

# The Social and Intellectual Legacy of the American Revolution

by Gary B. Nash



*“Entrance of the American Army into New York, Novr. 25th, 1783,” published by Virtue, Emmins & Co., New York, 1859. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)*

“We can see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used. We are now really another people, and cannot again go back to ignorance and prejudice. The mind once enlightened cannot again become dark.” This is how Tom Paine, the consummate pamphleteer of the American Revolutionary cause, reflected on how the long war with Great Britain pushed Americans into a concurrent search for a new and durable society based on ideas of liberty and equality.

Not everyone wanted such a double revolution—one of independence, the other of a reformed and revitalized society. In fact, many colonists didn’t even want to split from mother England and strike out on their own as a separate nation. Among those who decided to make the plunge, often reluctantly, many wanted a limited revolution, confined to achieving independence. But many more were unwilling to stake their lives and property for such a limited revolution; instead, they wanted a more democratic political system, where ordinary people had voice and vote, and a society cleansed of bondage, exploitation, and the yawning gulf between rich and poor that had gradually developed by the late colonial period. It was this splintering among those who craved independence that made the revolutionary era of almost two decades so filled with ideas, agendas for reform, and resistance to change. Paine said it best for those who hoped for a democratized society: “Can America be happy under a government of her own,” he asked. “As happy as she please,” he answered rhetorically; “she hath a blank sheet to write upon.”

Upon that blank sheet—wiped clean by the obliteration of legislative assemblies and courts of law at the moment independence was declared—the reformist wing of the American Revolutionists began to inscribe plans for striking at the heart of colonial inequalities and conservative governmental structures. The reformers were met with plenty of resistance from social, economic, and political conservatives, and they by no means reached all their goals. Much of what they hoped to do was unprecedented in the Euro-American world, and the boldness of it astounded even Enlightenment thinkers in Europe who yearned for a better age.

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Nobody put pen to paper to carve out a systematic plan for thoroughgoing reform. Rather, different groups, different men and women, different organizations, each with their own experiences and hopes for the future, espoused a variety of changes.

The most extensive of these reform agendas concerned the reshaping of political life. In some states, the franchise was extended in newly penned state constitutions to all free adult males, regardless of whether they held property or not. In other states, legislative assemblies were opened to the public and sometimes proposed laws were sent back to the electorate for comment before final passage. In other cases, property requirements for holding office were lowered or even eliminated. Other innovations—intended to make elected legislators and other office holders strictly accountable to their constituents— included annual elections, unicameral legislative bodies, term limits for elected officials, and paper ballots meant to do away with the voice voting (in which an ordinary person might fear casting a vote that would anger an employer, landlord, or lender). All of this shifted the center of political gravity downward, in some areas bringing into the theater of politics plain farmers, artisans, mariners, and even unskilled workers. In one state, New Jersey, the vote was extended to free, adult women, at least for several decades. At the extreme margins of society in the new nation, public officials were to be unsalaried. Well before the advent of Jacksonian politics, the so-called age of the common man, a democratized polity was well underway. The “people out of doors” now forced themselves inside, where the “respectable” men of worth had long held sway.

In the vision of a reformed and revitalized America, the abolition of slavery had special significance, since about one-fifth of the population was enslaved. African Americans fought on both sides of the Revolution, but it was the British who offered freedom to the enslaved who fled their owners and reached the British lines. This led to a massive upheaval of the entrenched system of slavery. White abolitionists, sure that a new republic could never survive if it remained false to its founding ideology of inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” pushed their cause. Led especially by members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, founded in 1775, anti-slavery advocates succeeded in putting slavery on the road to extinction in the northern states, where gradual abolition laws and court decisions took hold. This was not true in the southern states, where private manumission of slaves created sizeable populations of free blacks but did not prevent the number of the enslaved from growing rapidly after the Revolution. Nonetheless, the lamp of liberty had been lit and the hunger for freedom continued. For those who had thrown off the shackles of slavery by fighting with the British, freedom had to be pursued on other shores—in Nova Scotia, in England, and in the newly established Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa. Meanwhile, black leaders such as Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Prince Hall, and Peter Williams emerged from the shadows in northern cities, where independent black churches and schools worked to forge the bone and sinew of free black communities.

Women were among those who thought hard about Paine’s words in *Common Sense* that “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.” To be sure, most women on the eve of revolution did not dare to think about a future where women were admitted to the public sphere or even presume to regard themselves as possessing the same intellectual capacities as men. But some did, and now they vigorously took up the matters of gender inequality and injustice. Among them were two Massachusetts women, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, the latter one of the first historians of the American Revolution. Adams expressed the belief that the laws had to be rewritten to criminalize wife beating and extend property rights to women after marriage.

Another forward-looking Massachusetts “daughter of liberty,” Judith Sargent Murray called for the new nation to honor “the rights of women,” including access to what she called “a liberal education,” the right to vote and hold office, the right to exercise their capabilities as shopkeepers, printers, farmers, craftspersons, and even preachers with spiritual gifts. In her view, only male pretended superiority and the customary subjection of women to male authority held women in thrall. The “daughters of Columbia,”

wrote Murray a decade after the Revolution, were “equally concerned with men in the public weal,” and indeed it was female reformers such as Murray who led women out of the domestic sphere to which they had been confined and into the public realm. Many men widely deplored and resisted this invasion of the public sphere, and Murray’s insistence that women were the intellectual and spiritual equals of men kept more than a few marriage partners—John and Abigail Adams are prominent examples—in a state of tension for many years. Thirty-five years after she first told John to “remember the ladies,” Abigail Adams was still berating her aging husband about the need to “destroy the foundation of all pretensions of the gentlemen to superiority over the ladies” and “restore liberty, equality, and fraternity between the sexes.”

Among other crusaders for freedom were those who took up the causes of free speech, free public education, a free press, and freedom of religion. Though Madison and Jefferson are usually given credit for the “free exercise of religion,” it was persecuted Baptists such as John Waller and James Ireland who applied most of the pressure from below. In New York, the newspaper printer Thomas Greenleaf, succeeded by his widow, was instrumental in wrenching freedom of the press from those who feared what they regarded as libelous attacks on the rich and powerful. In other places, men such as Benjamin Rush in Pennsylvania and Robert Coram in Delaware promoted free public education at the taxpayers’ expense—and the idea that breaking the hold of a narrow portion of society who had the means to pay for a private education would give way to an aristocracy of talent drawn from different levels of society.

Perhaps in no other era of American history have so many people felt that they could participate in reshaping their society, in casting aside traditional ways of governing or being governed, in opening their minds to new ways of imagining the future. Some of the reformist ideas died aborning. Others were implemented in part, sometimes in a few states, not at all in others. A few, such as woman suffrage, were tried in only one part of the new nation—only to be revoked after a trial period. As in the case of almost all revolutionary cauldrons, much was left to the future. Yet once a lantern had been lit, its glow continued, for an idea, once enunciated, is almost impossible to suppress. Paine liked to call these ideas “sparks from the altar of ’76,” sparks that would remain as embers to be fanned into fire by later generations.

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**Gary B. Nash** is professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Los Angeles and Director of the National Center for History in the Schools. His books include *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution (1979)*; *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America (2005)*; *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution (2006)*; and *The Liberty Bell (2010)*.

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