

## The Meaning of the Revolution

For most Americans the meaning of the Revolution stems from how the event is remembered and invoked in the present. Although historians often lament their students' ignorance of history, when it comes to the Revolution, everyone is a historian; everyone remembers "something". Today  
5 Americans most often recall tales of a Revolution led by a group of "demigods" who towered above their fellow colonists, led them into a war against tyranny, and established a democratic nation dedicated to the proposition that all men were endowed by their creator with equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In these stories, a unity of purpose is emphasized over division. Good triumphed over evil as a small group of men overthrew a tyrannical monarchy and  
10 replaced it with a republican government, enshrined in one of the world's first written constitutions. In this telling, the American Revolution is a timeless story of the defense of freedom and the rights of all humankind. Above all, it is the story of the founding of a nation.

Yet the American Revolution was not always remembered this way. Those who survived the chaotic and complicated events of 1763-89 struggled to make sense of the momentous changes that  
15 had transformed the original thirteen colonies. Having just lived through eight years of war, white colonists could not help but recall the uncertain, halting, and painful movements toward separation from Britain. They remembered, or tried to forget, the betrayal of neighbors and family, the many divisions that split communities, and the bloodshed and losses endured in what was really America's first civil war. As the years passed, many strove to reconcile their own fragmented and traumatic  
20 memories of the war with the grand narratives of liberty spun with increasing frequency by political leaders. Others—especially women, Native Americans, and African Americans—mused on the unfulfilled promises and dashed hopes of the era.

As the Revolutionary generation passed away, and especially starting in the 1820s, accounts of the Revolution that appeared in print increasingly featured common themes, individuals, and tropes,  
25 although their meaning varied between audiences. In the meantime alternative stories were kept alive by word of mouth. Individuals, communities, regions, and eventually different sections of the country told their own stories about the Revolution and emphasized new memories and meanings. By the eve of the Civil War there was still no consensus as to the principles over which the Revolution had been fought or its outcomes. Had the founders supported slavery or its demise?  
30 What did equality and liberty really mean? What aspects of the past ought to be celebrated and whose memory mattered? Without agreement on some of these critical questions, Americans struggled to remain united. They once again went to war with one another, still unable to agree on how to remember the Revolution.