
How Revolutionary Was the American Revolution?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

How Revolutionary Was the American Revolution?

Directions: The word *revolution* means change. We know that the Revolutionary War brought some change to America – but just what kind, and how much? These are the questions raised by this DBQ.



There are several steps to forming an educated opinion.

1. Read the Background Essay. It provides a context for answering the question.
2. Skim through the 10 documents to see what they are about. Many are short.
3. Read the documents slowly. For each, use the margin space or a Document Analysis Sheet to record:
 - a. Who or what is the source? Is it a primary or secondary source?
 - b. What is the main idea of the document?
4. Redefine the analytical question in your own terms. What precisely are you looking for in these documents?
5. Organize the documents into analytical categories, such as politics, economics, and social groups. You may discover subcategories within these larger ones. Where, for example, would you place land reform? the status of women?
6. Make judgments on the amount of change in each category or subcategory.

The Documents:

Document 1: La Destruction de la Statue Royale

Document 2: "We hold these truths..."

Document 3: Billiards in Hanover-Town

Document 4: Six Legislatures

Document 5: Abolition

Document 6: Valedictorian of a New York Free School

Document 7: Abigail Adams

Document 8: 19th Amendment

Document 9: Northwest Ordinance

Document 10: Letter from Three Seneca Leaders

How Revolutionary Was the American Revolution?

The American Revolution, also called the War for Independence, took place between 1775 and 1783. It was a fight between 13 British colonies and their mother country, England. At the time, England was the most powerful country in the world. To the great surprise of many, the war was won by the 13 colonies who named themselves the United States of America.

The American Revolution left its mark on the land and in some familiar names, including The Philadelphia 76ers; The New England Patriots; Washington, D.C.; Madison, Wisconsin; The 4th of July; Sam Adams beer; Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis; Pulaski Day in Illinois; and the TV show "The Jeffersons." In fact, thousands of American teams, towns, counties, streets, schools, and families can trace their names to the American Revolution.

The Revolution has also left us with stories – Washington's men walking barefoot through the snow to Valley Forge, 16-year-old boys facing Redcoat musket balls at 40 paces, black slaves torn by the decision to support the American cause of national freedom or fight for the British and the hope of personal freedom.

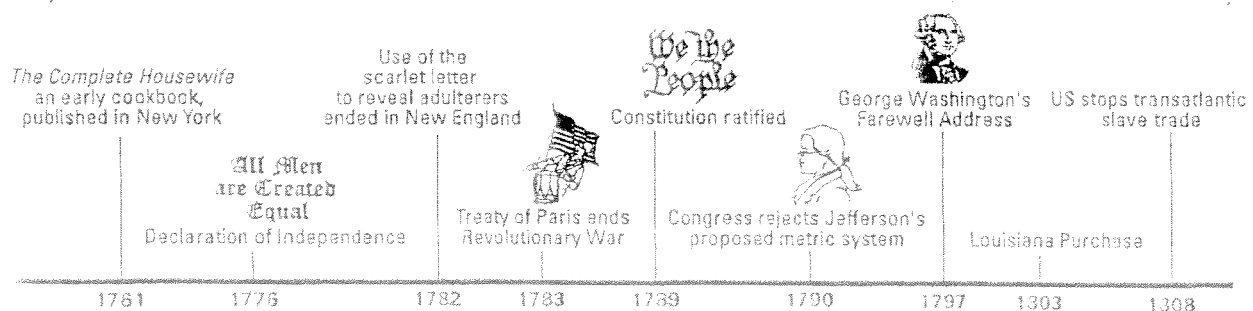
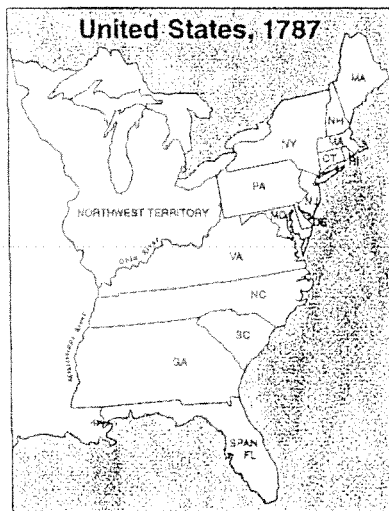
But beyond the names and stories, was the American Revolution truly a revolution? That is, did the Revolution produce big, long-lasting changes? Over the years, historians have disagreed about this. One group of historians has argued that the Revolution was not very revolu-

tionary. These historians see the Revolution as **conservative**. They believe American revolutionary leaders tried to conserve, or hold onto, many of the old ways. These historians admit we got our political independence from England but there was no big **social** or **economic** revolution. There was no class war where the poor destroyed the rich. In fact, what really happened, they argue, is that one group of rich white male American leaders, like Washington and Jefferson, took over from another group of rich white male leaders – King George and the members of British Parliament. Some famous historians like Charles Beard, Edmond Morgan, and Howard Zinn see it this way.

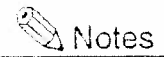
A second group of historians sees things differently. They see the Revolution as more **radical**, producing some big changes above and beyond independence. Historians in this group include J. Franklin Jameson, Alfred E. Young, and Gordon Wood. These historians say that because of the

war, people thought of themselves in a new way. For example, poor people felt more equal to rich people. Also some Americans began to seriously question slavery.

It seems clear, therefore, that the debate over the American Revolution of 1776 carries into the 21st century. Examine the 10 documents that follow and join the ongoing discussion of how much big, permanent change the Revolutionary War produced. That is, *How revolutionary was the American Revolution?*



Document 1



Source: La Destruction de la Statue Royale a Nouvelle Yorck. Reprinted by permission of Library of Congress. Print by Andre Bassett, 1770s, LC-USZ62-22023.



Document 2



Source: *The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America*.
Congress, July 4, 1776.

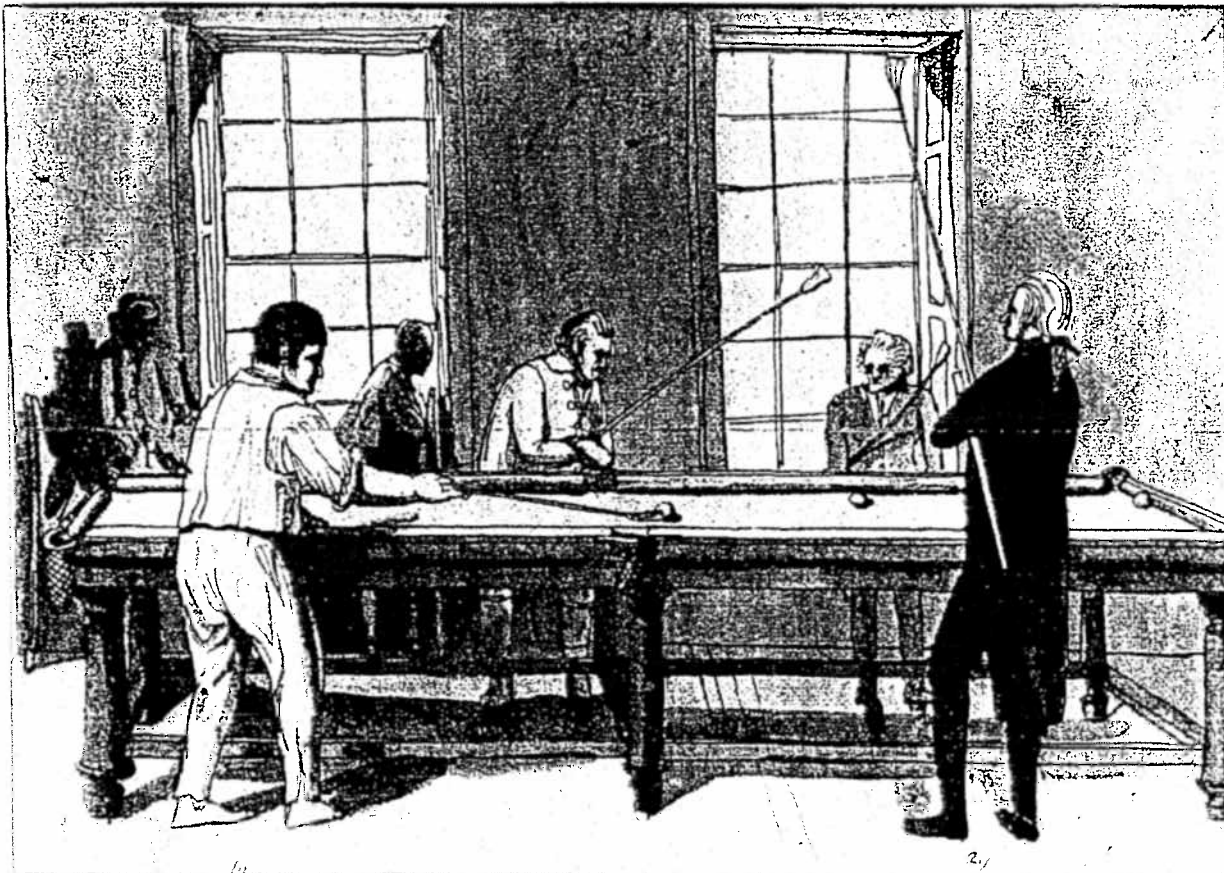
We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....

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Document 3

Source: Drawing by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, November, 1797. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Md.

Billiards in Hanover-Town (Virginia)



Document 4



Source: Adapted from Jackson Turner Main, "Government by the People: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures." *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 23, 1966.

Reprinted by permission of *William and Mary Quarterly*.

Economic Status of the Representatives in Six Colonial/State Legislatures

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N.H., N.Y., and N.J.	1765	1785
WEALTHY	36%	12%
WELL-TO-DO	47%	26%
MODERATE	17%	62%
POOR	0%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%

MD., VA., and S.C.	1765	1785
WEALTHY	52%	28%
WELL-TO-DO	36%	42%
MODERATE	12%	30%
POOR	0%	0%
TOTAL	100%	100%

KEY: Wealthy.....Over £5000

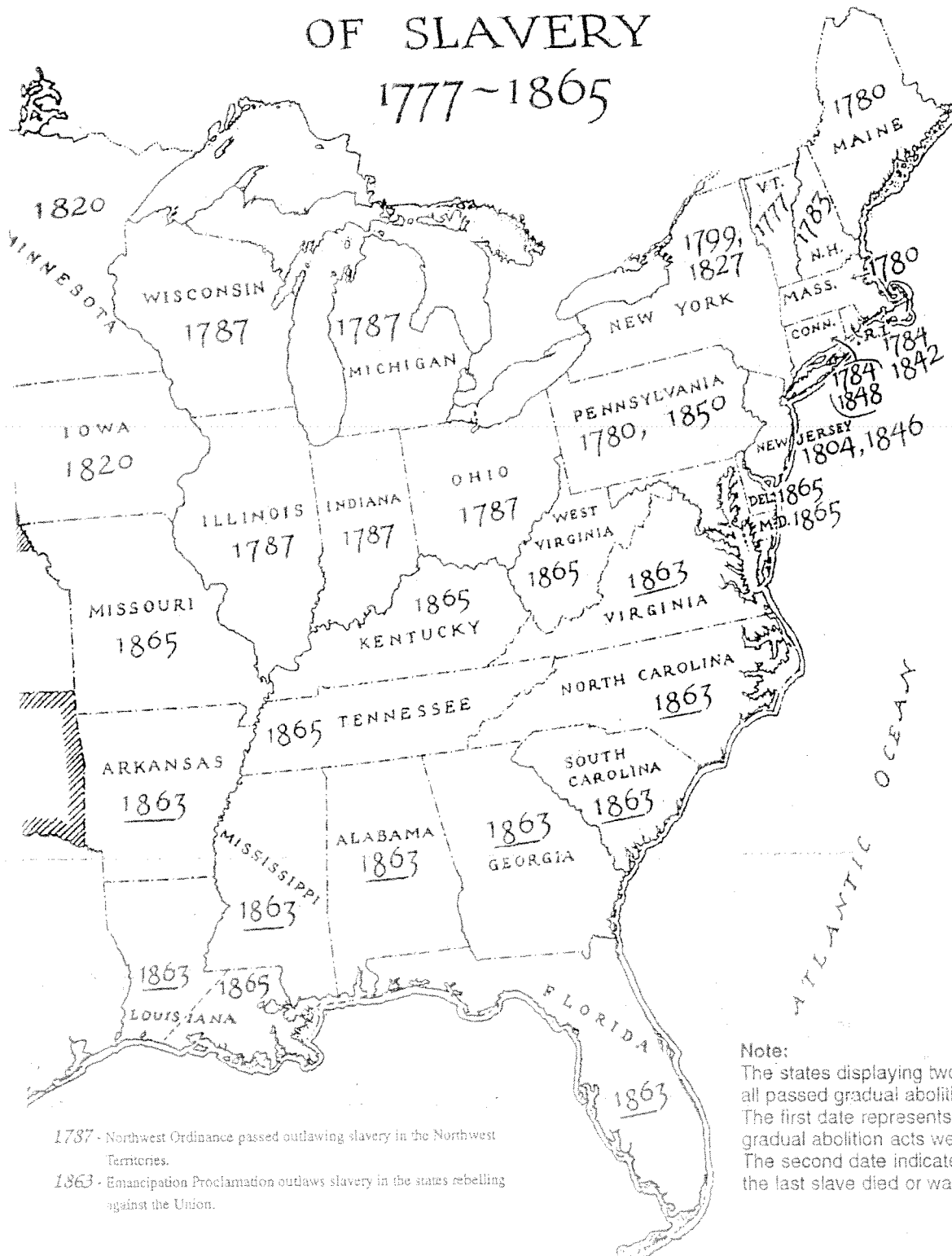
Well-to-do.....£2000 - £5000

Moderate.....£500 - £2000

Poor.....£0 - £500

£ = British Pound

THE ABOLITION
OF SLAVERY
1777~1865



Document 6



Source: Andrews, *History of the New York African Free-Schools*. Reprinted in Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 1961.

Speech made by a young African-American in 1819,
valedictorian of his New York free school

Why should I strive hard and acquire all the constituents of a man if the prevailing genius of the land admit me not as such, or but in an inferior degree! Pardon me if I feel insignificant and weak... Where are my prospects? To what shall I turn my hand? Shall I be a mechanic? No one will employ me; white boys won't work with me. Shall I be a merchant? No one will have me in his office; white clerks won't associate with me. Drudgery and servitude, then, are my prospective portion. Can you be surprised at my discouragement?

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Document 7

Source: Abigail Adams' letter to her husband John Adams, March 31, 1776. *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*.

Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Adams Family Correspondence*, Volume I, edited by L.A. Butterfield, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright (c) 1963 by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

...in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or Representation.

Document 8

Source: United States Constitution, Amendment 19 (1920).

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Document 9



Source: *Northwest Ordinance*, 1787.

"Utmost Good Faith" Clause from the Northwest Ordinance, 1787

The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress....

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Document 10

Source: *Great Documents in American Indian History*. Wayne Maquin and Charles Van Doren, editors, 1973.

Letter from three Seneca Indian leaders – Big Tree, Cornplanter, and Half-Town – to President of the United States, George Washington, 1790

When your army entered the country of the Six (Iroquois) Nations, we called you the town destroyer; to this day, when your name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling to the necks of their mothers....

You told us you could crush us to nothing; and you demanded from us a great country.... Our chiefs had felt your power...and they therefore gave up that country.... (W)e ask you to consider calmly – Were the terms dictated to us by your commissioners reasonable and just?...

All the land we have been speaking of belonged to the Six Nations. No part of it ever belonged to the king of England, and he could not give it to you.

Note: The Seneca along with the other Iroquois nations fought on the British side during the Revolution.

