

2 Declaring Independence

Section Focus

Key Terms Second Continental Congress
■ Olive Branch Petition ■ mercenary
■ resolution ■ Declaration of Independence

Main Idea After the eruption of fighting between British and colonial troops, the colonies declared their independence in 1776 and put forth new ideas about government.

Objectives As you read, look for answers to these questions:

1. Where did fighting in the American Revolution begin?
2. How did the Continental Congress try to pursue policies of peace and war at the same time?

The spies were busy that spring of 1775.

From his spies General Gage in Boston was trying to get information about colonial activity. On April 6, 1775, two soldier-spies walked into nearby Watertown pretending to be jobless men looking for work. They ordered a meal at the inn. Was there work around? one asked the black serving girl. She spiritedly replied, "Colonel Smith, you will find employment enough for you and all of Gage's men in a few months." Having once worked in Boston, the young woman knew a number of the British by sight and even name. It was the second time she had exposed the disguise of British spies.

In Boston the Sons of Liberty were just as busy. Sam Adams had organized a spy network that used teams of men moving every hour throughout Boston to spot unusual activity. Other spies included servants and barmaids—anyone who might have contact with the British.

LEXINGTON AND CONCORD

On the night of April 18 the British made their move. General Gage had decided to seize militia supplies at Concord. British soldiers silently made their way to the beach where boats were ready to take them across the harbor. Dr. Joseph Warren, head of the colonists' spies in Boston, learned of the movement. Warren called two of his couriers, Paul Revere and William Dawes, and gave them orders. They rode to Lexington, but by different routes, alerting the militia along the way.

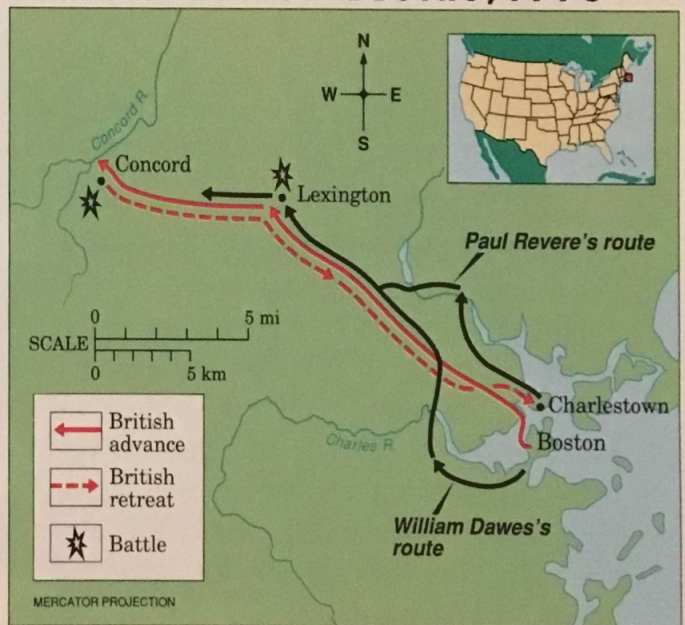
The next dawn, when British troops reached

Lexington, the fighting began. No one knows who fired the first shot—which Ralph Waldo Emerson called "the shot heard round the world." What followed, however, was a turning point in American history. At the battles of Lexington and Concord, British regulars and American Minutemen fought for the first time. Forcing the British to retreat toward Boston, the Minutemen pelted them with constant musketfire. Bitter as the retreat was for

MAP SKILLS

This map shows the first clashes of the Revolutionary War. Why did the British army march on Lexington and Concord? Why did Revere and Dawes hope to arrive before the British? **CRITICAL THINKING** Why was the first shot fired at Lexington called "the shot heard round the world"?

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS, 1775



the British, it could have been a terrible disaster had Minuteman musketfire been more accurate. The Minutemen's crude muskets and homemade bullets meant that only one shot out of every 300 found its mark.

For thousands of New Englanders the eruption of warfare meant choosing sides. Those Americans who feared revolution and who supported British policy were called Tories or Loyalists. Those who sided with the Minutemen on Lexington Green were Patriots.

After the battle thousands of militiamen from New England towns made their way to the Patriot headquarters in Cambridge. General Gage decided to protect his position by withdrawing troops from the peninsula opposite Boston, the peninsula containing Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill.

BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE

May 1775 arrived, and in Philadelphia it was time for the **Second Continental Congress** to meet. From Massachusetts the delegation included John Adams, Sam Adams, and the merchant John Hancock. Benjamin Franklin took his seat in the Pennsylvania delegation. From Virginia came George Washington, Richard Henry Lee, and fire-tongued Patrick Henry.

“Give me liberty, or give me death!”

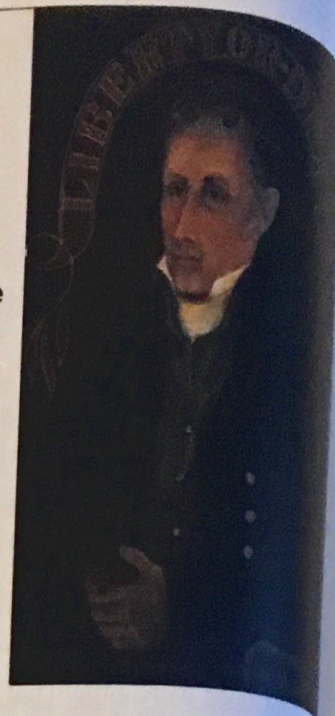
—Patrick Henry

It had been but two months since Henry made an impassioned speech in the Virginia assembly urging it to raise a militia:

Gentlemen may cry peace, peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! . . . Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!

BIOGRAPHY

PATRICK HENRY (1736–1799) was a Virginia lawyer who held many public offices, including that of governor. A magnetic speaker, Henry vigorously defended individual freedom. He later protested the Constitution's lack of a bill of rights. His powers of persuasion were such that the first ten amendments were added to the Constitution.



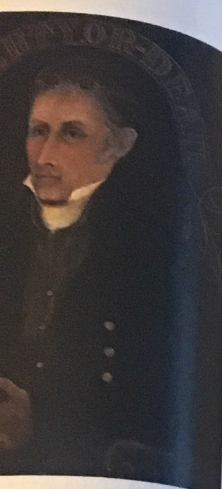
Radicals such as Patrick Henry and the two Adamses believed that the task of the Congress was to prepare for war. The moderates were reluctant to go so far. Negotiation, not war, was their aim. “We find a great many bundles of weak nerves,” John Adams wrote Dr. Warren.

THE CONTINENTAL ARMY

Acutely aware that the troops swarming into Massachusetts needed a strong leader, John Adams lobbied among his fellow delegates for a Continental Army headed by George Washington. Adams pointed out that Washington had extensive military experience from the French and Indian War. Washington was also wealthy, for he had married Martha Custis, one of the richest women in America. Southerners in particular considered independent wealth a requirement for leadership.

When he nominated Washington as commander-in-chief, Adams referred to his “skill as an officer, independent fortune, great talents and universal character.” Congress debated the issue for two days—New Englanders doubting their militias would obey a southerner—and then gave Washington the job. It also voted to send to Massachusetts ten companies of riflemen from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. The riflemen with their long-barrelled guns were famous as deadly shots.

A week later, to the tunes of fife and drums, Washington and his military aides left on horseback for Cambridge. Washington had gone less



than twenty miles when a tired, dusty courier galloped up to him with news. Another battle had been fought near Boston. This was the Battle of Bunker Hill, also known as the Battle of Breed's Hill. Breathlessly the courier gave the facts. The Patriots had fortified Breed's Hill. Then British regulars attacked. During the battle, Charlestown was burned, and the militia—with about 400 casualties—retreated from their positions. But over 1,000 redcoats were killed or wounded.

Colonists viewed the Battle of Bunker Hill as a moral victory. They had proved they could hold their own against the most powerful army in the world.

PETITION AND RESPONSE

Despite two bloody battles and the appointment of Washington to head a continental army, Congress

still hoped for peace. In this the delegates reflected the thinking of most colonists. They felt that while Parliament and the king's ministers might have made some bad decisions, King George III still deserved their loyalty. They believed that, like a good father, he would step in and settle the dispute. Thus in July Congress sent off the **Olive Branch Petition**. The petition begged the king to stop the war and bring about "a happy and permanent reconciliation." John Adams was disgusted, but he signed it. What good could it do? he wondered.

No good at all, it turned out. The king refused the petition and declared the Americans to be rebels. He announced a blockade of American shipping and the plan to send 10,000 Hessian (German) **mercenaries**—hired soldiers—to fight in America.

CHART SKILLS

What tactic did the colonists use to protest actions of the British Parliament? **CRITICAL THINKING** How might the Intolerable Acts be seen as a response rather than a cause?

CONFLICT WIDENS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

Date	Actions of the British Parliament	Reactions of the Colonists
1763	Issues the Proclamation of 1763 to close the frontier	Resent the Proclamation
1765	Passes the Stamp Act to pay for British troops in the colonies	Boycott British goods; pass Stamp Act Resolves
1766	Repeals the Stamp Act; passes the Declaratory Act to assert its authority	End the boycott
1767	Passes the Townshend Acts to raise more money from colonial imports	Organize new boycotts; clash with British troops in the Boston Massacre (1770)
1773	Passes the Tea Act, giving the East India Company a monopoly on tea trade	Protest the Tea Act by boycotting British tea and staging the Boston Tea Party
1774	Passes the "Intolerable Acts" to tighten British control over Massachusetts	Establish the First Continental Congress; boycott British goods
1775	Orders troops to Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts	Battle British troops; establish the Second Continental Congress and a Continental Army

DRIVING THE BRITISH FROM BOSTON

In Massachusetts George Washington faced the almost impossible task of organizing an army without adequate money, supplies, or arms. There was so little ammunition that when the British fired a cannon ball, the Patriots ran after it, put it in one of their cannons, and fired it back.

The situation changed, however, in February 1776. Eight months earlier a band of Patriots led by Ethan Allen, a New Hampshire land speculator, had seized Fort Ticonderoga in northeastern New York. Fifty-nine of the captured cannon were then dragged 175 miles over mountainous and snowy terrain to the Patriot army outside Boston. With cannons, and the ammunition for them, Washington moved his forces to Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston and began to bombard the city. William Howe, who had succeeded Thomas Gage as commander-in-chief of the British forces, decided to evacuate his troops by sea. With them went about 1,000 American loyalists.

PUSH FOR INDEPENDENCE

Congress, and most Americans, still hesitated to make the final break with Britain. Abigail Adams reflected some of their very legitimate fears when she wrote her husband:

If we separate from Britain, what code of laws will be established? How shall we be governed so as to retain our liberties? . . . Who shall frame these laws? Who will give them force and energy?

In January 1776 a 46-page pamphlet jolted Americans out of their uncertainty. The pamphlet was *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, a recent immigrant. Paine did what no one else had been able to do. His spirited writing encouraged people to sever their attachment to the king. Paine called the king “the Royal Brute” and argued that all monarchies were in fact corrupt. America had its own destiny, Paine argued. “Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation,” he said. “The blood of the slain . . . cries, ‘Tis time to part.’”

Common Sense was an instant success, selling as many as a half a million copies. Never had a book sold so well in America. An upsurge for independence rolled in on Congress like a torrent.

“Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation.”

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

In June 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia presented Congress with several **resolutions**, proposals to be voted on. Lee’s resolutions called for the colonies to (1) become independent states, (2) take measures to form their own foreign alliances, and (3) prepare a plan of confederation.

Not all the delegates were prepared to vote on Lee’s resolutions. Nevertheless, the Congress went ahead and appointed a committee to draft a **Declaration of Independence**. The committee included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson. At 33, Thomas Jefferson was young, but was the best writer of the group. To him, therefore, went the task of writing the Declaration.

On July 1, Congress began debate on Lee’s resolutions. Some delegates, including John Dickinson, were appalled. How could the states consider independence? he asked. It was “like destroying our house in winter . . . before we have got another shelter.” The debate continued the next day, and when the vote was taken, the *ayes* had it. Henceforth the colonies were to be independent states.

Two days later, on July 4, 1776, Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. The core idea of the document was that people have rights that cannot be taken away. John Locke had written books on the subject, but Jefferson expressed it for the ages:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

If a king disregards these God-given rights, Jefferson explained, he becomes a tyrant. The people then have the right to withdraw their allegiance. This was not a step to be taken lightly, and so, in strong and powerful language, Jefferson listed the misdeeds of George III.



In John Trumbull's painting "The Declaration of Independence," John Hancock sits at the desk at right. The drafting committee—(left to right) John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin—stands before him. **CIVIC VALUES** According to the Declaration, how should people respond to a tyrannical ruler?

In conclusion the Declaration declared the colonies to be free and independent states. This was a grave action—treason from the British point of view—and the drafters of the document knew it. In closing, they wrote, "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

Americans had declared independence. Now they had to win it.

★ Historical Documents

For the complete text of the Declaration of Independence, see pages 92–95 of this book.

SECTION REVIEW

- 1. KEY TERMS** Second Continental Congress, Olive Branch Petition, mercenary, resolution, Declaration of Independence
- 2. PEOPLE AND PLACES** Lexington and Concord, Patrick Henry, George Washington, Charlestown, Ethan Allen, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson
- 3. COMPREHENSION** Why did the Continental Congress select Washington as commander-in-chief?
- 4. COMPREHENSION** What resolutions did Richard Henry Lee present to Congress in June 1776? How did Congress vote on these resolutions?
- 5. CRITICAL THINKING** Imagine that you are a Loyalist in 1776. Explain your support of the British government against the colonies.