

COLONIAL LIFE IN AMERICA



The settlement of eastern North America by the English.

Abbreviations:

ME.	Maine	N.J.	New Jersey
N.H.	New Hampshire	DEL.	Delaware
MASS.	Massachusetts	MD.	Maryland
R.I.	Rhode Island	VA.	Virginia
N.Y.	New York	N.C.	North Carolina
CONN.	Connecticut	S.C.	South Carolina
PA.	Pennsylvania	GA.	Georgia

By the year 1733 the English owned thirteen separate colonies along the Atlantic coast of North America. The colonies stretched from New Hampshire in the north to Georgia in the south. Most people divided them into three main groups. Each group had its own way of life and character.

In the far north was the New England group, centered on Massachusetts. Since the time of the Pilgrims the people of New England had spread inland and along the coast. Most were small farmers or craftsmen, working the stony soil and governing themselves in small towns and villages.

Other New Englanders depended on the sea for a living. They felled the trees of the region's forests to build ships. In these they sailed to catch cod or to trade with England and the West Indies. Boston and other coastal towns grew into busy ports. Their prosperity depended on trade.

The nearest colonies to the south of New England were called the Middle Colonies. The biggest were New York and Pennsylvania. As in New England, most of their people lived by farming. But in the cities of New York and Philadelphia there were growing numbers of craftsmen and merchants. Philadelphia was the capital of Pennsylvania. By 1770 it was the largest city in America, with 28,000 inhabitants.

Philadelphia in 1720, a contemporary painting by Peter Cooper.



central Pennsylvania, cutting down forests of oak trees to make hilly farms. They spread westward along the river valleys in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. They moved north along the fertile valley of the Mohawk River of New York.

Making a new settlement always began in the same way. The settlers cleared the land of trees, then cut the trees into logs and planks. They used these to build a house and a barn. They then ploughed between the tree stumps, sowed their seeds, and four months later harvested the crops of corn and wheat. If their soil was fertile the settlers lived well. But if the soil was rocky, or poor in plant foods, life could be hard and disappointing. Settlers with poor soil often left their farms and moved westward, to try again on more fertile land. As they traveled inland they passed fewer and fewer farms and villages. At last there were none at all. This area, where European settlement came to an end and the forest homelands of the Amerindians began, was called the frontier.

Fresh waves of settlers pushed the frontier steadily westwards in their search for fertile soil. They would often pass by land that seemed unsuitable for farming. *Because of this, frontier farms and villages* were often separated by miles of unsettled land. A family might be a day's journey from its nearest neighbors. For such reasons the people of frontier communities had to rely upon themselves for almost everything they needed. They grew their own food and built their own houses. They made the clothing they wore and the tools they used. They developed their own kinds of music, entertainment, art and forms of religious worship.

A special spirit, or attitude, grew out of this frontier way of life. People needed to be tough, independent and self-reliant. Yet they also needed to work together, helping each other with such tasks as clearing land and building houses and barns. The combination of these two ideas – a strong belief that individuals had to help themselves and a need for them to cooperate with one another – strengthened the feeling that people were equal and that nobody should have special rights and privileges.

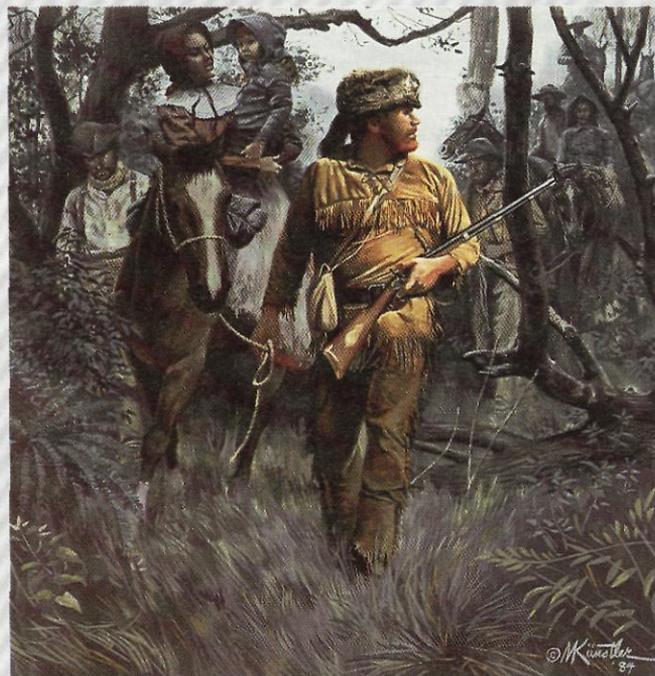
The frontier way of life helped democratic ideas to flourish in America. Today's Americans like to think that many of the best values and attitudes of the modern United States can be traced back to the frontier experiences of their pioneer ancestors.

Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road

In the 1760s land-hungry American settlers moving westwards were stopped by a major obstacle, the Appalachian Mountains. This thickly forested mountain range runs roughly parallel to the Atlantic coast of North America and stretches for hundreds of miles.

When settlers reached the foothills of the Appalachians they found waterfalls and rapids blocking the rivers they had been following westwards. In 1775 a hunter and explorer named Daniel Boone led a party of settlers into the mountains. Boone is said to have claimed that he had been "ordained by God to settle the wilderness." With a party of thirty axmen he cut a track called the Wilderness Road through the forested Cumberland Gap, a natural pass in the Appalachians.

Beyond the Cumberland Gap lay rich, rolling grasslands. In the years which followed, Boone's Wilderness Road enabled thousands of settlers to move with horses, wagons, and cattle into these fertile lands. They now make up the American states of Kentucky and Tennessee.



Daniel Boone escorting settlers on the Wilderness Road.



A plantation port in Chesapeake Bay.

Governors and assemblies

All the English colonies in America shared a tradition of representative government. This means that in all of them people had a say in how they were governed. Each colony had its own government. At the head of this government was a governor, chosen in most cases by the English king. To rule effectively, these governors depended upon the cooperation of assemblies elected by the colonists.

In most of the colonies all white males who owned some land had the right to vote. Since so many colonists owned land, this meant that far more people had the vote in America than in England itself—or in any other European country at this time.

THE ROOTS OF REVOLUTION

In the eighteenth century Britain and France fought several major wars. The struggle between them went on in Europe, Asia and North America.

In North America, France claimed to own Canada and Louisiana. Canada, or New France, extended north from the St. Lawrence River and south towards the frontier areas of the English colonies on the Atlantic coast. Louisiana, named for the French king, Louis XIV, stretched across the center of the continent. It included all the lands drained by the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

In the middle of the eighteenth century most of the forests and plains of both of these vast areas were still unexplored by Europeans. The French claim to own them was based upon journeys made in the previous century by two famous explorers.

The first of these explorers was Samuel de Champlain. From 1603 onwards, Champlain explored the lands on both sides of the St. Lawrence River and set up trading posts there. The two most important of these posts later grew into the cities of Quebec and Montreal.

The other French explorer was René La Salle. La Salle was a fur trader, explorer and empire builder all in one. In the 1670s he explored the valley of the Mississippi. "It is nearly all so beautiful and so fertile," he wrote. "So full of meadows, brooks and rivers; so abounding in fish and venison that one can find here all that is needed to support flourishing colonies. The soil will produce everything that is grown in France."

The British attack on Quebec.



La Salle paddled for thousands of miles down the Mississippi. At last he reached the Gulf of Mexico, where the great river empties into the sea. Some years later the French set up a trading post there. In future years this became the city of New Orleans.

The French claim that Louisiana belonged to them worried both the British government and the American colonists. A glance at a map explains why. Suppose France sent soldiers to occupy the Mississippi valley. They would be able to keep the colonists to the east of the Appalachian Mountains and stop them from moving westwards.

After several wars earlier in the eighteenth century, in 1756 Britain and France began fighting the Seven Years War. This is known to Americans as the French and Indian War.

Led by their forceful Prime Minister, William Pitt the Elder, the British sent money and soldiers to North America. In 1758 British and colonial forces captured the French strongholds of Louisburg on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Fort Duquesne on the Ohio River. In 1759 they took Quebec. In 1760 Montreal fell to them. The war was ended by the Peace of Paris, which was signed in 1763. France gave up its claim to Canada and to all of North America east of the Mississippi River.

Britain had won an Empire. But its victory led directly to conflict with its American colonies. Even before the final defeat of the French, colonists in search of better land began to move over the Appalachian Mountains into the Ohio valley. To prevent war with the Amerindian tribes who lived in the area, the English king, George III, issued a proclamation in 1763. It forbade colonists to settle west of the Appalachians until proper treaties had been made with the Amerindians.

The king's proclamation angered the colonists. They became angrier still when the British government told them that they must pay new taxes on imports of sugar, coffee, textiles, and other goods. The government also told them that they must feed and find shelter for British soldiers it planned to keep in the colonies. These orders seemed perfectly fair to British politicians. It had cost British taxpayers a lot of money to defend the colonies during the French and Indian War. Surely, they reasoned, the colonists could not object to repaying some of this money?

Trade laws and “sleeping dogs”

Until the 1760s most Americans seemed quite content to be ruled by Britain. An important reason for this was the presence of the French in North America. So long as France held Canada and Louisiana, the colonists felt that they needed the British navy and soldiers to protect them.

Another reason the colonists accepted British rule was that the British government rarely interfered in colonial affairs.

A century earlier the British Parliament had passed some laws called Navigation Acts. These listed certain products called “enumerated commodities” that the colonies were forbidden to export to any country except England. It was easy for the colonists to avoid obeying these laws. The long American coastline made smuggling easy.

The colonists did not care much either about import taxes, or duties, that they were supposed to pay on goods from abroad. The duties were light and carelessly collected. Few merchants bothered to pay them. And again, smuggling was easy. Ships could unload their cargoes on hundreds of lonely wharves without customs officers knowing.

When a British Prime Minister named Robert Walpole was asked why he did not do more to enforce the trade laws, he replied: “Let sleeping dogs lie.” He knew the independent spirit of the British colonists in America and wanted no trouble with them. The trouble began when later British politicians forgot his advice and awoke the “sleeping dogs.”

But the colonists did object. Merchants believed that the new import taxes would make it more difficult for them to trade at a profit. Other colonists believed that the taxes would raise their costs of living. They also feared that if British troops stayed in America they might be used to force them to obey the British government. This last objection was an early example of a belief that became an important tradition in American political life—that people should not allow governments to become too powerful.

Samuel Adams and the Boston Massacre

Samuel Adams was a politician and writer who organized opposition in Massachusetts to the British tax laws. He believed in the idea of “no taxation without representation.” In articles and speeches he attacked the British government’s claim that it had the right to tax the colonists.

On March 5, 1770, a Boston mob began to shout insults at a group of British soldiers. Angry words were exchanged. Sticks and stones began to fly through the air at the soldiers. One of the crowd tried to take a soldier’s gun and the soldier shot him. Without any order from the officer in charge, more shots were fired and three more members of the crowd fell dead. Several others were wounded.

Samuel Adams used this “Boston Massacre” to stir up American opinion against the British. He wrote a letter which inaccurately described the happening as an unprovoked attack on a peaceful group of citizens. He sent out copies of the letter to all the colonies. To make his account more



Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre.

convincing, he asked a Boston silversmith named Paul Revere to make a dramatic picture of the “Massacre.” Hundreds of copies were printed.

Adams’ letter and Revere’s picture were seen by thousands of people throughout the colonies. Together they did a great deal to strengthen opposition to British rule.

All this opposition forced the British government to withdraw the Stamp Act. But it was determined to show the colonists that it had the right to tax them. Parliament passed another law called the Declaratory Act. This stated that the British government had “full power and authority (over) the colonies and people of America in all cases whatsoever.”

In 1767 the British placed new taxes on tea, paper, paint, and various other goods that the colonies imported from abroad. A special customs office was set up in Boston to collect the new duties. Again the colonists refused to pay. Riots broke out in Boston and the British sent soldiers to keep order. It was not until 1770, when the British removed all the duties except for the one on tea, that there was less trouble.

But some colonists in Massachusetts were determined to keep the quarrel going. In December 1773, a group of them disguised themselves as Mohawk Amerindians. They boarded British merchant ships in Boston harbor and threw 342 cases of tea into the sea. “I hope that King George likes salt in his tea,” said one of them.

The British reply to this “Boston Tea Party” was to pass a set of laws to punish Massachusetts. Colonists soon began calling these laws the “Intolerable Acts.” Boston harbor was closed to all trade until the tea was paid for. More soldiers were sent there to keep order. The powers of the colonial assembly of Massachusetts were greatly reduced.

On June 1, 1774, British warships took up position at the mouth of Boston harbor to make sure that no ships sailed in or out. A few months later, in September 1774, a group of colonial leaders came together in Philadelphia. They formed the First Continental Congress to oppose what they saw as British oppression.

The Continental Congress claimed to be loyal to the British king. But it called upon all Americans to support the people of Massachusetts by refusing to buy British goods. Many colonists went further than this. They began to organize themselves into groups of part-time soldiers, or “militias,” and to gather together weapons and ammunition.

FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE

On the night of April 18, 1775, 700 British soldiers marched silently out of Boston. Their orders were to seize weapons and ammunition that rebellious colonists had stored in Concord, a nearby town.

But the colonists were warned that the soldiers were coming. Signal lights were hung from the spire of Boston's tallest church and two fast riders, Paul Revere and William Dawes, jumped into their saddles and galloped off with the news.

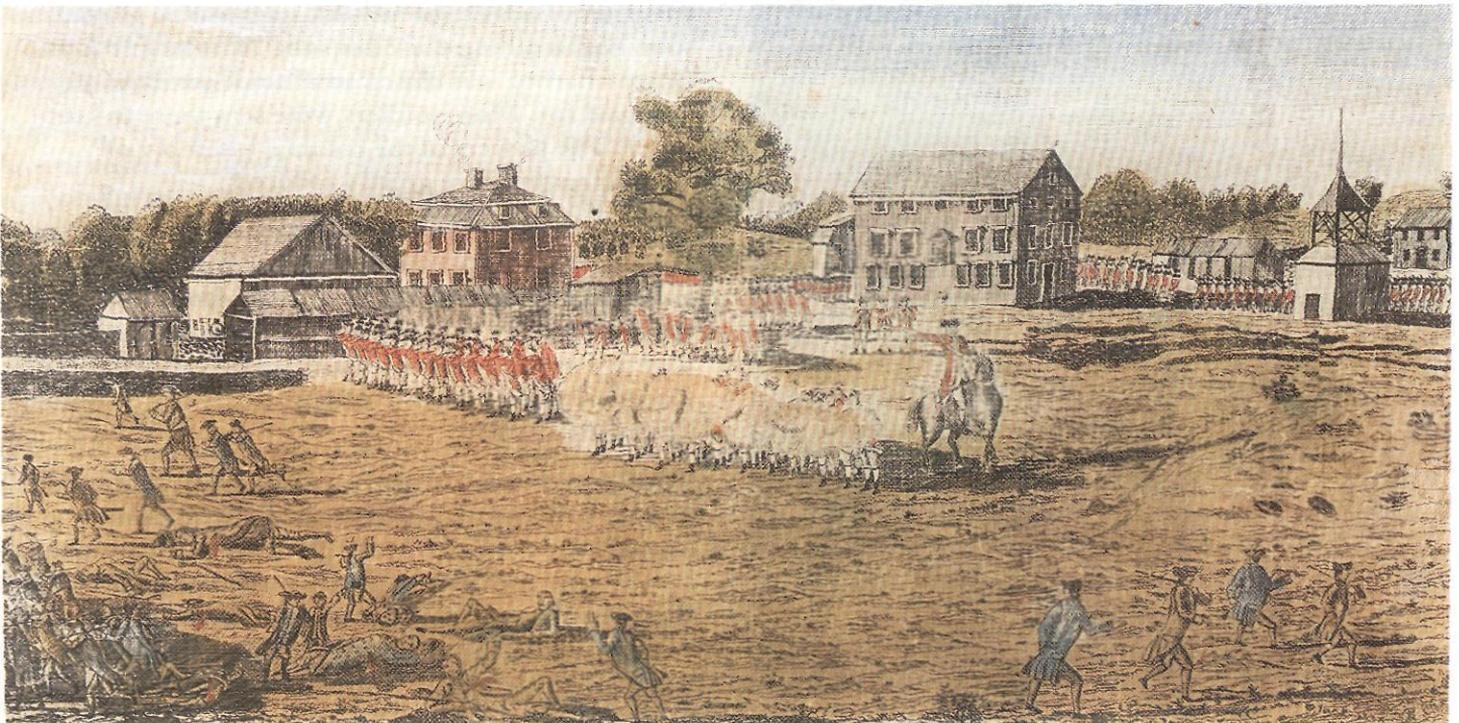
In the village of Lexington the British found seventy American militiamen, farmers and tradesmen, barring their way. These part-time soldiers were known as "Minutemen." This was because they had promised to take up arms immediately—in a minute—whenever they were needed.

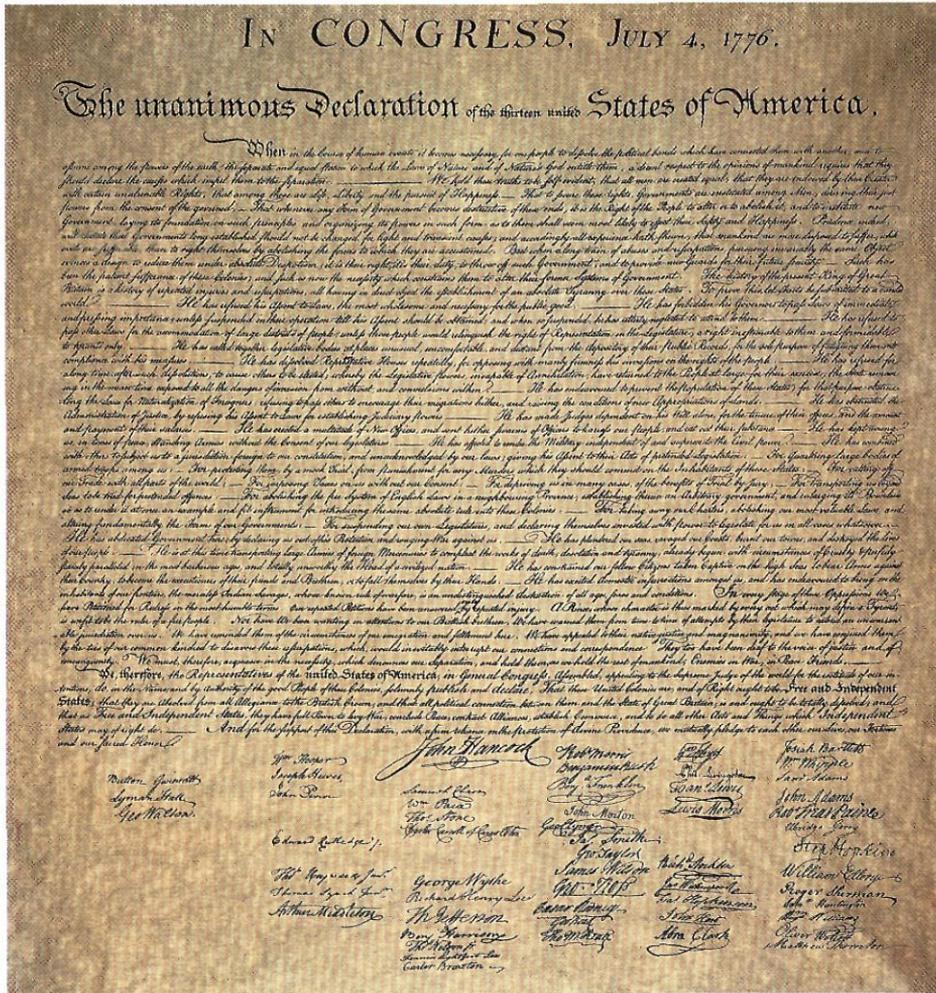
The British commander ordered the Minutemen to return to their homes. They refused. Then someone, nobody knows who, fired a shot. Other shots came from the lines of British soldiers. Eight Minutemen fell dead. The first shots had been fired in what was to become the American War of Independence.

The British soldiers reached Concord a few hours later and destroyed some of the weapons and gunpowder there. But by the time they set off to return to Boston hundreds more Minutemen had gathered. From the thick woods on each side of the Boston road they shot down, one by one, 273 British soldiers. The soldiers were still under attack when they arrived back in Boston. A ring of armed Americans gathered round the city.

The next month, May 1775, a second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and began to act as an American national government. It set up an army of 17,000 men under the command of George Washington. Washington was a Virginia landowner and surveyor with experience of fighting in the French and Indian War. The Continental Congress also sent representatives to seek aid from friendly European nations—especially from France, Britain's old enemy.

British soldiers firing on the Minutemen at Lexington in 1775. A contemporary engraving based on a sketch by an eye-witness.





The Declaration of Independence.

By the following year the fighting had spread beyond Massachusetts. It had grown into a full-scale war.

On July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress finally took the step that many Americans believed was inevitable. It cut all political ties with Britain and declared that “these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states.” Two days later, on July 4, it issued the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence is the most important document in American history. It was written by Thomas Jefferson, a landowner and lawyer from Virginia. After repeating that the colonies were now “free and independent states,” it officially named them the United States of America.

One of the first members of the Continental Congress to sign the Declaration of Independence was

John Hancock of Massachusetts. Hancock picked up the pen and wrote his name in large, clear letters – “large enough,” he said, “for King George to read without his spectacles.”

The Declaration of Independence was more than a statement that the colonies were a new nation. It also set out the ideas behind the change that was being made. It claimed that all men had a natural right to “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It also said that governments can only justly claim the right to rule if they have the agreement of those they govern – “the consent of the governed.”

Ideas such as these were a central part of the political traditions that the colonists’ ancestors had brought with them from England. Colonial leaders had also studied them in the writings of an English political thinker named John Locke. Men like Jefferson combined Locke’s ideas with their own experience of

Thomas Paine, the voice of revolution

One of the most influential voices calling for American independence was that of an Englishman. He was a Republican named Thomas Paine, who immigrated to America in 1774.

Two years later, in a brilliantly written pamphlet called *Common Sense*, Paine became one of the first to persuade Americans to make a complete break with Britain. "Everything that is right or reasonable cries for separation," he claimed. "'Tis time to part!"

Common Sense made Paine famous. It had an enormous effect on American opinion and prepared people's minds for independence. It was read on frontier farms and on city streets. Officers

read parts of it to their troops. George Washington described its arguments as "sound and unanswerable."

Later in 1776, as Washington's discouraged army retreated from the advancing British, Paine rallied the Americans with a new pamphlet called *The Crisis*. Its words are still remembered in times of difficulty by Americans today. "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine wrote. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands *now* deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." In one of the darkest hours of the war Paine's words helped to save Washington's armies from melting away and inspired new supporters to join the American cause.

life in America to produce a new definition of democratic government. This new definition said that governments should consist of representatives elected by the people. It also said that the main reason that governments existed was to protect the rights of individual citizens.

After some early successes, the Americans did badly in the war against the British. Washington's army was more of an armed mob than an effective fighting force. Few of the men had any military training and many obeyed only those orders that suited them. Officers quarreled constantly over their rank and



American general Nathan Heard reading the Declaration of Independence to his troops.

authority. Washington set to work to train his men and turn them into disciplined soldiers. But this took time, and meanwhile the Americans suffered defeat after defeat. In September 1776, only two months after the *Declaration of Independence*, the British captured New York City. Washington wrote to his brother that he feared that the Americans were very close to losing the war.

Success began to come to the Americans in October 1777. They trapped a British army of almost 6,000 men at Saratoga in northern New York. The British commander was cut off from his supplies and his men were facing starvation. He was forced to surrender. The Americans marched their prisoners to Boston. Here, after swearing never again to fight against the Americans, the prisoners were put on board ships and sent back to England.

Benjamin Franklin, the American ambassador to France, was delighted when he received the news of the victory at Saratoga. He used it to persuade the French government to join in the struggle against Britain. In February 1778, the French king, Louis XVI, signed an alliance with the Americans. French ships, soldiers and money were soon playing an important part in the war.

From 1778 onwards most of the fighting took place in the southern colonies. It was here that the war came to an end. In September 1781, George Washington, leading a combined American and French army, surrounded 8,000 British troops under General Cornwallis at Yorktown, on the coast of Virginia. Cornwallis was worried, but he expected British ships to arrive and rescue or reinforce his army. When ships arrived off Yorktown, however, they were French ones. Cornwallis was trapped. On October 17, 1781, he surrendered his army to Washington. When the news reached London the British Prime Minister, Lord North, threw up his hands in despair. "It is all over!" he cried.

North was right. The British started to withdraw their forces from America and British and American representatives began to discuss peace terms. In the Treaty of Paris, which was signed in September 1783, Britain officially recognized her former colonies as an independent nation. The treaty granted the new United States all of North America from Canada in the north to Florida in the south, and from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River.

The Marquis de Lafayette

In 1777 the Marquis de Lafayette, a twenty-year-old French aristocrat, landed in America. He came partly to fight for a new and free society. But he came also to avenge the death of his father, who had died fighting the British in the French and Indian War.

Lafayette served without pay in the American army and became a major-general on the staff of George Washington. In the next four years he fought in many battles, proving himself to be a brave and determined soldier. He won Washington's respect and friendship and played a part in the final defeat of the British at Yorktown in 1781.

When the war ended Lafayette returned to France. There he continued to support American interests. When the French revolution broke out in 1789, political opponents had Lafayette imprisoned and took away his estates. But Lafayette's American friends did not forget him. In 1794 Congress voted him his unclaimed general's pay of \$24,424. A few years later it granted him land in Louisiana.

In 1824 the now aging Lafayette returned to visit the United States. The American people greeted him as a hero, a living symbol of the birth of their nation.



The Marquis de Lafayette.