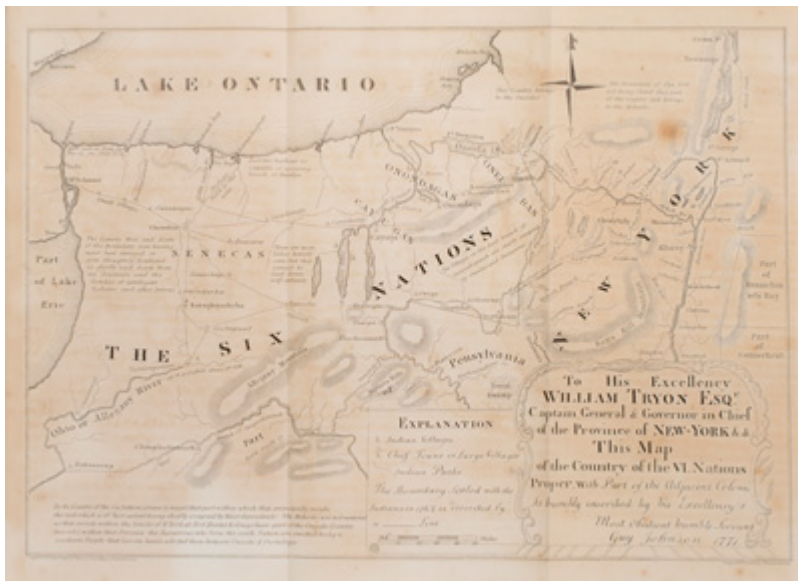# [What Changed During the American Revolution?](#)

Time and again between the earliest period of colonization and the Civil War, North American people waged ferocious war over what kind of place "their" America ought to be. The Revolutionary era was one such time. The Civil War was another. Yet though Founding Father narratives abound, serious study of the Revolution seems at a low ebb. Where are its passion, fear, hope, triumph, transformation, gain, loss, and tragedy? Borrowing from Lenin, this Revolution might as well be just a Tea Party.

The Seneca leader Chainbearer knew better when it was over and his people had lost. So, somewhat later, did Washington Irving (in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"), Nathaniel Hawthorne (in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"), Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The Revolution's course of human events overwhelmed existing institutions, beliefs, and practices. It provoked enormous creativity and it brought huge loss. All successful revolutions may ultimately be alike, in that they overthrow one order and institute another. But each successful revolution is successful in its own way. What, then, of the colonial order from which the American Revolution emerged? What did the Revolution transform? What did it leave unchanged? What did it render problematic that previously had been mere fact?

> Throughout the hemisphere, colonized America differed strikingly from Europe. Slavery—which did not exist in Britain, the Netherlands, and France, and which was of minor direct importance in Spain and Portugal—spread wherever colonizers went, engulfing both Native people and Africans.

To comprehend such questions we need to reach beyond the British colonies and early United States. Colonial settlements the length and breadth of the hemisphere were neo-Europes, enmeshed in ocean-spanning imperial structures. From their own viewpoint, Scotland, the Pays d'Oc, and Vizcaya were peripheral in relation to London, Paris, and Madrid. But though distant from their capitals, such places were parts of metropolitan cores. New France, New England, and New Spain were otherwise. In the British case, that fact underpinned the ultimately irresolvable problem that the attempted reforms of the 1760s and 1770s provoked: What did it mean to "belong" to Britain outside the central British realm? The Revolution ended that whole problem with the entry of the United States into Europe's Westphalian state system, able now to do all the "acts and things that independent states may of right do." It would be sovereign in the same sense as Britain or Spain, dealing with them as a juridical equal, defining its boundaries, setting its terms of belonging, freedom, and obligation, and, internally, answering to no power higher than itself. Its new order was republican rather than monarchical, but Europe's great theorists of sovereignty—Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, and Emer de Vattel—had allowed for that possibility. In this sense, the American Revolution transformed a set of incomplete colonial neo-European polities into a single full participant in the European order, calling itself the United States.

Throughout the hemisphere, however, colonized America differed strikingly from Europe. Slavery—which did not exist in Britain, the Netherlands, and France, and which was of minor direct importance in Spain and Portugal—spread wherever colonizers went, engulfing both Native people and Africans. George Washington's Mount Vernon only looked like an English gentleman's estate; its enslaved labor force made it fundamentally different. Slaves did not do the productive work of London, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Oporto, and Seville as they did of New York City, Cap Haitien, Willemstad, Recife, and Havana. Africans came to the Americas as captives, but in plantation quarters, on back streets of colonial towns, and in free "maroon" settlements from Virginia's Dismal Swamp through Jamaica's Blue Mountains to Brazil's *Quilombos*, they created neo-African communities as well as they could.

[Fredrika Teute and Ed Countryman discuss the Haitian Revolution and the American people.](#)

Sticking just to the northern continent, "colonial" America reached far beyond the Neo-Europes and Neo-Africas, to wherever European power, diplomacy, war, trade, and non-human species could be felt. Unlike anywhere in Europe, colonial areas were contested rather than defined. Guillaume de L'Isle's 1702 map of "La Floride" splashed color to distinguish British, French, and Spanish zones all across North America. But beneath his tints, in small print, were inscribed the names of the native peoples who actually were in control. Two decades later, a

Chickasaw map comprehended much the same space, depicting Native communities from the Red River to the upper Ohio, without any recognition of European claims. John Mitchell's supposedly definitive 1755 map of British America showed Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia stretching toward the Pacific. French and Spanish cartographers would have disagreed, and so would Cherokees and Creeks in the southern Appalachians, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Osage, and Quapaws in the Mississippi Valley, and Comanches on the High Plains.

Consider one late-colonial artifact. In 1771 cartographer Guy Johnson published a map "of the Country of the VI Nations [Iroquois]." Johnson rendered Iroquoia as beginning at a line that ran southward from just east of Oneida Lake to the Pennsylvania border and as including the whole northern country between Lake Champlain and Lake Ontario, "the boundary of New York not being closed." Within the Six Nations he drew only three of the Finger Lakes; the remainder could not "be laid down with certainty." The Iroquois guarded knowledge of what was theirs, even from Johnson, whom they knew well. They had bargained hard at the great Fort Stanwix treaty conference of 1768 for the line that separated them from New York. Mohawk country was already lost, and they wanted this new boundary to last. But playing the game of cartographic boasting as ruthlessly as any statesman, speculator, or settler, they also gave away a vast area that was not theirs at all. Delawares, Shawnees, and Cherokees were furious.

New York Governor William Tryon, the dedicatee of Johnson's map, thought entirely differently from both the Iroquois and Johnson, reporting to the Lords of Trade in 1774 that New York extended all the way to Detroit. Iroquoia belonged to his province, not to its people. But provincial authorities had nothing to do with the boundary line on Johnson's map. It had been drawn by Iroquois negotiators and Sir William Johnson, Guy's uncle and Britain's Superintendent of Northern Indian Affairs, who was the Crown's direct agent. His power fitted with what colonials were coming to see as a London plan to control them "in all cases whatsoever." Sir William lived as befitted a marcher lord, in neo-European gentlemanly style at Johnson Hall, a few dozen miles down the Mohawk River from Fort Stanwix. His life there, however, with his Mohawk wife Molly Brant and enough slaves to run a southern plantation, was entirely colonial American. Taken together, Guy Johnson's map, the Fort Stanwix Treaty, and Sir William Johnson's power and way of life brought all the themes of the colonial order into focus: contested space, imperial power, neo-European mimesis, and the prevalence of slavery.

"Six Nations Map," by Guy Johnson (1771), engraving, page 1090 (vol. IV) from The Documentary History of the State of New-York, by E.B. O'Callaghan (Albany, 1851). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in new window.

Running through all these dimensions were the political problems of authority, power, and belonging on which the British Empire broke. Colonial settlers

believed they had grown up and could run their world. Beginning in 1763, imperial reformers set out to teach them otherwise. Colonials wanted Indian land, but Indians knew how to defend themselves. Far from being the plantation south's "peculiar institution," slavery was everywhere, in both law and fact. In the midst of it all, only one power seemed absolute—that of masters over their slaves. Here, as unplanned, incoherent, and vibrant as Europe's Ancien Régime, was the colonial old order.

The Revolution's creation of a sovereign American People and of that People's instruments of power resolved the imperial problem. With remarkable speed, it also settled the colonial era's fundamental contestation about American space. Drawing the modern borders of the eastern states and creating the American system of western territories that could become states in their own right were part of the resolution, ending the problem of supposed settler inferiority. Just as important, if not more so, is that the new, self-conscious, empowered American People took rapid possession of all the land it could grasp, entirely on its own terms, achieving in mere decades what centuries of European empire builders had failed to do. Meanwhile, the colonial era's other great legacy, slavery, changed from an unchallenged universal fact into the South's "peculiar institution." The problem that destroyed the colonial order emerged from a combination of contested imperial power and contested American space. The problem that nearly destroyed the United States emerged from contested national power over freedom and slavery, within space that the Republic called its own.

From the beginning, Europe's children in America connected themselves with both Native people and Africans. The mature colonial order presented one set of such connections, turning ultimately on space; the young Republic presented another set, turning ultimately on slavery. Neither was a European problem at all. The Revolution replaced a colonial-era landscape of contested spaces with triumphalist notions about an Empire of Liberty, Manifest Destiny, and the Moving Frontier, in which Native people became mere "Indians Not Taxed" and, later, "domestic dependent nations." It also turned slavery from an accepted, universal fact into a pressing issue, opening a breach into which Black Americans stepped, and raising the question of whether, should slavery end, they would belong to the Republic as citizens or, like Indians, be excluded from it. Appreciating such continuities and disruptions, such gains and losses, transformations and consequences of the Revolutionary era, may offer a way to bring the American Revolution back to life as a subject of compelling and deeply human interest.

Further reading:

The thirteen essays collected in Juliana Barr and Edward Countryman, eds., *Contested Spaces of Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) reach well beyond the American Revolution both in geographical and chronological terms. But taken as a whole they bring out important differences between the colonial/imperial order that began to take shape with the Columbian

encounter, developed and flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and was radically transformed during the hemispheric era of national revolutions and state formation. Both Eliga Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012) and Leonard J. Sadosky, *Revolutionary Negotiations: Indians, Empires, and Diplomats in the Founding of America* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009) continue that theme, Gould in the sense of the United States joining Europe's Westphalian state system and Sadosky showing how a colonial order structured around Native-European diplomacy gave way to a post-revolutionary order structured around national sovereignty for international purposes and state sovereignty for internal purposes. Finally, Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era* (Lanham, Md., 2012), addresses what its subjects did with the opportunities and the partial liberation of the Revolutionary era and how the problem of an American nation divided between slavery and freedom emerged from that era.

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