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Page: 1

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This screenshot shows the results of a search in the database America's Historical Newspapers. We used the term *slavery* and limited the date range to July 4, 1776. Users can easily customize the date range as well as many other variables, e.g. publication name, type of article (including news, opinion, shipping information, advertising, etc.), and place of publication. All Massachusetts residents can gain access through the Boston Public Library.

Source: Early American Newspapers, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, Inc.

Using Historic Newspaper Databases in the Classroom:

From Primary Sources to Research Assignments

BRAD AUSTIN



Abstract: *This article has two main goals: to introduce Massachusetts history teachers to a remarkable database of historic newspapers and to provide specific ideas about how to use it as a teaching tool. The article explains the advantages of teachers using the America's Historical Newspapers database to find interesting primary sources that connect local people and places with national (and international) themes and events. It describes how teachers can use the database to create an effective research paper project, and it concludes with a lesson plan on the revolutionary era in Massachusetts.¹ Brad Austin teaches U.S. history and coordinates the History Secondary Education Program at Salem State College.*

* * * * *

As an historian who is still relatively new to New England, I am constantly discovering the ways local events and people have shaped the larger narratives of U.S. history, and, as a teacher, I am committed to trying to get my students to share my sense of wonder and fascination with the past and our shared surroundings. This commitment has led me to look for ways to make my world and U.S. history classes seem personally relevant to my students while also teaching vital historical thinking skills. Fortunately, a fantastic resource for connecting individual

towns in Massachusetts with larger U.S. and world history themes exists and is available to all Massachusetts teachers: the America's Historical Newspapers database, produced by Readex (www.readex.com).

In my Methods of Teaching History class, I focus my students' attention on a select few of the many web sites with excellent resources for history teachers. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, produces Edsitement, which offers an interdisciplinary approach to both U.S. and world history topics, and all of its resources and links are vetted by content specialists. San Diego State University's World History for Us All offers a constantly expanding collection of rich teaching resources. All of George Mason University's sites merit attention, but I devote my class time to exploring the lesson plans and "expert analysis" sections within History Matters. Similarly, my students use the National Archives' document analysis guides and related materials, the primary sources of Fordham University's Modern History Sourcebook and its siblings, and the primary sources available at the Library of Congress' American Memory site. They are excellent resources, rich in historical materials and pedagogical guides, and deserve the national audiences they have attracted.

In Massachusetts, however, their utility is matched, if not superseded, by the America's Historical Newspapers (1690-1922) database offered by Newsbank-Readex and accessible online through the Boston Public Library. This searchable database includes 142 Massachusetts newspapers from twenty Massachusetts towns and cities, and it offers remarkable opportunities to make our U.S. and world history classes more personal and interesting for Massachusetts students. It has enabled my students to understand Salem's Federal Era political disputes through contemporaneous examples from partisan newspapers, to explore how "national" and "international" events were received and portrayed locally, and to reconstruct a web of connections that they never suspected had existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I have successfully used these newspapers in two main ways. First, I have researched a topic and presented the selected articles to my students, either in class or as a homework reading assignment. For example, to demonstrate the ferocity of locals' feelings about the wisdom of President Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807, I gave students a brief report from a newspaper explaining that "Last night, a man by the name of *James Clark*, was beat down with a club in *Little-George-Street*, and killed, by the *Jefferson and Embargo* mob." It is one thing for students to read that

people disagreed; it is another to be able to find on a map where someone died locally as the result of a political dispute.²

To illustrate the types of appeals being made in the same year in support of ending the transatlantic slave trade, I've distributed a Swiftian "Petition From the Sharks of Africa" to Parliament, reprinted in Salem. The entire petition seeks to persuade the Members of Parliament that ending the slave trade would unfairly injure their loyal shark constituents. The argument to maintain the slave trade rests upon these, and similar, points:

That by hovering around these floating dungeons your petitioners are supplied with large quantities of their most favourite food — human flesh

That large vessels, crowded with negroes, are sometimes dashed on the rocks and shoals, which about in the regions of your petitioners, whereby hundreds of human beings, both black and white, are at once precipitated into their element, where the gnawing of human flesh, and the crashing of bones, afford to your petitioners the highest gratification which their natures are capable of enjoying.³

The cavalier language shocks my students, leaving them able to appreciate more fully the horrors of the international slave trade and some of the creative tactics used to end it. The fact that this British appeal to the British government appeared in a Salem, Massachusetts, newspaper only highlights the international element of abolitionism and reinforces earlier discussions about the interconnectedness of the Atlantic World.

My students have read the same newspaper accounts of the Boston Massacre, Shays' Rebellion, and Fisher Ames' eulogy to Washington as did residents of our city more than two centuries ago. They have had to struggle with both the language and the typeface, but they have also come to appreciate the ways that using these materials makes our nation's history feel more relevant than before.

The Historical Newspapers database deserves attention for its pedagogical "hooks" and local history sources, but, even more importantly, it empowers students to conduct "real" research and lends itself perfectly to imaginative research assignments. It also allows students to make surprising discoveries while helping them to understand the narratives presented in most traditional classes and textbooks. The fact that Massachusetts teachers can use this database to craft very specific

research assignments and, thereby, remove the temptation for students to look for completed essays online, is yet another benefit.

So, how does the assignment work? I begin by asking students to read an entire edition of a newspaper published in Massachusetts before 1877 and to relate the contents to the larger themes and events that we have been discussing in class. They are free to look for local reactions to “big” events, to choose a newspaper from the range offered in their home towns, to pick the newspaper published nearest to their birthday two hundred years ago, or to choose based on any other criteria they select. The key element here is that they choose “their” newspaper and that they are responsible for reporting to the entire class on its content and relevance.⁴ The element of choice has dual benefits: it gives students ownership of the project in substantive ways, and it also diversifies the topics covered in the final papers, making them much more interesting to grade.

The Historical Newspaper database allows users to narrow their search by keyword, place of publication, and timeframe, making it easy for searchers to identify the first mention of “slavery” in the *Berkshire Chronicle* (1788, in case you were wondering) or to explore the 380 mentions of “mermaids” in the Salem, New Bedford, and Newburyport newspapers. Once students have chosen (and read) their newspaper, the assignment requires them to accomplish two related tasks. The first is to identify the categories one might use to organize the information in their chosen edition. Most students are familiar with the “sports,” “metro,” and “editorial” sections of modern newspapers, so I ask them to identify and explain what most interested the editors (and presumably also the readers) of the paper they selected. This usually produces categories such as “foreign and domestic politics,” “shipping news,” “local interest,” and “trading reports.” Secondly, the assignment requires students to choose two or three items (articles, essays, advertisements, a poem, the masthead, etc.) and explain how they relate to the larger themes and issues we have discussed as a class.

Students are often initially skeptical of this assignment because it does not replicate what they have had to do for other history papers, but I have found that they usually produce their best work in the class on this assignment. This might be a product of the fact that most of them actually seek my help, sitting down with me for individual conferences to discuss “their” newspaper and the essay they must write explaining it, but I doubt it. With this assignment, they come to feel more like “real historians” and take pride in their ability to explain the connections they find between their newspapers and class content. They like being the one to identify and

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Letters | <input type="checkbox"/> Birth Notices |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poetry <i>Also includes songs</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Matrimony Notices |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legislative Acts or Legal Proceedings <i>Includes laws, proceedings of legislatures or courts, official speeches and proclamations by the king, governor, etc., and notices of copyright registration.</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Death Notices |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prices <i>Lists of current prices of important commodities</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartoons |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shipping News <i>Arrivals and departures of ships in domestic and foreign ports</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisements <i>Includes both display ads and classified ads</i> | |

Users can search narrowly for specific types of newspaper content.

Source: Early American Newspapers, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, Inc.

explicate these links, and that there is no single “right” way to accomplish their tasks. Just as importantly, this is an assignment that the students actually enjoy; most see that their newspapers are intrinsically interesting and can usually be related to class themes quite easily. I have had students come into my office fascinated with the grisly details of murders in nineteenth-century Salem, and I have also seen them quite sad after reading a poem from a sailor’s wife who had not heard from her husband in years and imagined him drowned at sea.

The benefits of using the Historical Newspaper database in U.S. history (or Massachusetts history) classes are, I hope, quite obvious. I would also note that the database is equally useful when teaching about the attitudes and experiences of other regions and when teaching about the role of the British North American colonies, and the later United States, in world history courses.

Moreover, having your students consult almost any newspaper from a seaport will reinforce vividly and concretely the web of connections these places had throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, a single eighteenth- or nineteenth-century newspaper from a coastal Massachusetts town will almost always contains news from six or seven foreign ports while discussing trading goods from many more. As the following lesson plan illustrates, these sources are almost indispensable in early U.S. and world history classes.

In summary, I urge all Massachusetts teachers of U.S. and world history to strongly consider using the Historical Newspapers database. It will enhance their classroom teaching and, moreover, can form the centerpiece of student research projects. The Boston Public Library will give any resident of the Commonwealth an electronic library card in mere minutes, and the possibilities for exploration and learning are exponential.



Notes

¹ This essay builds off of separate conference papers presented at the 2009 World History Association Conference and the 2010 American Historical Association Conference.

² *Columbian Centinel*, (Boston, MA) May 4, 1808, p. 2, America's Historical Newspapers database.

³ "The Petition of the Sharks of Africa," *The Friend* (Salem, MA) January 10, 1807, p. 4, America's Historical Newspapers database.

⁴ In my college class, I also give them the luxury of choosing their assignment's due date, so that the class presentation corresponds to the time in the semester when we are discussing the newspaper's period, but that's not necessary. In many ways, the assignment works best as a review of the events and themes of previously studied periods, and I imagine this would especially be the case in a high school class.

Lesson Plan:

Using *America's Historical Newspapers* Database

This lesson plan offers suggestions for how teachers can use the first newspaper to publish the Declaration of Independence in Salem, Massachusetts, to teach important themes and concepts in their U.S. or World History classes.

Background: Lesson plan for first half of U.S. History or World History Survey.

Students will read the first newspaper in Salem, Massachusetts, to print the text of the Declaration of Independence. They will examine the other articles in the paper to build their understanding of the social, economic, and political contexts of the Declaration.

Objectives:

1. Students will develop the abilities to analyze and categorize primary sources through reading and discussing the newspaper's articles.
2. Students will better recognize the connections between local and international events by connecting the newspaper's articles to other national (or world) events and developments.
3. Students will be able to identify connections to earlier Enlightenment thinkers and to specific documents in the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework through studying the language and the arguments used in the Declaration of Independence.
4. Students will better understand the information gaps and time constraints that affected decision-making in the Revolutionary period by noting the newspaper's publication date (July 16, 1776).
5. Students will think seriously about the contradictory nature of a society that declares universal human rights while also promoting the enslavement of people.

PREPARATION

Teachers should download the PDF file of *The American Gazette: Or, The Constitutional Journal* Vol. 1, Number 5 (Salem, MA) July 16, 1776,

THE
AMERICAN
OR,
CONSTITUTIONAL

VOL. I.



GAZETTE:
THE
JOURNAL.

NUMB. 5.

TUESDAY, JULY 16, 1776.

*In Congress, July 4, 1776.
A DECLARATION by the REPRESENTATIVES of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in GENERAL CONGRESS assembled.*

WHEN in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains

them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great-Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his assent to laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation until his assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend them.

He has refused to pass other laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to Tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved representative houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the legislative powers, incapable of annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the state remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands.

He has obstructed the administration of justice, by refusing his

assent to laws for establishing judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, standing armies, without the consent of our Legislatures.

He has affected to render the military independent of and superior to the civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws; given his assent to their acts of pretended legislation:

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock trial, from punishment for any murders which they should commit on the inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing taxes on us without our consent:

For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury:

For transporting us beyond seas to be tried for pretended offences:

For abolishing the free system of English laws in a neighboring province, establishing therein an arbitrary government, and enlarging its boundaries, so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms of our governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated government here, by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us.

He has plundered our seas, raz-

(Turn to the last Page.)

from the Historical Newspaper database available at the Boston Public Library web site.

Teachers might also want to make photocopies of the entire newspaper to distribute. They will certainly want to make photocopies of several specific articles to share with students.

Whether in a world or U.S. history class, teachers will want to have the students ready to discuss the political, economic, and social contexts of the American Revolution.

SUGGESTED WAYS TO USE THE NEWSPAPER IN CLASS

Focusing on the Declaration Itself

The most obvious way to use this newspaper is to have students consider how the news and ideas of the Declaration of Independence spread throughout the colonies and the world. When students encounter the ideas and arguments presented in the Declaration by reading the exact same newspaper that first presented them to many Massachusetts residents, they will find the exercise both more challenging and more interesting than if they had read the same document in a textbook.

Using this newspaper allows teachers to make the Declaration part of local history, leading to discussions of how local loyalists responded to the war and the Declaration. The text of the Declaration, however, allows teachers to make “larger” connections to Enlightenment thinkers and to the many economic and political injustices the colonists claimed to have suffered in the previous months and years.

While there are certainly benefits to using a local newspaper to make students more personally connected to such a monumental document (“see, it happened here in Salem, not just in Philadelphia”), the following list offers a variety of ways this particular newspaper can lead to a variety of important and fruitful discussions.

If teachers want to expand this part of the lesson, they should consult Pauline Maier’s wonderful book *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. In this text, Maier explains how the colonial government of Massachusetts asked each of the towns to give advice to the delegates in Philadelphia on the issue of independence. Maier describes the process, and provides several well-chosen examples of how town meetings across Massachusetts produced local declarations of independence. Many of these are emotional and illuminating documents, describing how painful the previous decade had been for these formerly

loyal subjects of the King and how they were now willing to risk their “lives and fortunes” to be free from his tyranny.

Juxtaposing these local declarations of independence against a local printing of the “real” Declaration of Independence shows how ordinary, local people helped shape and lead the “national” story.

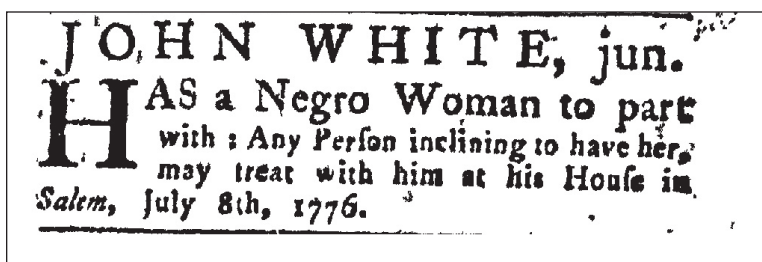
Exploring Surrounding Advertisements and Articles

Once the class has discussed the form, ideology, and arguments of the Declaration of Independence, teachers should direct students to look closely at the articles that occupy the remaining two pages of newspaper text. To do this, teachers will probably want to break the students into groups and give them photocopies of several of the articles and advertisements. Teachers could create stations and have the students move from station to station, circulate the articles at certain times, or just have each group look at a sample of the distributed articles.

Suggestions for articles and advertisements to use

- a. “Philadelphia, July 5” — article describing colonists’ attempts to secure “gunpowder, arms, dry goods, &c” before the British could seize them. Page 2, column 3.
- b. “The First and Second Volumes of that much-admired Pamphlet entitled COMMON SENSE” for sale. Page 3, column 3.
- c. “Two Dollar Reward” for Beverly runaway slave named Caesar. Page 3, column 3.
- d. “Ran away from his Master,” an apprentice, aged 12. Page 3, column 3.
- e. “John White, Junior, has a Negro Woman to Part With” can buy her at his home in Salem. Page 3, column 3.
- f. “Notice is Hereby Given” that the cargo of an American ship, taken by the British, has been retaken and is available for claim in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In particular, four slaves (named and described, including their owners) are available for claim. Page 4, column 3.

- g. Excerpts from “House of Lords, March 5.” This is a report from London that highlights the internal British debates about the cost of the conflict with the American colonies and the propriety of using foreign mercenaries. Page 2, columns 1 and 2.
- h. Some of the shipping advertisements that list goods for sale—these highlight the commercial connections that colonial Massachusetts had around the Atlantic and the world.



Source: Early American Newspapers, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, Inc.

Teachers could use these advertisements and articles to present a snapshot of the issues and events facing Salem residents at the moment of independence. They were deciding if they were “British” or “American” while also dealing with issues of freedom and slavery, both rhetorical and actual. As they were concerned about their life and death, they also had reason to fear for the survival of their regional and global trade networks. While building on more than a century of self-rule and decades of Enlightenment thought, they were trying something utterly unprecedented.

This newspaper lends itself to a variety of activities and assignments. Teachers might want to have their students do one or more of the following:

- a. Write a letter to the editor to appear in the next edition of the paper. Students might take the character of one of the people mentioned by name (“John White”) or simply described (his “Negro woman” for sale). They could be a Loyalist, a Patriot, a neutral observer (perhaps a foreigner traveling in the area), or a British citizen writing from London.

- b. Write a play depicting how two (or more) Salem residents would have reacted to the newspaper as it was read aloud in a local coffeehouse or pub. (If teachers want to make it more authentic, set the tone using pictures of Salem's Red's Sandwich Shop, which resides in the building that was once the London Coffee Shop, the meeting place of some of Salem's patriots.) Students could act out the best submissions.

Two Dollars Reward.

RAN away from
 the Subscriber, on Sunday the
 Fourteenth; Instant, a Negro
 Man, named **CASAR**, a thick
 well set Fellow, about Twenty-
 five Years of Age, about Five
 Feet Six Inches high: Had on
 when he went away, a homespun
 brown colored Great Jacket, a striped Under
 Jacket, a Pair of brown-colored Fustian Bree-
 ches, with black Kneebands; his Right Knee
 bending inwards.

Whosoever shall take up said Negro, and re-
 turn him to his Master, shall receive **TWO**
DOLLARS Reward, and all necessary Char-
 ges paid by me,

BENJAMIN RAYMOND.

Beetly. July 15, 1776:

Source: Early American Newspapers, an Archive of Americana Collection, published by Readex (Readex.com), a division of NewsBank, Inc.

- c. Have students consider, either in discussion or in writing, how it was possible for a newspaper to include the argument 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” alongside at least six references to New England slavery. (If students want to argue that “that’s just the way people thought back then,” I’d use Caesar as an example of a person who felt differently.)
- d. Extend the story of these “unalienable” rights and Massachusetts slavery by having them research what happened when similar language was incorporated into the Massachusetts Constitution drafted during the Revolution (1780). Its first article reads, “All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.” Have students research the Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett) cases that challenged slavery based on this provision of the state constitution.
- e. Have students use a map to connect Salem to other places mentioned in the newspaper, and have them note the time it took for news to travel from those places to Salem. Also, have them figure out where all of the goods for sale originated and map those connections too. (To be honest, other colonial newspapers are better for this second option—the Declaration occupies about half of the newspaper, so there are not as many advertisements in this edition as there are in other editions. Teachers might want to use another, contemporaneous newspaper to make the same point.)

CONNECTIONS TO THE *MASSACHUSETTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK*

The following are the sections from the official Massachusetts State Curriculum Framework for the Social Studies that relate to this lesson plan. Note: USI, WHI, and WHII are abbreviations referring to the learning objectives for the courses United States I and World History I and II

USI.1 Explain the political and economic factors that contributed to the American Revolution.

- A. The impact on the colonies of the French and Indian War, including how the war led to an overhaul of British imperial policy from 1763 to 1775
- B. How freedom from European feudalism and aristocracy and the widespread ownership of property fostered individualism and contributed to the Revolution

USI.2 Explain the historical and intellectual influences on the American Revolution and the formation and framework of the American government.

- A. The legacy of ancient Greece and Rome
- B. The political theories of such European philosophers as Locke and Montesquieu

USI.3 Explain the influence and ideas of the Declaration of Independence and the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson.

Key Primary Documents to Read: The Declaration of Independence (1776)

WHI.20 Describe the development and effects of the trans-African slave trade to the Middle East from the 8th century on, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Western Hemisphere from the 16th century on.

WHI.35 Explain how the Enlightenment contributed to the growth of democratic principles of government, a stress on reason and progress, and the replacement of a theocentric interpretation of the universe with a secular interpretation.

WHII.3 Summarize the important causes and events of the French Revolution.

- | | |
|---------|--|
| Causes: | A. The effect of Enlightenment political thought |
| | B. The influence of the American Revolution |