

# Transformation and stabilization in post- revolutionary america

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



In the decades immediately following the American Revolution, American society was fundamentally altered socially, politically, and economically as the thirteen separate states embarked on a historically unique journey to build a functional, long-lasting democratic republic. These three spheres of change naturally intersected considerably; any alterations in one arena undoubtedly affected change in other areas of American life. With a new mindset of independence, society grappled with the changes rocking the nation and built a successful, enduring country piece by piece. Throughout the Revolution, the position of American women in society was greatly altered. Granted, women still could not do many things, like buy or sell property, sue or be sued, make wills or contracts, or retain their own wages and property - it all went to their husbands.

Women, in the years leading up to the Revolution, and even more so after, came to be regarded less as necessary evils than as the upholders of American virtue. The concept of "Republican motherhood" held that wives and mothers had an obligation to instill republican virtues in their children, thus shaping the future of the fledgling nation. Literature also shifted to regard women as guardians of sexual virtue, a major shift in cultural conceptions, because for centuries before, the vast majority of male writers painted women as the more dangerous and deceitful sex. As the position of women in American society evolved to include the respectful position of republican child-rearing, many educational reformers began to argue that only independent-minded, educated women could raise the kind of citizens the new nation required, eventually leading to the spread of female literacy. With education finally starting to include American women, Molly Wallace, in

her valedictory address to the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia in 1792, asked: "No one will pretend to deny, that we should be taught to read in the best manner. And if to read, why not to speak?" (Document J).

In fact, women did much more than just speak when a small documented number of them boldly disguised their sex and fought alongside men in the Revolutionary War, while others stayed at home and undertook all of the tasks usually completed by men, running households, farms, and businesses entirely on their own. The exemplary "Patriot woman" can be seen in a woodcut from 1779: she stands erect in her long dress and hat, gunpowder horn in one hand and a rifle in the other (Document A). During the era of war, recognition of gender equality was finally beginning – although women would not earn their suffrage for another 140 years. The Revolutionary era also saw changes in the conditions of slavery in American society; it became difficult to ignore such a glaring issue in the midst of so much talk of freedom, independence, and the natural rights of man. The Northwest Ordinance notably outlawed slavery throughout the region, despite still providing for the return of fugitive slaves to their owners (Document H).

No southern state legally abolished slavery – in the name of republicanism, masters preserved their right to hold human property – but between 1776 and 1789, most southern states joined the North in prohibiting the importation of slaves, and antislavery societies began cropping up. With a shift from tobacco to wheat production in the Chesapeake, some planters in the Upper South even freed their slaves, as wheat required far less labor to cultivate. Despite such germs of change, black slaves were still considered

only three-fifths of a person in population counts, and even less human in the eyes of their white masters. Given all of the contributions blacks and women made to American society throughout the Revolution, it is truly a wonder that both groups were still deprived of some most basic political and human rights. Other aspects of American society were affected as well; while Loyalists were bitterly scorned following the war (“ Instantly banish every Tory from among you”, the Pennsylvania Packet urged Americans), progression in religious freedom was apparent in documents like the Statutes at Large of Virginia in 1786: “ all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion” (Document B; Document D). Immediately following separation from Britain, Americans were convinced of the dangers of strong executive powers and their seemingly inevitable evolution into tyranny.

As such, revolutionaries sought to form a government as antithetical to Britain’s as possible, establishing state constitutions that granted almost no power to governors and ratifying the Articles of Confederation in 1781, which called for no distinct executive branch. Congress could not even regulate trade or levy taxes, and financial matters were left entirely to the states. American revolutionaries had essentially created a loose group of semi-autonomous states under a nearly powerless national government. The weaknesses of such an establishment became clearer over time, as governments lacked the power necessary to suppress the civil unrest that was taking place in areas throughout the states. In a letter to Thomas

Jefferson in 1787, Abigail Adams expressed deep concerns about her home state of Massachusetts, writing, “ the tumults in my native state.

.. have been carried to so alarming a height as to stop the courts of justice in several counties. Ignorant, restless desperados, without conscience or principles, have led a deluded multitude to follow their standard, under pretense of grievances which have no existence but in their imaginations” (Document G). Such a disorganized state of affairs extended to American relations with Indian nations, whom they categorically disregarded and disrespected the rights of. In July of 1783, the Chickasaw Chiefs delivered a message to Congress in which they said “ it makes our hearts rejoice... to find that our Brothers the Americans are inclined to take us by the hand, and smoke with us by the great fire, which we hope will never be extinguished” (Document C).

Unfortunately, the aforementioned fire was put out rather quickly. A few months later, in September of 1783, the Treaty of Paris was signed in France, officially ending the Revolutionary War, despite actual fighting on American soil having ceased in 1781. Americans, proud of their new independence, focused on the issues inherent in the establishment of a new nation, and likely tainted by prejudice, largely ignored Indian rights and did not make much of an attempt at fostering friendly relations. The United Indian Nations delivered a new speech at the Confederate Council in 1786, in which they voiced their frustrations: “ It is now more than three years since peace was made... we, the Indians, were disappointed, finding ourselves not included in that peace...You kindled your council fires where you thought proper, without

consulting us, at which you held separate treaties and have entirely neglected our plan of having a general conference with the different nations of the confederacy” (Document E). When the Northwest Ordinance was issued in 1787, it completely ignored the fact that many Indian tribes were already living in the territory then newly being offered to American citizens.

Despite the Indian’s rightful frustration, the main threats to the survival of America as a republic still lay in the instability of government. With no power to regulate trade, wages, or prices, and no power to tax, Congress was powerless as paper money depreciated rapidly during and at the end of the war. Conflicts continued following the war, because the Confederation was unable to set coherent economic policy or conduct foreign affairs properly as long as the states remained sovereign. Following the upset of Shays’s Rebellion in 1786, movement for reform was finally spurred and a meeting was called to revise the Articles of Confederation. Finally, the delegates at this meeting constructed a new Constitution and provided for a strong, independent executive power who would have command over the armed forces, the power to veto, and authority to conduct diplomatic relations.

In order to avoid the excessive displays of power so feared by Americans, a system of checks and balances was put into place, wherein the different branches of government would be charged with keeping the others within the bounds of their constitutionally granted authority. James Madison, in response to anti-Federalist protests to such a powerful central government, put forth his argument in the Federalist Papers, remarking, “ If men were angels, no government would be necessary”, but, seeing that men indeed

were not angels, “ you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself” (Document I). Finally, an entirely new framework was laid out for a truly national government, complete with an independent executive and separated powers who were at last capable of exercising some power over the people. Economically, the war left the nascent nation with new advantages and disadvantages. During the war, the loss of British markets, goods, and cash flow were an automatic disruption, but what followed the war was perhaps even worse. Exports to Britain were restricted and trade with the Sugar Colonies of the West Indies was prohibited, dealing a huge blow to America’s trading system established before the Revolution.

Meanwhile, cheap manufactured goods from England and France were flooding the states, further hurting the U. S. economy as American-made items were largely ignored. The country was crippled by issues with currency (paper money was virtually worthless) and huge debts racked up during the war. Slowly, a commercial economy evolved in cities and towns, while for the most part the population remained rural.

“ Venerate the Plough”, the message imprinted on the Medal of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture (Document F), demonstrates how agrarianism remained prevalent – even revered – in America after achieving independence, despite farmers feeling cheated by new economic policy; many small farms were still in great financial trouble, and legislation favoring creditors over the farmers sparked discontent that manifested in uprisings like Shays’s Rebellion in the summer of 1786,

providing the final impetus for delegates assembling to “revise” the Articles of Confederation. Years later, resolutions to the financial crisis were found when Federalists won with the adoption of Hamilton’s new financial system, which was successful in stabilizing the economy, curbing inflation and stabilizing the currency. In 1791, he secured from Congress excises taxes on a few items, notably whiskey – piquing Pennsylvania distillers and leading to the Whiskey Rebellion. Washington’s swift suppression of the rebellion commanded new respect for the government, the nation’s credit was restored, and the young republic was at last finding some stable footing. Building a nation from the ground up sounds like an impossible feat – and in fact, America seemed at several points in time precariously close to failing. However, sweeping elemental changes evolutionized politics, societal construction, and the economy, enabling an unprecedented national form to arise.

By 1800, a solid twenty-four years of independence under their belts, Americans had established a powerful, respected central government, cleaned up its economic reputation, and evolved substantially as a society, fundamentally setting up the country on a good path for the years to come.