

Name: _____ Class Period: _____ Due Date: ____/____/____

WHAT WAS THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION? 1760-1836

Purpose:

This Crossroads Essay is an optional enrichment activity providing additional insight into the era. Many essential themes, concepts, and events are outlined in the essay; it serves as a valuable review tool before exams. Reading the article is assigned to all students. Completing the enrichment activity is optional.

Assessment:

Concepts will be tested. Students who complete this activity before they take the corresponding unit test may earn up to 10 bonus points which will be applied to a daily or quiz grade in the corresponding unit.

Directions:

Print this article and complete by hand using a highlighter and ink, or use PDFescape.com (or similar program) to create a digital version. If you are creating a digital version, replace highlighting with summarizing if you are unable to highlight or underline using the program. **As you read the article annotate in the spaces provided. Think CRITICALLY... go beyond simple/respective notes when analyzing themes.**

Annotate by:

- Highlighting** the main ideas/arguments,
- identifying major themes (MAGPIES)
- identifying and explaining historical context
- defining terms you may not know.

M	igration and Settlement
A	merica in the World
G	eography and the Environment
P	olitics and Power
I	dentify; American and National
E	conomy; Work, Exchange, and Technology
S	ociety and Culture

Introduction: Methodological Issues and Opportunities

If, as is often said, history is the study of change over time, then the American Revolution is an ideal case study for historical understanding. The Revolution presents a wide range of issues having to do with the nature, causation, mechanisms, and extent of historical change. For example:

- Was the Revolution really a revolution? Or was it that historical oxymoron, a conservative revolution? What does the term "revolution" mean? And can we apply it to such diverse historical episodes as the American Revolution and the French Revolution?
- Are the arguments of those supporting or opposing the Revolution (and, a decade later, supporting or opposing the Constitution) accurate explanations of and justifications for why these men and women acted as they did, or are they rationalizations (conscious or unconscious) crafted after the fact?
- What place does intellectual context -- the structure of ideas and intellectual assumptions shared or debated by people in a given period -- have in history? How do we set a historical process such as the Revolution into its intellectual context?
- Who are the proper subjects of history -- the articulate, power-wielding minority or the inarticulate majority? The victors (those supporting the Revolution) or the losers (the British and the Loyalists)? And does it make sense to choose at all?
- Can we really know the "truth" of what happened in a major historical event or process such as the Revolution? (John Adams thought not -- and he was there.)

... The Revolutionary generation understood questions of this sort very well, confronting them as the Revolution unfolded and, decades later, in pondering the Revolution's legacy. ... we must think of the men and women of the Revolutionary generation as more than decorous refugees from a historical costume-party. Further, we must think of the problems the Revolutionary generation confronted in the ways that they did -- as terribly perplexing yet endlessly fascinating, time-bound yet timeless quandaries whose solutions were neither obvious nor fore-ordained.

I. Argument and Drama, 1760-1775

The Revolution began as an argument over the meaning of the unwritten British constitution as applied to British North America. Rooted in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War (French and Indian War) between Britain and France, this dispute pitted colonial politicians and legal thinkers against British authorities and their apologists. The issue began as a pragmatic matter of costs: who should bear the massive burden of debt incurred by Great Britain in fighting and winning the war? To the British, it seemed self-evident: because the war, the last of a series of wars of empire, was fought largely to preserve British colonial possessions, the colonies should contribute their fair share to relieving wartime debt. But, for several reasons, it was not so simple in the eyes of the American colonists. First, then as now, people hated new taxes. Second, the Americans disputed the authority of the British Parliament to tax them, enact laws for them, or do anything else to them. The Americans maintained that they were not represented in Parliament; therefore, Parliament could not act to bind free Englishmen residing in the American colonies. Only legislatures elected by the colonists and responsible to them could make laws for them and impose taxes on them.

The British regarded these claims as quaint at best, and dishonest at worst. They maintained that, because Parliament was required to legislate for the benefit of all English subjects wherever they might reside, the Americans were "virtually" represented in Parliament even though they could not elect members to the House of Commons. Because Parliament had supreme power to make laws for the Empire, the colonists could not challenge its authority. The colonists answered that, if Parliament acted without a check on its power, it was just as arbitrary and thus dangerous to liberty as the Stuart kings Charles I and James II had been. This was the shape of the argument that began in 1765, with the Stamp Act and the colonists' Stamp Act Congress, and continued for ten years, through the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the convening of the Second Continental Congress. The colonists carried out the argument with the British government at two levels -- formal and informal. The formal level consisted of the declarations, resolutions, and petitions produced by town meetings, colonial legislatures, and inter-colonial congresses. The informal level, just as important as the formal level, was a politics of ritual and demonstrations carried out by colonial radicals (for example, burning effigies, "riots" [which, as Americans conducted them, were actually peaceful demonstrations with only limited and ritualized violence], and the Boston Tea Party).

In this period, nobody thought of or admitted thinking of Independence (capitalized to denote a political concept). The years of argument and drama, however, inculcated among the American colonists the idea that they had much in common -- that they ought to see themselves as one people with a common identity and a set of common interests overshadowing specific concerns. The arguments and rituals of revolution also set in motion the practice of building a national political framework and a national political community.

Analyzing what you read:

In what ways did post French and Indian War events cause Revolution?

Political Causes	Economic Causes	Cultural Causes
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

Which cause was the most significant? _____, because _____.

II. War and Independence, 1775-1783

In the spring of 1775, the argument became a military conflict; within a year, it transformed itself into a war for American independence (lower-cased to denote a legal reality) and national identity. The intermittent gatherings of representatives from the colonies to protest British policy had become a Continental Congress, which took up the task of forging a national politics, a national ideology (articulated by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine), a national diplomacy (pioneered by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay), and a national military (led by George Washington). All these were vital elements of creating an independent nation.

We see these elements coming together in the first great expression of the American mind -- the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and revised and adopted on 4 July 1776 by the Second Continental Congress. The Declaration divides into two parts: the preamble, looking forward, stated the basic terms of American national identity and politics, whereas the body, looking backward, was the last word of the Americans in the long and frustrating constitutional controversy with the mother country.

This struggle for independence and liberty was a long and painful one, with no guarantees and no fore-ordained result. The war was a long, frustrating, and brutal struggle -- the longest war this nation ever fought until the Vietnam Conflict of 1963-1975. Many historians agree that Americans were forced in the early years of the war to adopt what we would call guerrilla tactics, breaking all the conventional rules of eighteenth-century warfare in order to survive and to maintain their identity as a people's army. Although most Americans believed that a citizen's army was consistent with the principles of liberty and self-government for which they fought, George Washington and his aides chafed at what they deemed the lack of professionalism among American soldiers. When aid from France began arriving in massive quantities, American military leaders put it to work in training a professional American army. The last great battle of the war -- Yorktown, in 1781 -- was a clash of professional armies, fought in a manner that would have seemed familiar to Marlborough in the early 1700s or Wellington in the early 1800s.

In 1776, the "smart money" was on Britain; most observers believed that British military might and naval power would be more than enough to shatter the colonists' spirit of resistance. Why didn't it turn out that way?

- The Americans (no longer colonists after 4 July 1776) had a cause (independence) to fight for and, even when that cause seemed remote, homes and families to defend.
- Even though they scored repeated victories over the disorganized, badly trained, and badly supplied Americans throughout the first years of the war (for example, New York and Brandywine, 1776) the difficulty of subduing a continent-wide revolution escaped the British, who also underestimated the Americans' military skill and commitment.
- By decisively defeating British General John Burgoyne's army at Saratoga, New York (1777), the Americans managed to prove to the French government that the American cause was worth a Franco-American alliance and a war with Britain. The resulting combination of American and French soldiers, resources, and planning proved to be too much for the overextended British forces.
- At the negotiations of 1782-1783, the American diplomats were a match for the best the British or the French had to offer. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay negotiated a valuable treaty of peace that recognized American independence from Britain and won land concessions from Britain to the new nation that doubled the size of the United States.

III. The Revolution at Home, 1775-1783

The Revolution was more than just a war for independence from Great Britain. It also was a struggle to define what the new nation would be by framing instruments and institutions of government, revising the laws of the individual states, and policing the loyalties of the American people.

First, the Americans wrote new state constitutions to replace their former colonial charters and to restore legitimate government deriving its authority from the people. They thus made major contributions to the theory and practice of constitution-making and democratic government. Some state constitutions deeply influenced the framing and adoption of the Constitution of the United States in 1787-1788 -- Virginia (the first written declaration of rights), New York (the first popularly elected executive, armed with a veto that could be overridden by a supermajority vote in the legislature), and Massachusetts (ideas of separation of powers and checks and balances, the constitutional convention as a method for framing constitutions, and popular ratification as a method for adopting constitutions).

Second, Americans revised their states' laws to purge them of vestiges of the colonial past, setting in motion currents of change that in the next century would transform American law and society. In Virginia, Thomas Jefferson led an effort to establish religious liberty by ending the "establishment" of the Church of England and recognizing liberty of conscience for all, and to reform the law of property by permitting greater freedom in the purchase, transfer, and bequeathing of land. He also tried without success to promote the education of the people by establishing public schools.

Third, by enforcing demands of loyalty to the Revolution, the Americans created the idea that one could choose one's citizenship and political loyalty. In the process of establishing loyalty oaths and tests of patriotism, the leaders of the Revolution also created categories of people -- both "King's Friends" and those who wanted to remain "on the fence" -- known to historians as Loyalists. The Revolution was as much a civil war as the Civil War of 1861-1865, dividing states, communities, and even families. As the war wore on, the Americans imposed stricter tests of loyalty, forcing even those who wanted to sit the war out to choose sides. In the process, they broke up families and violated individual rights. The lessons of the Loyalist experience were not lost on the Americans, however. Even as tens of thousands of Loyalists fled the United States at war's end for Britain, Canada, or the Caribbean, they left a legacy: stricter standards for defining and punishing the crime of treason that became bulwarks of American liberty.

Fourth, recent scholarship has established that the American Revolution was not merely an enterprise of white men. Women (on both sides) also took part, whether by collecting supplies and amassing money for the war effort, or by running farms and businesses so their fathers, husbands, and sons could fight, or by providing intelligence of enemy movements. Blacks, some of them freed or runaway slaves, also fought on both sides -- only to find themselves abandoned at war's end. Indians were drawn into the conflict, some siding with the British against the Americans (whom they resented for their efforts to push white settlement into Indian territory), others aiding the Americans and the French, still others caught between the contending forces and paying terribly for their bad luck.

It is still vigorously disputed just how the Revolution affected the social and economic conditions of the American people. In the 1920s, J. Franklin Jameson asserted that the American Revolution had to be understood as a social movement, and that it promoted widespread democratization in a variety of ways -- by removing legal restrictions on land ownership, by broadening the range of religious denominations and sects whose members could take part in public and private life as equals safe from discrimination, and by shattering colonial patterns of deference and elite authority. Although many historians have disputed particular elements of Jameson's thesis, the most recent study of this question, Gordon S. Wood's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, is a vigorous, learned, and historically sophisticated reformulation of the Jameson thesis -- even though Wood maintains that American democratization was a step that took place despite the expectations of the leaders of the Revolution, who wished to preserve an elitist politics of republican leaders benevolently guiding the "common sort." Wood's critics fault his work for discounting or overlooking continuing American social, political, and legal discrimination against African-Americans, Indians, and women; Wood responds that he rightly stresses the distinctive democratization of America by contrast with the rest of the Western world rather than judging the Americans of the Revolutionary generation by the standards of the 1990s.

Analyzing What You Read

In what ways did the American Revolution impact the colonies politically, economically, and culturally?

Political Impact	Economic Impact	Cultural Impact
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

Which result was the most significant? _____, *because* _____

IV. The Ordeal of the Confederation, 1781-1789

Popular memory jumps straight from Yorktown to the writing of the Constitution, or even to the inauguration of President George Washington. But the period between 1781 and 1789, which so often slips through our fingers, was vitally important in American history. It was the era of the Confederation -- more precisely, the era of the ordeal of the Confederation.

The Articles of Confederation, framed in 1777 by the Continental Congress and ratified by all thirteen states by 1781, was the first charter of government for the American republic. Its architects, terrified of the specter of a too-powerful centralized government, sought a balance between a government strong enough to preserve the "perpetual union" of the states and one too weak to injure the sovereignty (ultimate political authority) of the states or the rights of individual Americans. The quest for this balance engaged the Continental Congress for over a year, from June 1776 through November 1777; the results of their labors hung in limbo for nearly four more years -- until 1 March 1781, when Maryland, the last state to act, ratified the proposed charter.

Historians have subjected the Articles to unfair scorn and abuse. The Confederation Congress, the government authorized by the Articles, deserves credit for the winning of the war, the winning of the peace (the negotiation and adoption of the Treaty of Paris of 1783), and the administering of one of the greatest benefits of that peace -- the western territories acquired from Britain under that treaty. After all, the Confederation Congress established the principle that territories would be organized as states that would join the Union on an equal footing with the original thirteen. A nation of former colonies would have no colonies of its own.

But the Articles of Confederation were fatally defective as a form of government, and the difficulties the Confederation faced from 1783 to 1789 nearly shattered the nation. Because the Confederation had no power to raise revenue, it had to rely on contributions requested from state governments -- who could not be forced to pay up. The Confederation had no power to establish a uniform system of trade between states, or between the United States and foreign nations. The Confederation could not force the states to comply with the Treaty of Paris. And, because only an amendment adopted by all thirteen states could give the Confederation powers that it lacked, one state's stubbornness could -- and did -- frustrate the demands of the other twelve.

Responding to the challenges of this period, politicians of the 1780s who thought in national terms demonstrated a political creativity and courage rarely equaled in history. The struggle, first to repair the Articles, then to replace them with the Constitution, touched off the first great national political debate. It was the first time in human history that a free people had the opportunity to decide how they would govern themselves.

Beginning in 1780, nationally-minded politicians began to exchange letters and ideas, just as politicians of the 1760s and 1770s had done in pooling their ideas about resisting the British. A series of interstate conferences resulted in a movement that persuaded the Confederation Congress (on 21 February 1787) to authorize the Federal Convention of 1787. After casting aside its mandate simply to propose amendments to the Articles, the Convention spent four months behind closed doors writing a revolutionary new charter of government: the Constitution of the United States.

Why was the Constitution so revolutionary?

First, the new nation was the largest in the Western world except Russia, and the conventional wisdom of the time taught that no republican government could survive if extended over too large an area. It was for this reason, among others, that the Confederation had no power to operate directly on individual citizens.

Second, for reasons of both political principle and pragmatic interest, state politicians preferred a weak and distant central government to an active and vigorous one having the power to coerce individual citizens.

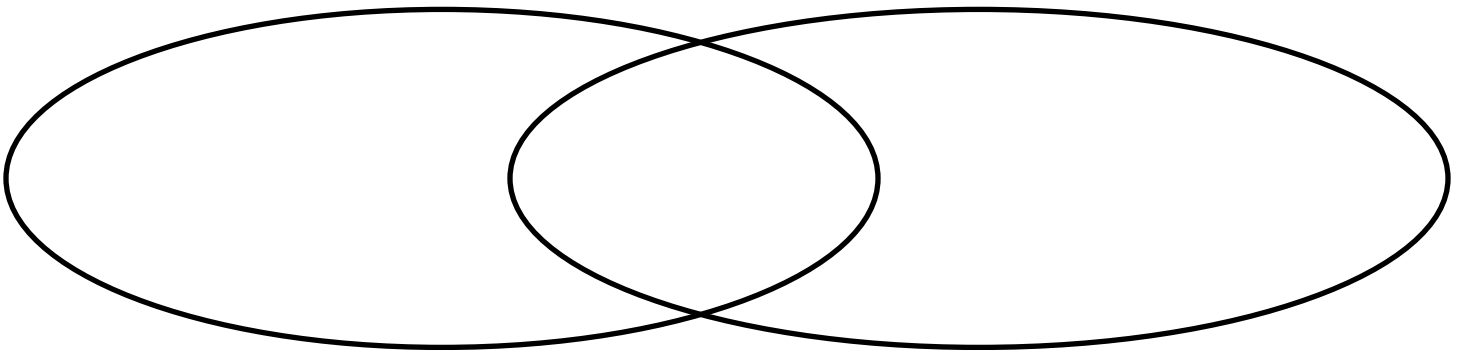
Third, the Constitution authorized a new, untried chief executive (the President) and a new, experimental federal judiciary -- features that the Confederation lacked, and that most Americans instinctively distrusted.

Fourth, the Constitution created not only a new national government (though the Framers avoided even the word "national") but a national political community, one where the doings of New Yorkers could affect Virginians, and vice versa.

The Convention could not impose the finished Constitution on the nation. The Constitution therefore had to be debated and voted on in a complex political process that took place both within each state and as the first national political argument. The states held elections for special ratifying conventions, which then debated the Constitution in full view of the people. The existence and openness of that argument persuaded Americans to think of themselves as one united people, and laid the foundations for national politics under the Constitution. ...

Analyzing What You Read

Compare and contrast the Articles of Confederation and United States Constitution.



Are they more alike or different?

They are more _____, because _____

Which difference is the most significant?

They are more _____, because _____

Which difference is the most significant?

They are more _____, because _____

V. The Ordeal of the Constitution, 1789-1801

Even though the Federalists triumphed in 1787-1788, their victory was neither complete nor assured; the ordeal of the Constitution was only beginning. Anti-Federalists expected the Constitution to be amended, as they had demanded and as the Federalists had promised. What shape would amendments take? Who would put the new government into effect? What policies would the government pursue? How would it cope with issues of domestic debt, economic stagnation, and foreign policy?

The period from 1789 to 1801 posed two clusters of issues of substance and two clusters of issues of method: Issues of substance included:

- (i) How should the federal government deal with problems posed by the crushing burden of federal debt from the Revolution? What, if anything, should the federal government do about state debts from the Revolution?
- (ii) Should the government promote American economic growth? If so, what kind of economic growth?
- (iii) What place should the United States have in the uncertain state of great-power politics on the world stage? Should the United States preserve its 1778 alliance with France, seek a rapprochement with Great Britain, or remain neutral?

Issues of method included:

- (i) How should we interpret the Constitution? Should we construe it broadly, to give the federal government extensive power to respond to national problems, or strictly, to guard against a federal tyranny and preserve state sovereignty and the rights of the people?
- (ii) How should we conduct politics under the Constitution? Is it a risk worth taking to organize like-minded Americans into political parties which will contend for office and the control of public policy? Or would parties endanger liberty and the survival of the Constitution, leading to factional strife and anarchy or tyranny?

These issues of substance and method were closely linked. Positions on substantive issues required politicians to adopt specific positions on issues of method, and vice versa. For example, if you favored using federal power to encourage domestic manufacturing and commercial interests -- for example, by recognizing federal power to charter a national bank -- then you supported a broad reading of the Constitution and favored a vigorous federal government over state sovereignty. If you supported a strict reading of the Constitution, then you opposed vigorous federal policies on the economy, in particular federal creation of a national bank. Similarly, if you supported commercial and industrial development at home, then you favored either neutrality in world affairs or closer ties with the world's greatest commercial and industrial power, Great Britain. If you opposed commercial and industrial development, then you supported aligning the United States with Great Britain's foe, France.

These issues sorted politicians into two loosely-organized groups or coalitions, which we recognize as the nation's first political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. (The term "political party" itself is fraught with confusion, as historians continue to battle when parties emerged and how, although without a clear or consistent definition of what a "political party" is. I propose, for our purposes, that we use the term to mean a group of like-minded politicians and voters, organized both within thin each state and across state lines, with a consistent platform or body of ideas and principles holding them together and stating their understanding of what government should and should not do. By this standard, neither the Federalists nor the Anti-Federalists were political parties, and the Federalists and Republicans of the 1790s were, however rudimentary they might appear to us and however much their members might have denied that they composed parties.)

The Americans of the Revolutionary generation feared parties as dangers to liberty and republican government. Seeing themselves as defenders of liberty and the republic, members of each group attacked their adversaries as dangerous to liberty and the republic. Thus, the politics of the 1790s were nasty and occasionally violent, elevating partisan conflict to unexpected levels of bitterness.

Three controversies marked out the course of political life from 1789 through 1801:

- in 1789-1791, the dispute over the constitutionality and the wisdom of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton's fiscal policies -- federal assumption of state debts, followed by creation of a national bank and federal policies supporting domestic manufactures.
- the disputes over whether to continue the 1778 alliance with France despite the Revolutionary French government's execution of Louis XVI, to restore relations with Britain (according to the controversial 1794 Jay Treaty), or to remain neutral in world politics (as President Washington counseled in his 1793 Neutrality Proclamation and in his 1797 Farewell Address).
- the disputes over the growing differences between Federalists (led by Hamilton and John Adams) and Republicans (led by Jefferson, Madison, George Clinton, and Aaron Burr).

These issues boiled over into the national elections of 1796 and 1800, both for the Presidency and for Congress (House and Senate), with echoes in the state elections that occurred (though not with perfect synchronization) throughout the period as well. After George Washington's two terms as the nation's first President, the American people confronted a clear choice between Federalists and Republicans. Their decision in 1796 to endorse the Federalists led to the single term of President John Adams, during which partisan rivalry got even worse, leading Federalists to seek legislation empowering the government to silence its critics. The crisis of 1798-1800 abated only when the Federalists split between followers of Adams and supporters of Hamilton, creating a priceless opportunity for the Republicans.

Thomas Jefferson hailed his election (despite the embarrassment of the deadlock in the Electoral College between himself and Aaron Burr) as "the revolution of 1800." He saw his victory as a confirmation of the American people's loyalty to the principles of 1776. Yet, ironically, even as they smarted and blamed one another in defeat, the Federalists deserved credit for the first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another under the Constitution.

VI. AFTERWORD -- DEFINING THE LEGACY, 1776-1836

What was the American Revolution? This question obsessed the Revolutionary generation. The issue continued to perplex the politicians of the 1790s, and survived into the new century.

In the early nineteenth century, the aged survivors of the Revolution were pelted with letters and inquiries by the new nation's rising generations of the new nation, asking about the glorious days of the Revolution and the purposes for which it was fought. But the old men of the Revolution -- notably John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison -- would have pondered these questions without outside prompting, for as they anxiously watched the development of the nation they had helped to call into being, they struggled to decide whether their labors had been worthwhile.

The following extract, from the last letter that Thomas Jefferson ever wrote, sums up his views on the meaning of the Revolution, and it is the best note on which to end:

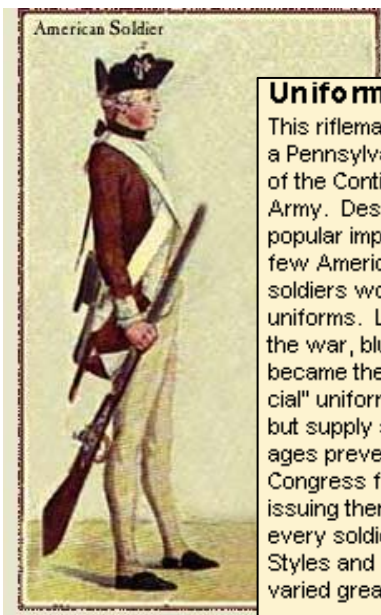
Monticello, June 24, 1826

...May [the American Revolution] be to the world what I believe it will be, to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all.) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self-government. That form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves let the annual return of this day, forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them....

Do you agree or disagree with Thomas Jefferson's view on the meaning of the Revolution? Defend your answer with one piece of evidence.

Identify one piece of historical evidence that supports the opposing view:

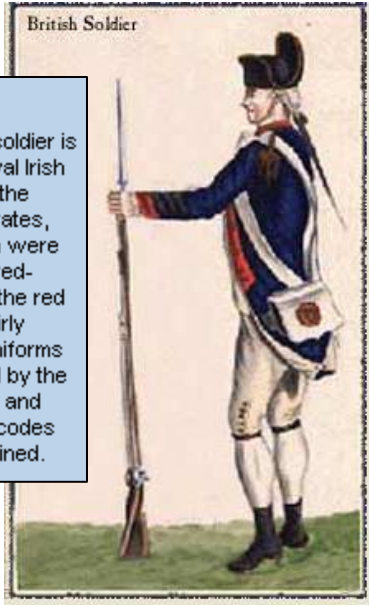
Additional Fun Facts



Uniform
This rifleman is from a Pennsylvania unit of the Continental Army. Despite popular impression, few American soldiers wore blue uniforms. Late in the war, blue became the "official" uniform color, but supply shortages prevented Congress from issuing them for every soldier. Styles and colors varied greatly.

Status
It is a myth that revolutionary-era colonists were more or less equal when it came to status and wealth. Society was very stratified and commanding officers were typically members of the elite upper class. For instance, George Washington owned over 36,000 acres of land, 130 horses and 135 slaves.

Status
18th century European armies reflected 18th century society. Commanding officers were drawn from the ranks of nobles; captain's and lieutenants were "gentlemen" of a lesser rank; and the ranks were filled with the lower classes, including peasants, the urban poor, paupers, and convicts.



Uniform
This British soldier is from the Royal Irish Artillery. As the picture illustrates, not all British were outfitted in "red-coats." Still, the red coat was fairly standard. Uniforms were issued by the government, and strict dress codes were maintained.