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# Siege of Yorktown

United States history

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Written by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Last Updated: Aug 14, 2025 • Article History

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**Siege of Yorktown**, (September 28–October 19, 1781), joint [Franco-American](#) land and sea campaign that entrapped a major [British army](#) on a peninsula at [Yorktown, Virginia](#), and forced its [surrender](#). The siege virtually ended military operations in the [American Revolution](#).

After a series of reverses and the depletion of his forces' strength, the British commander in the southern colonies, General Lord [Cornwallis](#), moved his army from [Wilmington, North Carolina](#), eastward to [Petersburg, Virginia](#), on the Atlantic coast, in May 1781. Cornwallis had about 7,500 men and was confronted in the region by only about 4,500 American troops under the marquis de [Lafayette](#), General [Anthony Wayne](#), and [Frederick William, Freiherr \(baron\) von Steuben](#). In order to maintain his seaborne lines of communication with the main British army of General [Henry Clinton](#) in [New York City](#), Cornwallis then retreated through Virginia, first to [Richmond](#), next to [Williamsburg](#), and finally, near the end of July, to Yorktown and the [adjacent](#) promontory of Gloucester, both of which he proceeded to fortify.



**Surrender of Lord Cornwallis** With the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781, the Revolution effect...(more)

### Quick Facts

**Date:** September 28, 1781 - October 19, 1781

**Location:** [United States](#) • [Virginia](#) • [Yorktown](#)

**Participants:** [France](#) • [United Kingdom](#) • [United States](#)

**Context:** [American Revolution](#)

**Key People:** [Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess and 2nd Earl Cornwallis](#) • [Henry Knox](#) • [Marquis de La...](#) [\(Show more\)](#)

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## Follow the Road to Revolution: Timeline of Independence

The American commander in chief, General [George Washington](#), ordered Lafayette to block Cornwallis's possible escape from Yorktown by land. In the meantime Washington's 2,500 Continental troops in [New York](#) were joined by 4,000 French troops under the comte de [Rochambeau](#). This combined allied force left a screen of troops facing Clinton's forces in New



York while the main Franco-American force, beginning on August 21, undertook a rapid march southward to the head of [Chesapeake Bay](#), where it linked up with a French fleet of 24 ships under the comte de [Grasse](#). This fleet had arrived from the [West Indies](#) and was maintaining a sea blockade of Cornwallis's army. Cornwallis's army waited in vain for rescue or reinforcements from the British navy while de Grasse's fleet transported Washington's troops southward to Williamsburg, Virginia, whence they joined Lafayette's forces in the siege of Yorktown. Washington was thus [vindicated](#) in his hopes of entrapping Cornwallis on the Yorktown Peninsula.



**George Washington at Yorktown** *Siege of Yorktown*, oil on canvas by Louis-Charles-Auguste Couder, c. 1836. The painting..(more)



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Meanwhile, a smaller British fleet under Admiral [Thomas Graves](#) was unable to counter French naval superiority at the [Battle of Virginia Capes](#) and felt forced to return to New York. A British rescue fleet, two-thirds the size of the French, set out for Virginia on October 17 with some 7,000 British troops, but it was too late. Throughout early October Washington's 14,000 Franco-American troops steadily overcame the British army's fortified positions at Yorktown. Surrounded, outgunned, and running low on food, Cornwallis surrendered his entire army on October 19 (though, either ill—as he claimed—or simply [humiliated](#), Cornwallis did not participate in the actual surrender, having delegated that task to Brig. Gen. Charles O'Hara). The total number of British prisoners taken was about 8,000, along with about 240 guns. Casualties on both sides were relatively light. The victory at Yorktown ended fighting in the Revolution and virtually assured success to the American cause.

*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica*

*This article was most recently revised and updated by Amy Tikkanen.*

World History > Wars, Battles & Armed Conflicts

## American Revolution

United States history

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*Also known as:* American Revolutionary War, United States War of Independence, War of Independence

Written by [Willard M. Wallace](#)

Fact-checked by [The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)

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What was the American Revolution? ▼

What was the first state in the United States? ▼



**The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis** *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* (at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781), oil on c...(more)

### Quick Facts

**Also called:** United States War of Independence or American Revolutionary War

How did the American Revolution begin?

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The **American Revolution** was an [insurrection](#) carried out by 13 of [Great Britain's North American](#) colonies that began in 1775 and ended with a peace treaty in 1783. The [colonies](#) won political independence and went on to form the [United States of America](#). The [war](#) followed more than a decade of growing estrangement between the British crown and a large and influential segment of its North American colonies that was caused by British attempts to assert greater control over colonial affairs after having long adhered to a policy of [salutary neglect](#).

Until early in 1778 the conflict was a civil war within the [British Empire](#), but afterward it became an international war as [France](#) (in 1778) and [Spain](#) (in 1779) joined the colonies against [Britain](#). Meanwhile, the [Netherlands](#), which provided both official recognition of the United States and financial support for it, was engaged in its own war against Britain (see [Anglo-Dutch Wars](#)). From the beginning, [sea power](#) was [vital](#) in determining the course of the war, lending to British strategy a flexibility that helped compensate for the comparatively small numbers of troops sent to America and ultimately enabling the French to help bring about the final British [surrender at Yorktown](#) in 1781.

## Setting the stage: The two armies

The [American colonies](#) fought the war on land with essentially two types of organization: the [Continental \(national\) Army](#) and the state [militias](#). The total number of the former provided by quotas from the states throughout the conflict was 231,771 soldiers, and the militias totaled 164,087. At any given time, however, the American forces seldom numbered over 20,000; in 1781 there were only about 29,000 insurgents under arms throughout the country. The war was therefore one fought by small field armies. Militias, poorly [disciplined](#) and with elected officers, were summoned for periods usually not exceeding three months. The terms of Continental Army service were only gradually increased from one to three years, and not even bounties and the offer of land kept the army up to strength. Reasons for the difficulty in maintaining an adequate Continental force included the colonists' traditional [antipathy](#) toward regular armies, the objections of farmers to being away from their fields, the competition of the states with the [Continental Congress](#) to keep men in the [militia](#), and the wretched and uncertain pay in a period of [inflation](#).

By contrast, the [British army](#) was a reliable steady force of professionals. Since it numbered only about 42,000, heavy recruiting programs were introduced. Many of the enlisted men were farm boys, as were most of the

revolutionary war

**Date:** 1775 - September 3, 1783

**Location:** United States

**Participants:** [Dutch Republic](#) • [France](#) • [loyalist](#) • [Spain](#) • [United Kingdom](#) • [United States](#) • [American colonies](#)

**Major Events:** [Battle of Brandywine](#) • [Battle of Bunker Hill](#) • [Battles of Saratoga](#) • [Battle of the Ch...](#)[\(Show more\)](#)

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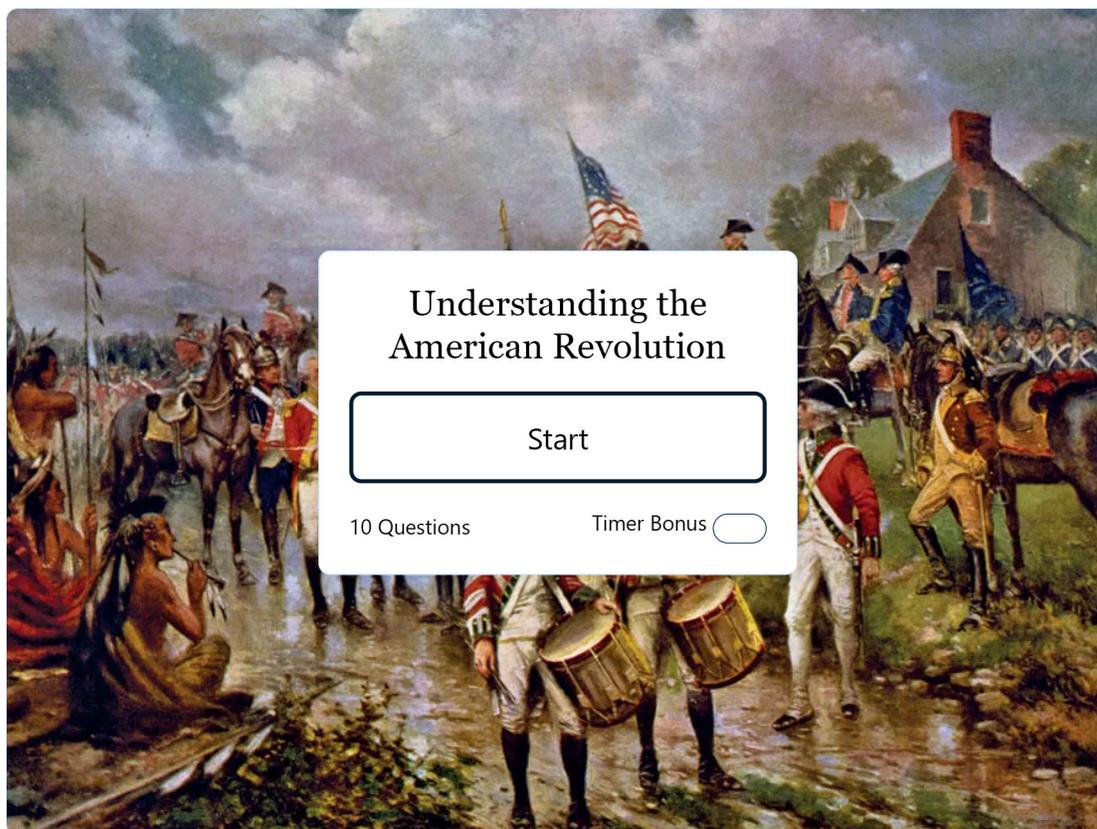
Americans, while others came from cities where they had been unable to find work. Still others joined the army to escape fines or imprisonment. The great majority became efficient soldiers as a result of sound training and ferocious [discipline](#). The officers were drawn largely from the gentry and the [aristocracy](#) and obtained their commissions and promotions by purchase. Though they received no formal training, they were not so dependent on a book knowledge of military tactics as were many of the Americans. British generals, however, tended toward a lack of imagination and [initiative](#), while those who demonstrated such qualities often were rash.



Britannica Quiz

Facts You Should Know: American Revolution

Because troops were few and [conscription](#) unknown, the British government, following a traditional policy, purchased about 30,000 troops from various [German](#) princes. The [Lengsreve \(landgrave\) of Hesse](#) furnished approximately three-fifths of that total. Few acts by the crown roused so much antagonism in America as that use of foreign [mercenaries](#).



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