

PEOPLE OF THE REVOLUTION



On the eve of the American Revolution, British North America was a hugely diverse place. Not only had Native Americans occupied the land for thousands of years already, but immigrants and forced laborers had also been arriving for over a century, bringing their languages, religions, foods, music, and social practices with them. All of these people participated in and had their lives shaped by the American Revolution. And all of these people needed to decide which side, if any, they would choose to support during the turbulent years of protest and war.

EUROPEAN AMERICA

In the early 1760s, British American colonists were happy to be just that — British American. When King George III took the throne in 1760, he became ruler of a British empire that encompassed England and Scotland, and included parts of the Caribbean, North America, and India. British Americans celebrated in the streets. And when the British American colonists and their British brethren successfully defeated the French and their Native American allies in the French and Indian War, they felt proud to be part of the largest, most powerful empire on earth. But, while the British made up the largest single group of Europeans in the colonies, not everyone in British North America, nor the specific land that would become the United States of America, was British.

Traveling through Pennsylvania in the 1760s or 1770s, it would not have been uncommon to hear some dialect of German being spoken or to see a newspaper printed in that language. On the eve of the Revolution, one out of every three Pennsylvanians was German-speaking, and German-speaking peoples could be found throughout the colonies, especially in the Mid-Atlantic and New England. Meanwhile, New York's first colonial name was New Amsterdam, reflecting the presence of the Dutch, which continued into the 18th century, even as others mixed in. The first European colony in Delaware was Swedish, and many of their descendants remained there and traveled elsewhere in the colonies. Scots-Irish settled throughout the colonies, especially in the southern regions, and the British victory in the French and Indian War meant that French residents of the land were now a part of the British Empire as well. All of these people were joined by the Scots, Spanish, Irish, Germans, and others from European regions.

European settlers came to North America for many reasons. Some came looking for religious freedom, seeking safety from persecution based on religious beliefs that others believed were dangerous or wrong. Some came looking for economic opportunity, hoping to make money, and therefore better lives, for themselves in a place that had looser social hierarchies, greater access to land, and more opportunities for proving themselves. This included both those who traveled freely and those who sold themselves as

indentured servants. Other European settlers arrived against their will, shipped from their countries of origin after having been convicted of crimes.

Waves — and trickles — of new immigrants arrived on North American soil over the years, creating a mixture of first-generation European settlers and those who could trace their ancestry back to the first ships to land on the continent's shores. Support for the American cause — or the British — might depend on their relationships to their home countries, their reasons for coming to North America, or the status and power they or their families had gained in the time since they had arrived.

EARLIEST INHABITANTS

The story of British North America did not start, however, with Europeans. Thousands of years before colonists arrived, millions of Native Americans inhabited the land, including the Penobscot and Onondaga in the north, the Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk in the west, the Cherokee and the Coharie in the south, and many more.

They were just as diverse as European colonists in customs and languages. Some nations were hunters and gatherers, roaming the land and setting up camps when and where they needed to. Others had permanent residences and purposefully farmed the land. They did not all worship the same god or gods as one another; they dressed differently depending on the climate and resources of the land on which they lived. The Delaware, or Lenape, in the Mid-Atlantic saw themselves as different from the Choctaw in the Southeast, and even when tribes joined together in confederacies, like the Iroquois Confederacy in what is now New York or the Wabanaki Confederacy in northern New England, the individual nations still made their own decisions.

European contact brought both challenges and opportunities for Native Americans. It opened up trade relationships and brought new goods and materials to Native communities. This included more powerful weapons, useful for ongoing wars and feuds, and was supplemented by new European allies. It also brought disease, as Native peoples were exposed — sometimes accidentally and occasionally on purpose — to germs that their bodies did not know how to fight.

For Native Americans, the decision to support the British or the American Revolutionaries may perhaps have seemed a little clearer than that of their European colonial or African counterparts. As the colonial population grew, it demanded more land and more resources. In 1763, King George III had made clear that he saw both Native Americans and European colonists within the new boundaries of his empire as being under his protection. He told colonists to stop moving further and further west onto Native American land. For many Native peoples, an independent United States posed a far greater threat to their interests and way of life than a continued British presence that restrained westward expansion.

PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

One out of every five people in British North America on the eve of the American Revolution was a person of African descent. Most, but not all, of these men, women and children were enslaved. For some, this meant that they themselves had been captured in Africa and transported against their will to the American colonies, perhaps with a stop in the Caribbean. They might remember their homes, families, and communities, and speak one or more languages from their places of origin, including countries today known as Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, Angola and Côte D'Ivoire. They might bring specialized skills like the knowledge of how to grow and harvest rice or cultivate indigo to create a rich blue dye. Others, however, were third- or perhaps fourth-generation in North America and unused to any other experience. They might speak the language of those Europeans closest to them, including Dutch, French, Spanish and/or English.

Depending on their region and their owners' occupation and class, the work and lives of enslaved people varied greatly. People of African descent living near the coast and in New England were more likely than others to be sailors or work in a job supporting traders and merchants. Those in the southern colonies were more likely to be involved in farming indigo, rice or cotton, while in the Mid-Atlantic, tobacco and wheat farming were a strong possibility. Enslaved people in the North were more likely to live alongside their owners with 1-2 enslaved people in a household, while further south an owner might count many more enslaved people as his or her property, and they were more likely to share housing away from their owners.

Enslaved people in the north, and in cities or towns, were also more likely to encounter and interact with free people of color. Philadelphia, for example, had approximately 1,000 enslaved people in 1775, and another 300-400 free people of African descent. Such examples of freedom, especially in a city where so many Revolutionaries gathered, might have heightened enslaved people's hopes for their own lives. But wherever they were and with whomever they could, people of African descent worked to resist slavery. Before the American Revolution, there were at least 30 known slave rebellions in the Caribbean and North American colonies. The language of the Revolution — that "all men are created equal" — provided a new opportunity to demand change. The chaos of war provided opportunities to seek freedom, wherever the chances seemed best.

Did You Know? The British issued two proclamations, one in 1775 and one in 1779, stating that any enslaved people who were owned by rebels and who would fight with or support the British would be made free and be protected by them. Thousands of people of African descent freed themselves by running to the British Army, like Boston King in South Carolina, and Deborah [last name unknown] in Virginia.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

It's easy to divide the inhabitants of British North America by their place of origin, or status of freedom, but equally important for many of those men, women and children was their religious faith. A defining difference between the French in Canada (and the Spanish in Florida) and the majority of British colonists was that the French and Spanish were Catholic and the British were Protestant. Their nations had been fighting in Europe for centuries, in part due to their differing religious beliefs. But religious diversity in British North America went far beyond this split.

Quakers and Anglicans from England mixed with Moravians and Lutherans from German-speaking regions. Anabaptists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Puritans were also represented across the thirteen colonies. Judaism was practiced by people from various European nations. Some Africans arrived as Christians or adopted Christianity, while others brought Islam and other spiritual practices. Similarly, some Native Americans kept older spiritual belief systems and others adopted Christianity or combined the two, especially if they interacted often with European colonists. Some people were deists, generally believing in God, while others practiced no religion at all.

The varied religious beliefs of British North America's residents helped shape their feelings on war and on the importance of authority. These feelings, in turn, helped shape their ideas about the American Revolution. For example, many Quakers — but not all — were opposed to violence, and tried to stay out of the war. Many Anglicans were taught that the church was an extension of the King's authority, and that to disobey the King was to disobey God's wishes. But it was a mixture of their religious beliefs, relationship to power, and loyalty to their places of origin and to the communities they had built in North America that ultimately shaped colonists' decisions.

There were many stakeholders in North America during the American Revolution, and the stakes were high for people of all backgrounds. What to do, and what their decisions would mean, were dramatic questions, with sometimes life-altering results.

Did You Know? It can be easy to picture the Revolution as a conflict between men, but women were heavily involved! The Daughters of Liberty organized and participated in boycotts and helped manufacture goods when non-importation agreements caused shortages. Women like Esther de Berdt Reed helped raise thousands of dollars for Continental Army soldiers, while women like Mercy Otis Warren used their quills and ink to shape public opinion. Two Kettles Together, an Oneida leader, fought alongside her husband as an ally to the Revolutionaries while Molly Brant, a Mohawk leader, helped support the British. Meanwhile, Abigail Adams pressured her husband John to “remember the ladies” as he helped construct new laws for the newly-independent United States, and women like Mum Bett — who won her freedom in court and changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman — encouraged revolutionaries to apply their ideals to enslaved people of African descent.