REALIZING INDEPENDENCE

George Washington by Rembrandt Peale, c. 1853
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09119.01)

THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY
I. OVERVIEW

The American Revolutionary War was one of the hardest fought conflicts in the nation's history. Per capita the war involved the third highest mobilization rate of military-age men (trailing only World War II and the Civil War) and second highest casualty rate (after the Civil War) of all wars in American history. Moreover, the Revolutionary War was long, stretching for eight and a half years from 1775 to 1783. Only three other wars in American history were longer: the country's recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Vietnam War.

The American Revolutionary War had two distinct halves. The first half of the war, fought from the spring of 1775 to the winter of 1777−1778, took place primarily in North America and centered on the American colonial rebellion against the British Empire. General George Washington, commander of the American forces, overcame a large defeat at New York in August 1776 to lead inspiring victories against the British at Trenton (December 1776) and Princeton (January 1777). Unable to extinguish the rebellion, the British were left to capture leading American seaports, including New York and Philadelphia, before suffering a major defeat at Saratoga in October 1777.

America’s victory at Saratoga convinced Britain’s foremost rival, France, to enter the war on the American side. The Franco-American alliance, made official in February 1778, marked the opening of the second half of the war. No longer simply a colonial conflict, the American Revolution expanded into a global war that would also include Spain and the Netherlands fighting against Britain. With so many enemies, Britain and its famed Royal Navy lost control of the seas for the first time during the eighteenth century; not coincidentally, Britain also lost its only war in the century. In October 1781, French army and naval forces aided Washington’s Continental Army in forcing British General Charles Cornwallis to surrender at Yorktown. Two years later, American and British diplomats signed the Treaty of Paris, which recognized the independence of the United States of America.

Today, it is easy to take American independence for granted, but it was hardly ensured. Indeed, if the primary documents on the war from the Gilder Lehrman Collection share one overriding theme, it is sacrifice. The war caused not only bloodshed but other forms of loss and division in American society. As difficult as it was to declare independence, American colonists discovered that realizing independence was even harder.

II. THEMES

1. Onset of the War

Of all the misconceptions about the American Revolution, perhaps the most common is that independence preceded war. In fact, the war came first and helped lead to independence.
In a letter to the British historian Catharine Macaulay, the American writer and patriot Mercy Otis Warren describes in vivid detail the scene around Boston in the summer following the start of the war at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Warren extols “the Bravery of the Peasants of Lexington, & the spirit of freedom Breath’d from the Inhabitants of the surrounding Villages.” Warren’s passion against the “Wanton Barbarity” of the British illustrates how the war pushed Americans to support independence by 1776.

2. The Home Front

The War of Independence was not just a revolutionary war but also a civil war. Rather than entire regions fighting against each other, as in the American Civil War, individuals often fought neighbors and even family members during the Revolution.

Timothy Pickering, a future secretary of state in the Washington and Adams administrations, fought on the American side in the Revolution. His father, Timothy Pickering Sr., stayed loyal to the British Crown. In February 1778, Pickering learned that his father was gravely ill and wrote an affectionate letter seeking reconciliation. Pickering appreciated his father for allowing the “freedom in thinking & the rights of conscience” that made their differences possible. Pickering Sr. died a few months later.

The human side of the war also comes through in a letter from Lucy Knox to her husband, Henry Knox, a general in the Continental Army, in August 1777. Lucy recounts her loneliness and “solitary” life in Boston, as her immediate family remained loyal to Britain and fled the town while Henry was away fighting on the American side. There was a silver lining, however, as women like Lucy Knox managed their households and experienced new opportunities with their husbands gone—a phenomenon repeated in later American wars, and famously represented in the figure of Rosie the Riveter in World War II. Lucy did not want everything to return to normal after the war. “I hope you will not consider yourself as commander in chief of your own house,” she writes to Henry, “but be convinced . . . that there is such a thing as equal command.”

3. Unequal Hardships

The American Revolution inaugurated another feature of future American wars. Common people, particularly the poor, experienced the greatest hardships. As early as January 1777, George Washington understood this fact, as evidenced by his letter calling on the state of New Hampshire to fulfill its troop allotment set by Congress. Washington writes, “You must be fully sensible of the Hardship imposed upon Individuals, and how detrimental it must be to the Public, to have her Farmers and Tradesmen frequently called into the Field as Militia-men.” Yet he justified the sacrifice as necessary, lest America “submit to a greater [inconvenience], the total Loss of our Liberties.” Although future generations of Americans would appreciate this rationale, the Continental Army faced recruiting shortages throughout the Revolution.

4. Treatment of Veterans

Since the Revolution, every generation of Americans has confronted the question of how best to treat the nation’s veterans. The question carries particular meaning for the founding era in light of the extraordinary sacrifices made by soldiers in the Revolutionary War.

The final document in this section is an appeal by the African American veteran Peter Kiteredge to the local government of Medfield, Massachusetts, for aid to support his wife and four children. A former slave, Kiteredge served as a private for five years in the American military (presumably the Continental Army) before later working as a sailor and laborer. During the Revolution, he sustained injuries, for which he “suffered in a greater or less degree ever since.” We do not know the outcome of his request for help.

III. QUESTIONS

1. How do Revolutionary War casualty statistics and firsthand accounts of hardship by Lucy Knox, George Washington, Peter Kiteredge, and others change your understanding of the country’s founding?
2. How was the experience of American men and women during the Revolution similar to or different from the experience of war today?
3. In what ways has the treatment of veterans changed (or not changed) since the Revolutionary War?
Born and raised in Massachusetts, Mercy Otis Warren supported the patriot cause during the Revolutionary War and corresponded with its leaders, including John Adams. Her published writings include a volume of political poems (1790) and her masterwork, History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution (1805).

Warren wrote this letter to the English historian Catharine Macaulay to give her a true picture of the suffering of the colonists at the hands of the British. She praises “the Bravery of the peasants of Lexington” and describes the beginnings of representative government in Massachusetts.

Plimouth N E August 24 1775

At a time when all Europe is interested in the state of America you will forgive me Dear Madam, if I . . . again call at your attention when I have not been assured of the welcome reception of my last, in that I hinted that the sword was half drawn from the scabbard, soon after which this people were obliged to unsheath it to repel the violence offered to individuals, & the insolence of an attempt to seize the private property of the subjects of the King of England. And thereby put it out of their power to defend themselves against the corrupt ministers of his Court.

You have doubtless Madam been apprized of the consequences of this hostile movement which compelled the Americans to fly to arms in defence of all that is held dear & sacred among mankind. And the public papers as well as private accounts have witnessed to the bravery of the peasants of Lexington, & the spirit of freedom breath’d from the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. You have been told of the distresses of the people of Boston . . . famine & pestilence began to rage in the city . . .

And the conflagration of Charlestown will undoubtedly reach each British ear before this comes to your hand. Such instances of wanton barbarity have been seldom practiced even among the most rude & uncivilized nations, the ties of gratitude which were broken through by the kings troops in this base translation greatly enhances their guilt. . . . We have a well appointed brave & high spirited continental army, consisting of about twenty thousand men, commanded by the accomplished George Washington Eqr. A gentleman of one of the first fortunes in America. A man whose military abilities, & public & private virtues place him in the first class of the good & brave & are really of so high a stamp as to do honour to human nature this army is to be occasionally reunited.
& to be supported & paid at the Expense of the United Colonies of America. And
were Britain powerful & Infatuated Enough to send out a force sufficient to cut off
to A Man this little Resolute army. Less than the Compass of A week would Exhibit
in the Field thrice their Numbers Ready to Avenge the stroke & to call down the
justice of Heaven on the Destroyers of the peace, Liberty & Happiness of Mankind.

In Compliance with the Recommendation of the Continental Congress
the Massachusetts have at Last Reassumed the power of Government. the provincial
Congress sent out A writ for Calling a House of Representatives & Agreeable to the
Charter of Wm & Mary they proceeded to Elect 28 Counselers. . . . Thus after
living without Government without Law and Without any Regular Administration
of justice for more than 12 Months we are just Returning from a state of Nature to
the subordinations of Civil Society.
George Washington to the President of the Convention of New Hampshire,
January 23, 1777

From Letter to the President of the Convention of New Hampshire,
January 23, 1777

In autumn 1776, Washington’s army of fewer than 20,000 poorly trained and
supplied troops nearly collapsed, retreating across New Jersey to Pennsylvania. On
Christmas night, the Continental Army staged a surprise counterattack, crossing
the Delaware River from Pennsylvania into New Jersey, and defeated the British
forces at Trenton and, soon after, Princeton. These victories restored confidence
in the American cause, but Washington still had to plead for additional troops and
supplies from each of the individual states.

Headquartrs. Morris Town. Jany. 23d. 1777

The Situation to which I am reduced for want of a Regular body of Troops
on whom I can depend for a length of time, makes it indispensably necessary for
me to call upon You and intreat you to exert Yourselves in levying and equipping
the number of Battalions allotted to your State by the Resolution of Congress in
September last.

You must be fully sensible of the Hardship imposed upon Individuals, and
how detrimental it must be to the Public, to have her Farmers and Tradesmen
frequently called into the Field as Militia-men, whereby a total Stop is put to Arts
& Agriculture, without which We can not possibly long subsist. But great as this
Inconvenience is, We must put up with it, or submit to a greater, the total Loss of
our Liberties, untill our regular Continental Army can be brought into the Field.

The above Reasons alone I hope will be Sufficient to induce you to exert
Yourselves; for if our new Army are not ready to take the Field early in the Spring,
We shall loose all the Advantages which I may say we have providentially gained
this Winter. While our dependence is upon Militia, We have a full Army one day &
Scarce any the next; And I am much afraid, that the Enemy one day or other, taking
Advantage of one of these temporary Weaknesses, will make themselves Masters
of our Magazines of Stores, Arms & Artillery. Nothing but their Ignorance of our
Numbers protects Us at this very time. When on the contrary, had We six or eight
Thousand regular Troops, or could the Militia, who were with me a few days ago,
have been prevailed upon to Stay, We could have Struck such a Stroke, as would
have inevitably ruined the Army of the Enemy in their divided State.

I am not without hopes, that by creating a powerful Diversion on the side of
New York, We may still keep their force divided between that Province & this; If
so, and a good body of Regular troops could be thrown in to me before the Roads

George Washington (1732–1799)

(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00639.28, p. 1)
will be in a Condition for the Enemy with their reduced Waggon and Artillery horses, to move out, it perhaps may not be out of my power to Strike a decisive Blow before Spring – This is another and a forcible Reason to induce You to Send your new Levies forward with all Expedition. – While the men are raising, I beg you will spare no pains to make Collections of all things necessary for their Equipment; not only of Such as they carry with them into the Field, but for their Use and Convenience while they are there such as Spare Shoes, Stockings & Shirts; the want of which has been the Ruin of the old Army. . . .

G: Washington
Lucy Flucker Knox to Henry Knox, August 23, 1777
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02437.00638, p. 4)
his Lucy to admit the most remote thought of that distracting kind – away with it – don’t be angry with me my Love – I am not jealous of you affection – I love you with a love as true and sacred as ever entered the human heart – but from a diffidence of my own merit I sometimes fear you will Love me less – after being so long from me – if you should may my life end before I know it – that I may die thinking you wholly mine –

Adieu my love  LK
My Honoured Father,

With much grief I received the account of your indisposition; but at the same time was happy to find you rather growing better, & that there was a prospect of your recovery. Not that I deemed you anxious to live; I supposed the contrary:— but whether to live or die, I know you are perfectly resigned to the will of Heaven.—But for the sake of your family & friends, I wished you to live yet many years; that I too might again see you, & manifest that filial duty which I feel, & would cheerfully pay, to your latest breath.

When I look back on past time, I regret our difference of sentiment in great as well as (sometimes) in little politics; as it was a deduction from the happiness otherwise to have been enjoyed. Yet you had always too much regard to freedom in thinking & the rights of conscience, to lay upon me any injunctions which could interfere with my own opinion of what was my duty. In all things I have endeavoured to keep a good conscience, void of offence towards God and man. Often have I thanked my Maker for the greatest blessing of my life—your example & instructions in all the duties I owe to God, and my neighbour. They have not been lost upon me; tho’ I am aware that in many things I have offended, & come short of my duty. For these things I am grieved; but not as those who have no hope.

I am deeply indebted too for your care in my education; I only regret that I improved my time no better.

But altho’ the line of action I have pursued has not always been such as you would have chosen; yet (but I boast not) in regard to religion and morality, I hope you have never repented that I was your son. By God’s grace I will in my future...
life aim at higher attainments in those all-essential points; not only from a sense of duty to my Creator—from a regard to my own happiness here and beyond the grave—but that I may never wound the breast of a parent to whom I am under so many and so great obligations.

My love and duty to you and my mother,
conclude me your obedient son,

Tim. Pickering jun'.

To M.' Tim.ᵃ Pickering
Petition to the selectmen of Medfield, Massachusetts, April 26, 1806

An enslaved man from Massachusetts, Peter Kiteredge entered the military when he was twenty-five and served in the American Revolution for five years. Afterwards, he spent time as a sailor and a laborer. Due to an illness that left him disabled, Kiteredge requested assistance from Medfield officials to support his wife and four children, fearing that he could no longer earn a living.

Gentlemen,

I beg leave to state to you my necessitous circumstances, that through your intervention I may obtain that succour, which suffering humanity ever requires. Borne of African parents & as I apprehend in Boston, from whence while an infant I was removed to Rowley and from thence again to Andover into the family of Doct. Thom Kiteridge, with whom, as was then the lot of my unfortunate race, I passed the best part of my life as a slave. In the year of our Lord 1775 or 6 & in the twenty fifth of my age I entered into the service of the U.S. as a private soldier where I continued five years and where I contracted a complaint from which I have suffered in a greater or less degree ever since & with which I am now afflicted. After leaving the army to become a sailor for two years; when I quited the sea & resided for some time in Newtown, from whence I went to Natick where I remained for a short time & then removed to Dover where I carried as a day labourer during the period of seven years. Eight years past I removed to the place where I now live, & have until this time, by my labor, assisted by the kindness of the neighbouring inhabitants been enabled to support myself and family. At present having arrived at the fifty eight year of my life and afflicted with severe and as I apprehend with incurable diseases whereby the labour of my hands is wholly cut off, and with it the only means of my support.—

My family at this time consists of a wife and four children, three of whom are so young as to be unable to support themselves and the time of their mother is wholly occupied in taking care of myself & our little ones – thus gentlemen, in this my extremity I am induced to call on you for assistance; not in the character of an inhabitant of the town of Westfield, for I have no such claim. but as a stranger accidently fallen within your borders, one who has not the means of subsistence, & in fact, one, who must fail through want & disease unless sustained by the fostering hand of your care.

I am Gentlemen your mos obedient, most humble servant.

Peter Kiteredge

Attent. Ebenezer Clark
His X Mark

Paul Hifner