**American War of Independence**

**American Revolution**, also called **United States War of Independence**or **American Revolutionary War**, (1775–83), insurrection by which 13 of [Great Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Britain-island-Europe)’s [North American](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America) colonies won political independence and went on to form the [United States of America](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States). The [war](https://www.britannica.com/topic/war) followed more than a decade of growing estrangement between the British crown and a large and influential segment of its North [American colonies](https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-colonies) that was caused by British attempts to assert greater control over colonial affairs after having long adhered to a policy of [salutary neglect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/salutary-neglect). Until early in 1778 the conflict was a civil war within the [British Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire), but afterward it became an international war as [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) (in 1778) and [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain) (in 1779) joined the colonies against [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom). Meanwhile, the [Netherlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Netherlands), which provided both official recognition of the United States and financial support for it, was engaged in its own war against Britain. From the beginning, [sea power](https://www.britannica.com/topic/naval-warfare) was vital in determining the course of the war, lending to British strategy a flexibility that helped compensate for the comparatively small numbers of troops sent to America and ultimately enabling the French to help bring about the final British [surrender at Yorktown](https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Yorktown).

Americans fought the war on land with essentially two types of organization: the [Continental (national) Army](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Continental-Army) and the state [militias](https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia). The total number of the former provided by quotas from the states throughout the conflict was 231,771 men, and the militias totaled 164,087. At any given time, however, the American forces seldom numbered over 20,000; in 1781 there were only about 29,000 insurgents under arms throughout the country. The war was therefore one fought by small field armies. Militias, poorly [disciplined](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciplined) and with elected officers, were summoned for periods usually not exceeding three months. The terms of Continental Army service were only gradually increased from one to three years, and not even bounties and the offer of land kept the army up to strength. Reasons for the difficulty in maintaining an adequate Continental force included the colonists’ traditional [antipathy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antipathy) toward regular armies, the objections of farmers to being away from their fields, the competition of the states with the [Continental Congress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Continental-Congress) to keep men in the [militia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia), and the wretched and uncertain pay in a period of inflation.

By contrast, the British army was a reliable steady force of professionals. Since it numbered only about 42,000, heavy recruiting programs were introduced. Many of the enlisted men were farm boys, as were most of the Americans. Others were unemployed persons from the urban slums. Still others joined the army to escape fines or imprisonment. The great majority became efficient soldiers as a result of sound training and ferocious [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline). The officers were drawn largely from the gentry and the [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy) and obtained their commissions and promotions by purchase. Though they received no formal training, they were not so dependent on a book knowledge of military tactics as were many of the Americans. British generals, however, tended toward a lack of imagination and [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative), while those who demonstrated such qualities often were rash. Because troops were few and [conscription](https://www.britannica.com/topic/conscription) unknown, the British government, following a traditional policy, purchased about 30,000 troops from various [German](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Germany) princes. The [Lensgreve (landgrave) of Hesse](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hesse-Kassel) furnished approximately three-fifths of that total. Few acts by the crown roused so much antagonism in America as that use of foreign [mercenaries](https://www.britannica.com/topic/mercenary).

**Prelude to the War**

The colony of [Massachusetts](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts) was seen by King [George III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-III) and his ministers as the hotbed of disloyalty. After the [Boston Tea Party](https://www.britannica.com/event/Boston-Tea-Party) (December 16, 1773), [Parliament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parliament) responded with the [Intolerable Acts](https://www.britannica.com/event/Intolerable-Acts) (1774), a series of punitive measures that were intended to cow the restive population into obedience. The 1691 charter of the [Massachusetts Bay Colony](https://www.britannica.com/place/Massachusetts-Bay-Colony) was [abrogated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abrogated), and the colony’s elected ruling council was replaced with a [military government](https://www.britannica.com/topic/military-government) under Gen. [Thomas Gage](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Gage), the commander of all British troops in [North America](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-America). At Gage’s headquarters in [Boston](https://www.britannica.com/place/Boston), he had four regiments—perhaps 4,000 men—under his command, and Parliament deemed that force sufficient to overawe the population in his vicinity. [William Legge, 2nd earl of Dartmouth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Legge-2nd-earl-of-Dartmouth), secretary of state for the colonies, advised Gage thatFrom London, Dartmouth concluded thatGage, for his part, felt that no fewer than 20,000 troops would be adequate for such an endeavour, but he acted with the forces he had at hand. Beginning in the late summer of 1774, Gage attempted to suppress the warlike preparations throughout [New England](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-England) by seizing stores of weapons and [powder](https://www.britannica.com/technology/gunpowder). Although the colonials were initially taken by surprise, they soon mobilized. Groups such as the [Sons of Liberty](https://www.britannica.com/event/Sons-of-Liberty-United-States-history-18th-century) uncovered advance details of British actions, and [Committees of Correspondence](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Committees-of-Correspondence) aided in the organization of countermeasures. Learning of a British plan to secure the weapons [cache](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cache) at Fort William and Mary, an undermanned army outpost in [Portsmouth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Portsmouth-New-Hampshire), [New Hampshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-Hampshire-state), Boston’s Committee of Correspondence dispatched [Paul Revere](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paul-Revere) on December 13, 1774, to issue a warning to local allies. The following day, several hundred men assembled and stormed the fort, capturing the six-man garrison, seizing a significant quantity of powder, and striking the British colours; a subsequent party removed the remaining cannons and small arms. That act of open violence against the crown infuriated British officials, buttheir attempts to deprive the [incipient](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/incipient) rebellion of vital [war](https://www.britannica.com/topic/war) matériel over the following months were increasingly frustrated by colonial leaders who denuded British supply [caches](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caches) and sequestered arms and ammunition in private homes. On April 14, 1775, Gage received a letter from Dartmouth informing him that Massachusetts had been declared to be in a state of open revolt and ordering him to “arrest and imprison the principal Actors and Abettors in the [Massachusetts] Provincial Congress.” Gage had received his orders, but the colonials were well aware of his intentions before he could act.

**Paul Revere’s ride and the Battles of Lexington and Concord**: On April 16 Revere rode to [Concord](https://www.britannica.com/place/Concord-Massachusetts), a town 20 miles (32 km) northwest of Boston, to advise local compatriots to secure their military stores in advance of British troop movements. Two nights later Revere rode from [Charlestown](https://www.britannica.com/place/Charlestown-section-Boston-Massachusetts)—where he confirmed that the local Sons of Liberty had seen the two lanterns that were posted in Boston’s Old North Church, signaling a British approach across the [Charles River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Charles-River)—to [Lexington](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lexington-Massachusetts) to warn that the British were on the march. Revolutionary leaders [John Hancock](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Hancock) and [Samuel Adams](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Adams) fled Lexington to safety, and Revere was joined by fellow riders William Dawes and Samuel Prescott. The trio was apprehended outside Lexington by a British patrol, but Prescott escaped custody and was able to continue on to Concord. Revere’s “midnight ride” provided the colonists with vital information about British intentions, and it was later immortalized in a poem by [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Wadsworth-Longfellow). Some 700 British troops spent the evening of April 18, 1775, forming ranks on Boston Common, with orders to seize the colonial armoury at Concord. The lengthy public display ensured that Gage had lost any chance at secrecy, and by the time the force had been transported across the Charles River to [Cambridge](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambridge-Massachusetts) it was 2:00 AM the following morning. The march to Lexington was an exercise in misery. It began in a swamp, and the British were forced to wade through brackish water that was, in places, waist deep. By the time the soaked infantrymen arrived in Lexington at approximately 5:00 AM, 77 [minutemen](https://www.britannica.com/topic/minuteman) were among those who had assembled on the village green. Officers on both sides ordered their men to hold their positions but not to fire their weapons. It is unclear who fired “the shot heard ’round the world,” but it sparked a skirmish that left eight Americans dead. The colonial force evaporated, and the British moved on to Concord, where they were met with determined resistance from hundreds of militiamen. Now outnumbered and running low on ammunition, the British column was forced to retire to Boston. On the return march, American snipers took a deadly toll on the British, and only the timely arrival of 1,100 reinforcements prevented the retreat from becoming a rout. Those killed and wounded at the [Battles of Lexington and Concord](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battles-of-Lexington-and-Concord) numbered 273 British and 95 Americans. The Siege of Boston and the Battle of Bunker Hill

Rebel [militia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia) then converged on Boston from all over New England, while London attempted to formulate a response. Generals [Sir William Howe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Howe-5th-Viscount-Howe), [Sir Henry Clinton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Clinton), and [John Burgoyne](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Burgoyne) were dispatched at once with reinforcements, and [Charles Cornwallis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Cornwallis-1st-Marquess-and-2nd-Earl-Cornwallis) followed later. Those four commanders would be identified with the conduct of the principal British operations. The [Continental Congress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Continental-Congress) in [Philadelphia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Philadelphia), acting for the 13 colonies, voted for general defensive measures, called out troops, and appointed [George Washington](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Washington) of [Virginia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Virginia-state) commander in chief. Before Washington could take charge of the 15,000 colonial troops [laying siege](https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Boston) to the British garrison in Boston, Gage ordered Howe to drive the Americans from the heights in Charlestown.

The Americans provoked the assault by entrenching on Breed’s Hill, the lower of two hills overlooking the British position. The placement of American artillery on the heights would have made the British position in Boston [untenable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/untenable), so on June 17, 1775, Howe led a British frontal assault on the American fortifications. In the misleadingly named [Battle of Bunker Hill](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Bunker-Hill) (Breed’s Hill was the primary locus of combat), Howe’s 2,300 troops encountered withering fire while storming the rebel lines. The British eventually cleared the hill but at the cost of more than 40 percent of the assault force, and the battle was a [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) victory for the Americans.