



CHAPTER 1

“America must fear you”

*O*n a warm October morning in 1781, a strange sight appeared at the top of a hill in Yorktown, Virginia. In the haze of smoke from cannons and gunfire, a small soldier in a bright red coat was walking directly toward the enemy.

“It’s the British!” shouted an American soldier. “They’re preparing a surprise attack from that far hill!”

But as the soldier drew closer, the Americans could see that he was only a young boy. He walked alone, playing a continuous drumroll, and he stood straight, perhaps in an attempt to look brave and tall. The boy was too far away for the Americans to see the tears of terror that streaked his dusty face. Finally, the boy stopped, barely fifty yards from the Americans. Perhaps a hundred muskets were pointed at him. He looked straight ahead, his thin legs shaking uncontrollably. But his drumming never stopped.

“Hold your fire!” came the command from an officer who knew what this continuous drumroll meant.

“Don’t shoot!” the soldiers shouted to one another, eyeing the drummer curiously. What could this mean?

Sometimes drummer boys tapped a sharp, quick drumbeat that meant it was time to attack. Sometimes a different kind of irregular rhythm meant to turn around and run away from the battle. But this uninterrupted drumroll sent out a very rare kind of message. It was one the Americans had not heard once before during six long years of fighting.

An unusual silence fell over the battleground as the soldiers listened and watched. For nearly five minutes, the only sounds were the wind blowing in from the Chesapeake Bay and the constant drumming. Then another British soldier, a grown man, slowly appeared behind the boy. His shoulders drooped, and he frowned sadly. But he held both of his hands high over his head to show that he carried no weapons. And in his right hand he waved a white piece of cloth back and forth.

Surrender!

“Huzzah! Huzzah!” came the excited cheer from the Americans. Was it really possible? Had the mighty British military finally been brought

to its knees? As soldiers celebrated, shouts of “It’s a miracle!” mingled with the cheers. It was, truly, very difficult for many of these American men to believe that they had beaten such a strong enemy, such a giant.

If it was difficult for the Americans to believe, it was nearly impossible for the British to comprehend. Many refused to accept that this shameful and embarrassing loss could really have happened. Two days after waving the flag of surrender, thousands of British soldiers marched out into a wide field, surrounded by rows and rows of American soldiers. It was the tradition in the 1700s for the losing side’s soldiers to throw their weapons into a huge pile to show that they were no longer a threat.

“They looked like angry schoolboys who had just received a whipping,” one American remembered. “Mostly they looked like they wondered how an army like ours had ever beaten an army like theirs.”

As the pile of British guns grew, the British military band struck up a tune. Usually during a surrender ceremony like this, the losing side showed respect by playing songs that celebrated the winners. But not today. Instead, the British band loudly played a popular song called “The World Turned Upside Down.”



*If ponies rode men and if grass ate cows,
And cats should be chased into holes by the
mouse,
If summers were spring and the other way
around,
Then all the world would be upside down.*

The intended message was clear. The British soldiers would not even look at the victorious Americans, and the British army's general was so upset that he had pretended to be too sick to attend the surrender ceremony. Some British soldiers claimed that he stayed in his tent all day crying. This all went beyond being sore losers; the British really felt that nothing was as it should be. Truly, the world had turned upside down.

How had this happened? The story of this miraculous victory is the story of a war in which unbelievable odds were beaten and in which, even in the worst of circumstances, brave men and women refused to give up believing either in themselves or in their dream of freedom. It is the story of the American Revolution. But while this story ended with a loud cheer, it had begun quietly enough.

Thirteen colonies stretched out along the Atlantic Ocean. They made up what was known simply as "America" in the 1700s. There was no

“United States” yet, because there were no states—only areas that were colonies, or possessions, of England. And these colonies were hardly what anyone would describe as “united.” Most people living in the colonies had never traveled more than ten miles away from their homes. Roads were so few and so bad that it took two weeks just to get a letter from Boston to Philadelphia! As a result, the people of the original thirteen colonies knew very little about one another. A man from Virginia, for example, may never even have met a man from New York, and if he had, he had probably eyed him with suspicion.

“They seem in a hurry to go everywhere,” a Virginian wrote of New Yorkers in 1745 when he visited their colony. “They dress most oddly, and though we speak the same language, they are exceedingly difficult to understand!”

Truly, in the early 1700s, the thirteen colonies were more like thirteen separate countries than like the one country we now know as America. There was, however, a common bond—a common thread of interest—among all the colonists: England. Most colonists had originally come from England and continued to think of it as their “mother country.” They wore clothes made of British cloth, drank British tea, followed British politics, and waited impatiently for newspapers and books to make their way

across the Atlantic Ocean on ships from England. Colonists living in South Carolina might not have a clue about what life was like in neighboring North Carolina, but they knew even the smallest details of recent trends and scandals in London.

And colonists did not call England the mother country simply out of affection and love for their country of origin. England, like a parent, protected the young colonies and provided them with many of the things they needed to “grow up” and become strong. Although the British king and his government (called “Parliament”) encouraged the colonies to provide for themselves, finding the appropriate place to draw the line between protection and independence often proved challenging. The king worried that if the colonies became too independent, they would not need England anymore. And the colonies were full of rich resources and possibilities—which the king certainly did not want to lose.

Living on the edge of a new and unsettled country was often frightening. There were strange wild animals, dark unexplored forests, and, perhaps most fearsome of all to the colonists, Indians. These Native Americans were the original settlers of the land, and they had lived there for many thousands of years. Their culture was quite advanced, with organized settlements and inventive farming methods. But many of the

colonists viewed them only as dangerous half-dressed savages who spoke a bizarre language and fought brutally when their land was threatened. Some colonists even believed that the natives were evil spirits and devils in human form.

If it was unsettling for colonists to know that Native Americans lived nearby, it had been downright terrifying when, in 1754, the natives had joined the French in a war against the colonists. Although France already owned a sizable chunk of North America, it had wanted even more land. For many years, French traders and fur trappers who lived in Canada had dealt peacefully with Native Americans, generally treating them with respect and fairness. The French had easily convinced the natives to join them in their fight against the colonists. In return, the French promised to leave the Native Americans alone and not take over their lands.

The British did not want France interfering with their colonies. Eventually, the king and Parliament decided it was time to drive the French out of America altogether. What followed was nine years of fighting known as “the French and Indian War.” Although many American colonists (including a twenty-five-year-old George Washington) fought in that war, England provided thousands of British soldiers and nearly all the weapons and supplies the colonists needed.

By 1763, the war was over, and the British had led America to victory.

Americans were extremely grateful to the British. Songs of praise were written for the new king of England, George III. The colonists sent many gifts to England by ship. Young boys played “war” dressed in the bright red coats of the British soldiers, and young girls perfected the art of serving British tea. What, then, could have so interfered with this love and harmony to lead to a war with England barely ten years later? Two things: money and power.

By the end of the French and Indian war, England had racked up a debt that would be equal to about \$4 billion today. Making matters worse, England had the expense of supporting more than 10,000 British soldiers who remained in America to protect the colonies. In addition, the jobs that the war had provided in England were gone. Homeless families soon filled the streets of London, and people began rioting and demanding that the government do something to fix the economy. The leader of Parliament, the prime minister, came up with a simple solution.

“We have run ourselves into an immense debt to give the Americans protection,” the prime minister, George Grenville, announced. “And now they must contribute a small share toward the expense.”

In other words, he wanted to start taxing the colonists. He suggested placing a tax on a large list of paper goods, including such items as legal documents, books, newspapers, and even playing cards and calendars. Colonists would be required to buy stamps in the amount of the tax, and then place the stamps on these paper goods before they could legally use them. This would be called “the Stamp Act.”

Some members of Parliament thought this was a very bad idea. For many generations, Americans had repaid England through loyalty and hard work to settle a new territory for the mother country. Being forced to pay a tax on top of this might make colonists angry. After all, Britain owned this new country. It wasn't the colonists' fault if this ownership was creating debt.

But the new king dismissed these warnings as though he was fanning away annoying gnats. He thought taxation sounded like a wonderful idea. King George was barely 22, and he had neither the patience nor the experience to consider the backlash that might result from taxing people who lived 3,000 miles away. In addition, the governors of each colony had been appointed by King George (as opposed to being elected by the colonists), so enforcing the tax would be no problem, right?

“And everyone who does not agree with me is a traitor and a tyrant,” King George concluded flatly, as he ordered the Stamp Act to go into effect in the spring of 1765.

Perhaps King George’s biggest mistake was that he did not understand Americans at all. He had never visited America, mainly because he saw no reason to do so. The King believed that the colonists were really not much different from British people. Perhaps the Americans were a little less stylish and cultured, but, like his British subjects, they would obviously do as they were told. King George was certain that they would not dare to disobey their king.

However, the young king was wrong.

“No taxation without representation!”

When they learned about the new tax, colonists from Charleston to Boston took to the streets, angrily shouting this slogan. Essentially, the colonists were saying, “We did not have a voice in this decision! You can’t just slap a tax on us without our input!”

For more than 150 years, the colonists had been making their own decisions. Even though the colonies belonged to England, the people in America had generally governed themselves. Granted, England stepped in to protect its investment now and then, but for the most part, the British government had allowed the colonists

to make their own laws and create their own taxes. Now, Americans were angry with King George about this crazy Stamp Act. It would take more than shouting in the streets to get rid of the tax, however.

In Boston, a writer and political activist named Samuel Adams came up with a simple solution. The stamps had to be distributed by an official agent. What if there were no agents to hand out the stamps and collect the money? Then the tax would die before it even began. Adams encouraged the people of Boston, and beyond, to threaten the stamp agents and, hopefully, scare them away from their assignments.

*What greater joy did New England see
Than a stamp man hanging on a tree?*

This brief poem was attached to a life-sized doll hanging by a noose from an elm tree in Boston. This display made Boston's stamp agent, Andrew Oliver, a bit nervous, but he was not particularly frightened. Much later that evening, however, the doll's head was cut off, and its body was set on fire. An angry mob then marched to Oliver's house and hurled the doll's head through Oliver's front window. Andrew Oliver quickly decided to quit his very short-lived career as a stamp agent.

Throughout the colonies, groups that called themselves “the Sons of Liberty” threatened and harassed stamp agents. Soon, just as Samuel Adams had hoped, there was no one left to distribute stamps and collect money. Back in England, King George sulked and argued, but he finally had to admit that the tax was not going to work. When the Stamp Act was canceled, the colonists celebrated their victory and once again returned to cheering and supporting their beloved king and the wonderful British people. New Yorkers were so grateful to King George that they built a huge statue of him and placed it in the middle of the city.

But King George wasn’t feeling the same love for his disobedient colonists.

“It is our right to tax them!” he pointed out to his favorite adviser, Frederick North, who would later become prime minister. “They are behaving exactly like spoiled children.”

So, within the year, Parliament approved new taxes on many items, such as paper, glass, paint, wine, and tea, that were shipped from England to America. This time there were no stamps involved, just an amount of money to be collected. Perhaps King George had thought the colonists would not be as offended by what seemed more like a simple price increase than a tax, but the Americans were not so easily fooled.

Immediately, colonists refused to buy any of the British goods. As much as Americans loved British tea, many of them instead began drinking what they considered a rather dull and unpopular drink: coffee.

The protest went well beyond the boycott, however. Things turned violent when tax collectors (the men assigned to collect the taxes from merchants) were chased down and beaten with clubs. Some tax collectors who refused to stop working received the particularly gruesome punishment of tarring and feathering. First they were stripped naked and covered in hot tar. Then they were rolled in goose feathers and paraded around town.

“The worst of it was trying to get the tar off,” one tax man later wrote. “Whole chunks of skin came off with the dried tar.”

Meanwhile, tempers flared at American ports where British guards and tax agents watched for smugglers who were attempting to sneak in goods from other European countries without paying taxes on them. One of these smugglers was a rich Boston merchant named John Hancock. Like his friend Sam Adams, Hancock believed that the new taxes were terribly unfair, and he was more than willing to do his part to fight this injustice by bringing in a shipload of tax-free wine. When British soldiers seized his ship full of

wine, Hancock was furious. A large gathering of the Sons of Liberty stood on the docks with their fists clenched and their anger building as they watched Hancock argue with the British guards.

“If you are men, behave like men!” Sam Adams finally shouted to those gathered. “Let us take up arms immediately and be free!”

Finally, it had come to this. Americans were now beyond protest and were ready to fight back with guns if necessary. In London, King George huffed around and again complained to his adviser, Frederick North. When the king wondered out loud if these new taxes should be canceled too, North strongly objected. In North’s opinion, it was time to teach these disrespectful Americans a lesson. He thought it would be better to send over more British soldiers than to give in again.

“America must fear you,” North explained to the young king, “before she can love you.”