

The Unknown American Revolution

Course Overview\Course Goals

Teaching young students about the causes, the flow, and the consequences of the American Revolution is an essential part of becoming an active citizen in the American democracy. In order to reach judgments about how revolutionary the American Revolution actually was, this course will examine the long struggle through different sets of eyes—Native Americans, enslaved and free African Americans, and white women and men of different social classes, religions, ideological dispositions, occupations, and regions. Through this course, teachers will explore the impact of the unsung and of lesser-known Americans in the revolution.

Delivered over six weeks, each module features a different aspect of skill building and important questions to address:

Module 1: Women and the Revolution: Engagement and Reform

Module 2: Native Americans and the Revolution

Module 3: African Americans and the Revolution

Module 4: State Constitution Making

Module 5: Washington's Continental Army

Module 6: Assessing the Revolution

Each module includes a video lecture, a PowerPoint lecture, readings, discussion questions for the online forum, and selected activities involving skills and strategies learned in the module.

Course Teaching Methods

This course meets online for six weeks. There is no designated meeting time and work may be done at participants' convenience; however, there are specific deadlines that must be met. Students will be evaluated primarily based on their participation in the discussion forum.

The supplemental reading recommended for this course is *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, 1st Edition (Knopf, 2011), edited by Alfred F. Young, Ray Raphael, and Gary Nash.

Summary of Course Modules:

Sometimes calling the chapter on the American Revolution “the War of Independence,” these schoolbooks drain the revolution of its other side—the internal struggle that divided colonists sharply as the unruly birth of democracy unfolded. Of course, the War of Independence—an external military conflict—was at the heart of the American Revolution, but the war within this war involved men and women of many hues, different colonial experiences, and dreams of a different America as they clashed sharply. Should they win the war, what would they want their children and grandchildren to inherit by way of government, the labor system, the practice of religion, education, gender relations, and a host of other elements that bind a society together or obstruct its unity?

Module 1: Women and the Revolutionary Struggle

Textbooks nod toward Molly Pitcher, Abigail Adams, and Betsy Ross for singular contributions to the “Glorious Cause” (Betsy Ross’s is apocryphal). What’s missing is the critical role women played in the boycotts of English imported goods, in the “food riots” they conducted to hold profiteering merchants to account during wartime shortages of foodstuffs, and in their campaigns for greater women’s rights and responsibilities. Teachers will read essays from the supplemental text for this course—*Revolutionary Founders*—and the *Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution* and see how several primary documents highlight female perspectives on the revolution and their engagement in the issues at hand.

Module 2: Native Americans and the Revolution

Native Americans fill little space in textbook accounts of the American Revolution; yet they played highly significant roles as allies of both the Americans and the British (though overwhelmingly with the latter). Why they remained loyal to King George III is in itself an important question to explore. Moreover, the policies of the Continental Congress are worthy of attention, as are how the outcome of the revolution affected the many tribes east of the Mississippi River. Teachers will read essays in *Revolutionary Founders*—on Oneida leaders who sided with the Americans and Dragging Canoe, the Cherokee leader who fought alongside the British—and in the *Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*. Key documents to be explored include the clause in the Declaration of Independence relating to Indian hostility, Washington’s instructions to General Sullivan relating to a scorched earth policy toward the Iroquois, and other documents that set the course for federal Indian policy after the war.

Module 3: The African Americans and the Revolution

Representing 20 percent of the colonial population, men and women of African descent are the “forgotten fifth” of the Revolution. Textbooks touch lightly on the important black involvement in the struggle for independence and the prolonged campaign, as one American leader put it, “to begin the world anew.” Aided by Hollywood accounts, the public awareness of black participation in the war focuses on Crispus Attucks, Phyllis Wheatley, and perhaps another black patriot. In reading essays in the *Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution* and from *Revolutionary Founders*, teachers will acquire an understanding of why the vast majority of black Americans sided with the British while pursuing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness on their own terms. Also, by examining freedom petitions, Benjamin Banneker’s letter to Jefferson, and excerpts from several anti-slavery essays, teachers will discover how the Revolution prompted a fiery debate on how the new republic, founded on universal “natural rights,” could thrive while a fifth of its population remained in chains.

Module 4: State Constitution Making

Tom Paine asked rhetorically, “Can America be happy under a government of its own?” and replied by saying “As happy as she wishes; she has a blank sheet to write upon.” At the crux of the internal struggle that accompanied the armed conflict with England for independence was the matter of writing on the clean sheet—namely, writing state constitutions to replace the colonial charters wiped out by declaring independence. Textbooks surprisingly pay almost no attention to this ultimate exercise of applying the natural rights philosophy to the business of structuring representative governments. Teachers will read chapter 6 of Gary Nash’s *The Unknown American Revolution* on the boisterous process of creating a wide variety of state constitutions and look at primary sources.

Module 5: Assessing the Revolution

It is right and proper to celebrate the successful war to wrest independence from England, but it is also essential for students understand and evaluate the internal contest for structuring the new nation. This will require students to hone critical thinking skills—a prerequisite for active citizenship in the republic. After absorbing the Standards in Historical Thinking from the *National Standards for U.S. History* (1996), teachers will reflect on how to help their students apply these thinking skills in reaching evidence-based judgments about the accomplishments and failures of the Continental Congress, and the extent to which the revolutionary goals of different groups were achieved and how the Revolution altered social, political, and economic relations among them. Applicable to all other chapters of American history, such thinking skills as “differentiating between historical facts and historical interpretations,” (Standard 3C), considering multiple

perspectives” (Standard 3D), and challenging arguments of historical inevitability” (Standard 3F) are at the heart of historical literacy.

Module 6: Assessing the Revolution

Grade 5–12 textbooks do their best in describing the ebb and flow of American military fortunes in the contest for independence. However, students learn very little about who did most of the fighting, most of the bleeding, and most of the dying in Washington’s Continental Army. This week is devoted to understanding of whom Washington’s army was composed—ethnically, racially, and socially—and how they changed during eight long years of war. Attention will be given to the female camp followers and the overseas “Friends of Liberty” who provided essential military engineering skills. Teachers will read excerpts from Private Joseph Martin’s fascinating account of what enlisted men endured, how some deserted and mutinied, and how, in the end, his “band of brothers” prevailed.