of the 1988 presidential election campaign, candidate George Bush made Boston Harbor an issue that badly hurt his opponent, Michael Dukakis. Bush made political hay out of the fact that the harbor was an ecological disaster zone, and placed the blame squarely in the lap of Dukakis, the Massachusetts governor. Once before, the

mess in that harbor played a role in history, and back then the results were quite extraordinary. If George Bush thought Boston Harbor was a mess in 1988, he should have seen it in 1773.

The post-Massacre peace and the end of the nonimportation boycott brought renewed prosperity to the colonies and with it a respite from the bickering with London. Fearing this calm would soften resistance, Samuel Adams and his allies tried to fan the embers over such local issues as moving the Massachusetts assembly out of Boston and who should pay the governor's salary. These were important legal questions, but not the sort of outrages that inspire violent overthrow of the government. Things heated up considerably when a party of patriots in Rhode Island boarded and burned the *Gaspee*, a grounded Royal Navy boat intensely disliked for its antismuggling patrols.

While the *Gaspee* arsonists avoided arrest, the British Crown threatened to bring the guilty to England for trial, rebuffing the English tradition of right to trial by a community jury. It was the bit of tinder that Samuel Adams needed to stoke the flames a little higher. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses appointed Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and Richard Henry Lee as a Committee of Correspondence, and by 1774, twelve of the colonies had such committees to maintain a flow of information among like-minded colonists.

But a burning—or boiling—issue was still lacking until Samuel Adams found one in tea. In 1773, Parliament had granted a legal monopoly on tea shipment to America to the nearly bankrupt East India Company. The injury was made worse by the insult of funneling the tea business through selected loyalist merchants, including the sons of Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts. The East India Company could now undercut American merchants, even those using smugglers, on the sale of tea. Tea first, thought the colonists, what will be next?

In November 1773, three tea-laden cargo ships reached Boston. Led by Samuel Adams and a powerful ally, John Hancock, one of the richest men in America and one of those most threatened by the possibility of London-granted trade monopolies, the patriots vowed that the tea would not be landed. Governor Hutchinson, whose sons stood to profit by its landing, put his back up. After two months of haggling, the Boston patriots made up their minds to turn Boston Harbor into a teapot.

On the night of December 16, 1773, about 150 men from all layers

of Boston's economy, masters and apprentices side by side, blackened their faces with burnt cork, dressed as Mohawk Indians, and boarded the three ships. Once aboard, they requested and received the keys to the ships' holds, as their target was the tea alone and not the ships or any other cargo aboard. Watched by a large crowd, as well as the Royal Navy, the men worked for nearly three hours, hatcheting open the cases of tea and dumping it into the harbor. So much was dumped that the tea soon piled up in the waters and spilled back onto the decks, where it was shoveled back into the water.

The Boston Tea Party, as it was quickly anointed, was soon followed by similar tea parties in other colonies and served to harden lines, both in America and England. Patriots became more daring; loyalist Tories became more loyal; Parliament stiffened its back. The Sons of Liberty had slapped London's face with a kid glove. The king responded with an iron fist. "The die is now cast," King George told his prime minister, Lord North. "The colonies must either submit or triumph."

What was the First Continental Congress? Who chose its members, who were they, and what did they do?

From the moment the tea was dumped, the road to revolution was a short one. In a post-Tea Party fervor, Parliament passed a series of bills, called the Coercive Acts, the first of which was the Port Bill, aimed at closing down Boston until the dumped tea was paid for. It was followed by the Administration of Justice Act, the Massachusetts Regulating Act (which virtually nullified the colony's charter), and the Quebec Act, establishing a centralized system of government in Canada and extending the borders of Canada south to the Ohio River. Parliament backed up these acts by sending General Thomas Gage to Boston as the new governor, along with 4,000 troops. In addition, it reinforced provisions of the Quartering Act, which gave the army the right to demand food and shelter from colonists.

In response to these Intolerable Acts, as the colonists called them, the colonial assemblies agreed to an intercolonial meeting, and each assembly selected a group of delegates. Gathering in Philadelphia from September 5 to October 26, 1774, the First Continental Congress was

made up of fifty-six delegates from every colony but Georgia. They represented the full spectrum of thought in the colonies, from moderates and conservatives like New York's John Jay or Pennsylvania's Joseph Galloway, who were searching for a compromise that would maintain ties with England, to fiery rebels like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry of Virginia (Thomas Jefferson was not selected to make the trip). As they gathered, John Adams privately worried, "We have not men fit for the times. We are deficient in genius, in education, in travel, in fortune—in everything."

But his opinion would soon change as the debate began, and Adams became aware that he was indeed in remarkable company. The first Congress moved cautiously, but ultimately adopted a resolution that opposed the Coercive Acts, created an association to boycott British goods, and passed ten resolutions enumerating the rights of the colonists and their assemblies.

Taxes and representation were only part of the issue, as Theodore Draper writes in *A Struggle for Power*. "The struggle to deprive Parliament of its power over taxation struck at the heart of British power in the Colonies and spilled over everything else."

Before adjourning, they provided for a second session to meet if their grievances had not been corrected by the British. While they had not yet declared for independence, the First Congress had taken a more or less unalterable step in that direction. In a very real sense, the Revolution had begun. It needed only for the shooting to start.

Must Read: *A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution* by Theodore Draper.

What was "the shot heard 'round the world"?

Now governor of Massachusetts, General Gage wanted to cut off the rebellion before it got started. His first move was to try to capture hidden stores of patriot guns and powder and arrest John Hancock and Sam Adams, the patriot ringleaders in British eyes. The Sons of Liberty had been expecting this move, and across Massachusetts the patriot farmers and townspeople had begun to drill with muskets, ready to pick up their guns on a minute's notice, giving them their name Minutemen.

In an increasingly deserted Boston, Paul Revere, silversmith and maker of false teeth, waited and watched the British movements. To sound an early warning to Concord, Revere set up a system of signals with a sexton at Christ Church in Boston. One lantern in the belfry meant Gage's troops were coming by land; two lanterns meant they were crossing the Charles River in boats. Late on the night of April 18, 1775, as expected, it was two lanterns. Revere and another rider, Billy Dawes, started off to Lexington to warn Hancock and Adams and alert the Lexington Minutemen that the British regulars were coming. Continuing on to Concord, Revere and Dawes were joined by Samuel Prescott, a young patriot doctor. A few minutes later a British patrol stopped the three men. Revere and Dawes were arrested and briefly jailed, while Prescott was able to escape and warn Concord of the British advance.

Meanwhile, in Lexington, the group of seventy-seven Minutemen gathered on the green to confront the British army. The British tried to simply march past the ragtag band when an unordered shot rang out. Chaos ensued, and the British soldiers broke ranks and returned fire. When the volleying stopped, eight Minutemen lay dead.

Warned by Prescott, the Concord militia was ready. Farmers from the nearby countryside responded to the church bells and streamed toward Concord. The resistance became more organized, and the Concord Minutemen attacked a troop of British holding a bridge leading into Concord, and later took up positions behind barns, houses, stone walls, and trees, pouring fire down on the British ranks. Unused to such unfair tactics as men firing from hiding, the British remained in their standard formations until they reached Lexington again and were met by reinforcements.

By the day's end, the British tallied seventy-three dead and 174 wounded.

The Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, had come to the crisis point. The bloodshed at Lexington meant war. With swift action, the patriots could bottle up the whole of the British army in Boston. To John Adams, all that needed to be done was to solidify the ranks of Congress by winning the delegates of the South. The solution came in naming a Southerner as commander of the new Continental army. On June 15, 1775, George Washington, a

delegate from Virginia who had hinted at his ambitions by wearing his old military uniform to the Philadelphia meetings, received that appointment.

MILESTONES IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

1775

April 18–19 Seven hundred British troops march on Concord, Massachusetts, to secure a rebel arsenal. They are met on the Lexington village green by a small force of colonial Minutemen, and an unordered shot—the “shot heard ’round the world”—leads to the killing of eight Americans. During a pitched battle at Concord and on their return to Boston, the British are harassed constantly by colonial snipers and suffer heavy losses.

May 10 Under Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, a colonial militia force takes the British arsenal at Fort Ticonderoga, New York, capturing cannon and other supplies; in a separate attack, the British garrison at Crown Point on Lake Champlain is seized.

June 15 The Second Continental Congress decides to raise an army and appoints George Washington to lead it.

June 17 In the Battle of Bunker Hill (actually fought on Breed’s Hill), the British sustain heavy losses, with more than 1,100 killed or wounded, before forcing a rebel retreat. Nathanael Greene, an American commander, comments, “I wish we could sell them another hill at the same price.” In the wake of this costly victory, General Gage is replaced by Howe as the British commander in America.

1776

January Tom Paine publishes the pamphlet *Common Sense*, a persuasive and widely read argument for independence.

March 4–17 Rebel forces capture Dorchester Heights, overlooking Boston Harbor. Cannon captured by the Americans at Ticonderoga are brought in, forcing a British evacuation of Boston.