5.6: The Consequences of the American Revolution

Like the earlier distinction between “origins” and “causes,” the Revolution also had short- and long-term consequences. Perhaps the most important immediate consequence of declaring independence was the creation of state constitutions in 1776 and 1777. The Revolution also unleashed powerful political, social, and economic forces that would transform the new nation’s politics and society, including increased participation in politics and governance, the legal institutionalization of religious toleration, and the growth and diffusion of the population, particularly westward. The Revolution affected Native Americans by opening up western settlement and creating governments hostile to their territorial claims. Even more broadly, the Revolution ended the mercantilist economy, opening new opportunities in trade and manufacturing.

The new states drafted written constitutions, which, at the time, was an important innovation from the traditionally unwritten British Constitution. These new state constitutions were based on the idea of “popular sovereignty,” that is, that the power and authority of the government derived from the people. Most created weak governors and strong legislatures with more regular elections and moderately increased the size of the electorate. A number of states followed the example of Virginia and included a declaration or “bill” of rights in their constitution designed to protect the rights of individuals and circumscribe the prerogative of the government. Pennsylvania’s first state constitution was the most radical and democratic. They created a unicameral legislature and an Executive Council but no genuine executive. All free men could vote, including those who did not own property. Massachusetts’s constitution, passed in 1780, was less democratic in structure but underwent a more popular process of ratification. In the fall of 1779, each town sent delegates—312 in all—to a constitutional convention in Cambridge. Town meetings debated the constitution draft and offered suggestions. Anticipating the later federal constitution, Massachusetts established a three-branch government based on checks and balances between the branches. Independence came in 1776, and so did an unprecedented period of constitution making and state building.

The Continental Congress ratified the Articles of Confederation in 1781. The articles allowed each state one vote in the
Continental Congress. But the articles are perhaps most notable for what they did not allow. Congress was given no power to levy or collect taxes, regulate foreign or interstate commerce, or establish a federal judiciary. These shortcomings rendered the postwar Congress weak and largely ineffectual.

Political and social life changed drastically after independence. Political participation grew as more people gained the right to vote, leading to greater importance being placed on representation within government. In addition, more common citizens (or “new men”) played increasingly important roles in local and state governance. Hierarchy within the states underwent significant changes. Society became less deferential and more egalitarian, less aristocratic and more meritocratic.

The Revolution’s most important long-term economic consequence was the end of mercantilism. The British Empire had imposed various restrictions on the colonial economies including limiting trade, settlement, and manufacturing. The Revolution opened new markets and new trade relationships. The Americans’ victory also opened the western territories for invasion and settlement, which created new domestic markets. Americans began to create their own manufactures, no longer content to rely on those in Britain.

Despite these important changes, the American Revolution had its limits. Following their unprecedented expansion into political affairs during the imperial resistance, women also served the patriot cause during the war. However, the Revolution did not result in civic equality for women. Instead, during the immediate postwar period, women became incorporated into the polity to some degree as “republican mothers.” Republican societies required virtuous citizens, and it became mothers’ responsibility to raise and educate future citizens. This opened opportunity for women regarding education, but they still remained largely on the peripheries of the new American polity.
Approximately sixty thousand loyalists ended up leaving America because of the Revolution. Loyalists came from all ranks of American society, and many lived the rest of their lives in exile from their homeland. A clause in the Treaty of Paris was supposed to protect their property and require the Americans to compensate Loyalists who had lost property during the war because of their allegiance. The Americans, however, reneged on this promise and, throughout the 1780s, states continued seizing property held by Loyalists. Some colonists went to England, where they were strangers and outsiders in what they had thought of as their mother country. Many more, however, settled on the peripheries of the British Empire throughout the world, especially Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec. The Loyalists had come out on the losing side of a Revolution, and many lost everything they had and were forced to create new lives far from the land of their birth.  

In 1783, thousands of Loyalist former slaves fled with the British army. They hoped that the British government would uphold the promise of freedom and help them establish new homes elsewhere in the Empire. The Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, demanded that British troops leave runaway slaves behind, but the British military commanders upheld earlier promises and evacuated thousands of freedmen, transporting them to Canada, the Caribbean, or Great Britain. They would eventually play a role in settling Nova Scotia, and through the subsequent efforts of David George, a black loyalist and Baptist preacher, some settled in Sierra Leone in Africa. Black loyalists, however, continued to face social
and economic marginalization, including restrictions on land ownership within the British Empire.  

The fight for liberty led some Americans to manumit their slaves, and most of the new northern states soon passed gradual emancipation laws. Some manumissions also occurred in the Upper South, but in the Lower South, some masters revoked their offers of freedom for service, and other freedmen were forced back into bondage. The Revolution’s rhetoric of equality created a “revolutionary generation” of slaves and free black Americans that would eventually encourage the antislavery movement. Slave revolts began to incorporate claims for freedom based on revolutionary ideals. In the long term, the Revolution failed to reconcile slavery with these new egalitarian republican societies, a tension that eventually boiled over in the 1830s and 1840s and effectively tore the nation in two in the 1850s and 1860s. 

Native Americans, too, participated in and were affected by the Revolution. Many Native American groups, such as the Shawnee, Creek, Cherokee, and Iroquois, had sided with the British. They had hoped for a British victory that would continue to restrain the land-hungry colonial settlers from moving west beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Unfortunately, the Americans’ victory and Native Americans’ support for the British created a pretense for justifying rapid and often brutal expansion into the western territories. Native American peoples would continue to be displaced and pushed farther west throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, American independence marked the beginning of the end of what had remained of Native American independence.
Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): Joseph Brandt as painted by George Romney. Brandt was a Mohawk leader who led Mohawk and British forces in western New York. [Wikimedia](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/National_History/Book%3A_U.S._History_(American_YAWP)/05%3A_The__).