CHAPTER

04

Revolutionary War

1775 – 1783

In 1763 the British Empire had just won the largest war the world had yet seen — and it was nearly broke. Somebody was going to have to pay for all that winning, and Britain had a candidate in mind: the American colonies.[1]

[1] The 7 Years War. In the USA, known as the "French and Indian War."

For more than a century, thirteen **British colonies** had been strung along the Atlantic coast like beads, from New Hampshire in the cold north (the region the colonists called **New England**) down to Georgia in the warm south. They bickered with one another, mostly governed themselves, and did not think about the king very often. Around them sat the other great empires — **New France** running down the middle of the continent, **New Spain** along the "bottom." To most colonists the king of England was a face on a coin. That was about to change, and the trouble would begin, of all places, with a tax on paper.

Quote & Music for this Chapter

QUOTE *"Those who stand for nothing fall for everything."*
— Alexander Hamilton

Hamilton was an immigrant with very strong Jewish ties from the West Indies, the new nation's first Treasury Secretary, and on the American $10 bill. (We will discuss this more in the next chapter ... constitution.)

SONG *"You'll Be Back"* — Lin-Manuel Miranda, from *Hamilton*
King George III's mock-confident farewell to the colonies in the musical — he assumes, sweetly and with menace, that they will come crawling back. (He's not Jewish, though he has an honorary degree from Yeshiva University and the guy who plays Thomas Jefferson is.)

Timeline: The Revolutionary War, 1500s–1783

Two stories were unfolding at once — the war America remembers, and the quieter story of its small Jewish community living through the same years.

AMERICAN HISTORY **JEWISH AMERICAN HISTORY**

1500s

The first Jews arrive — mainly Sefardim escaping the Inquisition. New Amsterdam (today's New York) tries to bar them; the Netherlands overrules it, since Jewish investors helped fund the colony.

Thirteen very different colonies sit under British rule, New Hampshire to Georgia.

1763

The largest Jewish communities are in Charleston, Savannah, Philadelphia, New York, and Newport.

France and England finish their war over North America. England wins.

1770

Jews are mostly merchants and traders — and usually the Revolution's strongest supporters.

The Boston Massacre: colonists killed by British troops after a crowd rushes them with clubs and stones.

1773

New York's **hazan** (the leader of a Jewish congregation — at least, that is what the word used to mean), Gershom Mendes Seixas, says "Better to close the shul than live under the British!"

Cheap taxed tea is refused; the Boston Tea Party dumps a fortune of it into the harbor. Britain closes the port — and Americans switch to coffee.

1775

The British take New York; its Jews flee to Philadelphia. A Jewish Hessian now runs Shearith Israel.

British troops attack at Lexington and Concord — "the shot heard round the world." The war begins. George Washington pushes his way into being commander.

1776

The British capture Newport; the **Loyalist** hazan Isaac Touro — a colonist who stayed loyal to the British Crown — flees to New York, which was controlled by the British. After the war, Touro goes to Jamaica — still a British colony.

Independence is declared.

1781

Washington gives a four-word order: "Send for Haym Salomon."

The last great battle: Yorktown, Virginia.

Treaty of Paris. The American signers: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Jay.

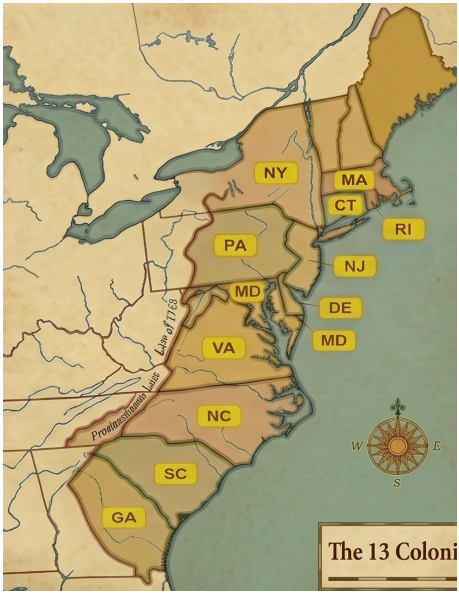
1783

Several states forbid Jews from holding office. New York does not — and becomes, to this day, the largest center of Jewish life in the country.

Map & Places to Know

The whole war fits on a thin ribbon of the East Coast. Here are the thirteen colonies, north to south, and some interesting facts.

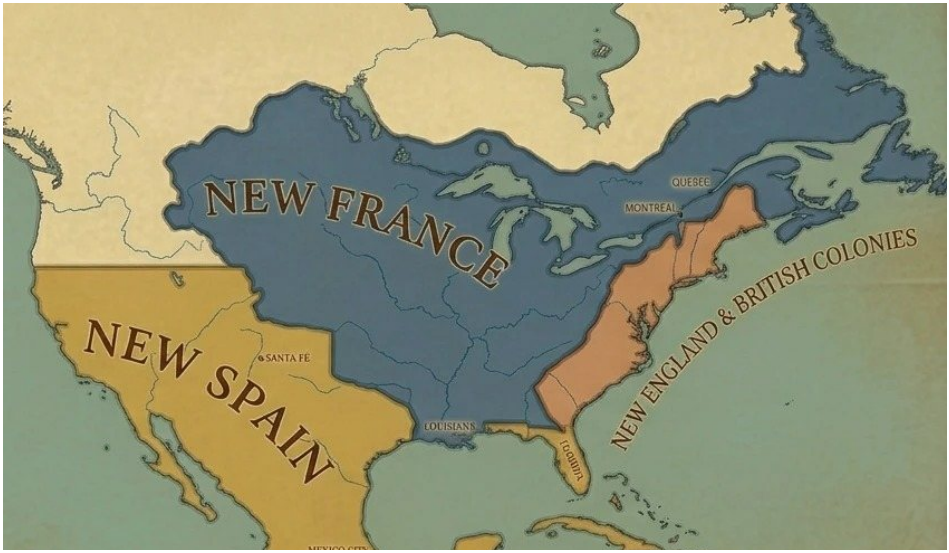
The Thirteen Colonies, north to south



		An interesting fact about the state
NH	New Hampshire	
MA	Massachusetts (with Maine)	*where the war starts*
RI	Rhode Island	*home of the Touro shul*
CT	Connecticut	
NY	New York	*held by the British — Sherith Israel shul*
NJ	New Jersey	*Morristown winter camp*
PA	Pennsylvania	*Philadelphia: largest city*
MD	Maryland	
DE	Delaware	*Washington's crossing*
VA	Virginia[2]	*Yorktown ends the war*
NC	North Carolina	
SC	South Carolina	
GA	Georgia	*the youngest colony*

[2] See the Proclamation Line of 1763? After the 7 Years War the British agreed with their Indian allies that the Americans wouldn't move past that line. Americans weren't happy about this, which is one of the reasons for the war. We'll talk about this from the Indian perspective in Chapter 13.

North America in 1754 — the three empires



North America in 1754, on the eve of war.[3]

It began with a war that had nothing to do with taxes. From 1754 to 1763, Britain and France fought for control of North America in what the colonists called the French and Indian War — and what the rest of the world calls "the Seven Years' War," because the French and the Indians were only a small part of it, and different Indians fought on each side.[4] A young Virginia officer named George Washington started the conflict in the Pennsylvania backcountry, leading a small force against the French — and losing badly, surrendering after most of his men were killed.[5] The fight spread into a world war, and when the conflict ended Britain had won an empire. Yet empires are expensive, and Britain was now deep in debt. To London the solution was obvious: Britain had spent a fortune defending the colonies from France, so the colonies could help pay the debt back. Parliament started taxing. The Stamp Act of 1765 put a duty on nearly every printed document — contracts, newspapers, even playing cards — plus new taxes on sugar and imports. It was a spectacular political blunder, because the act landed hardest on exactly the people most able to make trouble: the lawyers, printers, merchants, and politicians who were the loudest, best-con-

[3] "Not really accurate — the Europeans didn't actually control most of this or even know what was there. Native nations lived there. They had claims like "to the mouth of the Mississippi river," without knowing where that was."

[4] Some of this account comes from Dean Harry Ballan, who I heard speak in the spring of 2021.

[5] ...and which the French abandoned soon after anyway.

nected men in every town.[6] More laws followed.[7] The colonists asked king George III to compromise. He refused.

A padlock — for John Locke.

Why did any of this lead to revolution? Because the ground had already shifted under the king's feet. For more than a thousand years, kings had ruled Europe as a matter of course — their power was assumed to come from God, and questioning it was nearly blasphemy. Beginning around the 1700s that certainty cracked. The Protestant Reformation had shown that even the mightiest institutions could be defied,[8] and then came the philosophers.

Chief among them was the Englishman John Locke. Rights, Locke argued, do not belong to the king — they belong to the individual, and they come from the Creator, not the crown — the human king. You may have heard of these three: life, **liberty** (doing what you want, so long as you don't hurt anyone else), and property, and said no government could justly take them away. A people whose rights were trampled, he added, had every right to revolt. Radical words — and they traveled.[9]

A writer named Thomas Paine packed Locke's ideas into a plain-spoken pamphlet, "Common Sense,"[10] which became the runaway bestseller of the age and made independence feel not merely possible but obvious. "No taxation without representation," the colonists insisted. And a Virginia firebrand named Patrick Henry supplied the line nobody has forgotten.

> *Give me* **liberty**, *or give me* **death**.
>
> **— Patrick Henry, Virginia Politician**

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[6] New Jersey once tried speed cameras that ticketed anyone over the limit automatically. Then politicians started getting tickets — and the cameras vanished within days.

[7] One law forced colonists to let British soldiers move into their houses. That indignity later earned its own line in the Bill of Rights.

[8] The Reformation was led by Christians who broke away from a Catholic Church that had grown reaaallllyyy controlling.

[9] Some of my favorite Locke quotes — "Don't believe everything you read on the internet," for one. He lived centuries before the internet, which, contrary to rumor, was not invented in 1587.

[10] I tried reading it once. I couldn't get through it.

Rules for Rulers & Keys to Power

Here is a sneakier way to understand the whole war — not as a clash of ideals, but as a fight over who pays whom.[11] The big idea is this: **no man rules alone.** Every leader, from a king to a class president, needs a circle of supporters to stay in charge. Call them the *keys to power*. To keep them loyal, a ruler hands out money, land, and privileges — the treasure. Everyone outside that circle is, in cold political math, an expense.

You might think a kind ruler would simply help everyone. Try it, though, and you have less treasure left for the keys who actually keep you in power — who may then decide someone else would pay them better. So the treasure flows to the keys, and the keys alone.

The number of keys is the whole difference between a dictatorship and a democracy. A dictator needs only a handful of generals and cronies, and can ignore everyone else — especially when his treasure gushes from oil or foreign aid rather than from his people's work.[12] A democracy is the reverse: power rests on so many keys — voters, by the millions — that leaders must keep the country productive enough to tax. Educated, prosperous people are harder to push around, which is exactly why leaders in democracies last a fraction as long as dictators do.

Now watch the Revolution through this lens. It plays out almost like an argument across a table:

[11] The framework comes from *The Dictator's Handbook* by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, made famous by CGP Grey's video "The Rules for Rulers."

[12] This is why many countries with oil are dictatorships. They get their treasure from the ground and don't need their people.

The War, as an Argument

England: "We just paid so much money to win land from France and we have little treasure. We need to get some from the colonies."

Leaders of the colonies: "No."

England: "We're going to tax your documents and give treasure to British governors and judges that we choose."

Leaders of the colonies: "No treasure? Then we have nothing to lose if we fight you."

England: "Do too. Your treasure comes from trade. We're going to close Boston!"

Leaders of the colonies: "Big mistake. That was also your key to power and it is gone."

England: "Doesn't matter. You don't even have an army."

Leaders of the colonies: "This guy, General Washington — he has a lot of keys and is on our side now. We've been telling people you're killing them so they'll think it's worth fighting."

England: "We're not killers!"

Colonies: "Do the words 'Boston massacre' mean anything to you?"

England: "That wasn't a massacre. Only a few people died after physically threatening some British 18 year olds who got scared and fired their weapons against orders."

Leaders of the colonies: "Well, we got all our newspapers to call it a massacre so too bad."

France: "I'd like some more power too. We're going to help the colonies win the war."

Two-Thirds of colonists: "We don't actually want a war ... we have nothing to gain from it."

England: "Did someone say something?"

Leaders of colonies: "I didn't hear anything."

France: "Me neither."

Six years later ...

England: "We're out of treasure. Our people don't care about the war and our keys to power want to get more treasure — they can do that by ending the war and reopening trade with the colonies."

Leaders of colonies: "Agreed! Let's do that and become trading partners for the next 250+ years!"

The framework makes the Revolution feel less like a clash of abstract ideals and more like a negotiation that broke down. Each side was doing exactly what the theory predicts: England trying to extract treasure from the colonies, the colonists protecting the sources of their own wealth, and France joining when it saw a chance to shift the balance of power. What looks like heroism and villainy from the inside looks, from a distance, like rational actors following the logic of the keys.

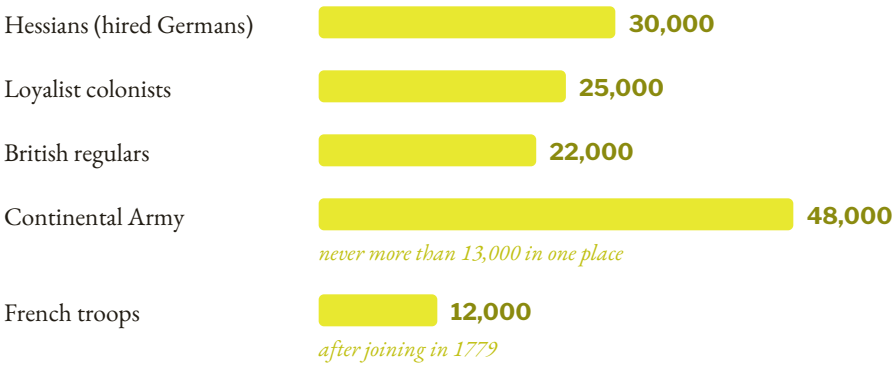
The framework travels surprisingly far. When Avshalom rebelled against Dovid HaMelech and was defeated, Dovid spared Shimi — who had backed the rebellion — because Shimi still controlled keys Dovid would need. Mishlei 21:1 makes the same point from the other direction: the heart of a king is like channeled water in Hashem's hand. Even the mightiest ruler is not truly free — he is always downstream of the people who hold him up.

The War, by the Numbers

When did the war begin? When radicals in Boston dumped the tea, the British blocked Boston's port taking away Boston's treasure, then in 1775 drew the British army out to Lexington and Concord — and beat them. When did the fighting end? At Yorktown in 1781, with scattered fighting until the Treaty of Paris in 1783. In between were seven long years that, on paper, the colonists had no business winning.

Look at the sides. Britain was a global power of eight million people, with the finest navy on earth and a professional army it could rent and reinforce. The colonies had about two and a half million people — nearly half a million of them enslaved — and no real army at all. The numbers tell the story:

Soldiers at peak strength



So how did the colonists survive? Two advantages no map shows. First, distance: every British soldier and biscuit had to cross three thousand miles of ocean. Second, France — which in 1779 sent troops and, more importantly, a fleet.

Send for Haym Salomon

A Haym Salomon plaque in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens.

Wars run on money, and the new nation had almost none — its paper currency was nearly worthless, the states would not pay, and the treasury was empty. Before the march to Yorktown, Washington was warned the war chest was bare and his hungry soldiers were ready to leave. His answer was four words: **Send for Haym Salomon.**

Salomon found the money — selling war bonds, brokering loans, and advancing his own funds, in today's money some $9.5 billion. He even paid to keep James Madison and others in Philadelphia while they wrote the Constitution. He was never repaid. He died in 1785, at forty-four, in debtors' prison,[13] penniless — remembered now by a handful of plaques.[14]

[13] People who owed money used to be thrown in prison for it.

[14] One of them stands in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens.

Why Jewish Americans Backed the Revolution

Salomon's loyalty was not unusual. The small American Jewish community — perhaps three thousand people — was, with a few notable exceptions, fiercely **Patriot** (a colonist who sided with independence, as opposed to a Loyalist who backed the king). Three reasons stand out. **Religious freedom:** the Patriots' rhetoric of conscience and equal citizenship was, for Jews, a profound improvement on what most of Europe and even the British empire offered. **Equal rights, including in uniform:** the British army would not commission Jewish officers; the **Continental Army** — the colonies' own fighting force — did. **Geography:** most Jews lived in the major port cities — Newport, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Savannah — and those cities bore the brunt of British blockades and trade restrictions. The city party was the Patriot party.

Blood, Spies, and Scarlet Coats

The cost in lives was grim. The Patriots lost about 6,800 killed in battle and far more to disease and to British prison ships, which were as deadly as any battlefield.[15] Roughly 7,000 Black men fought for the colonies and some 20,000 for the British, who promised them freedom. Most Native nations sided with Britain, which had at least tried to keep the colonists from pushing west — a reasonable bet that turned tragic, because once the Americans won, west they went. We'll discuss more about this in the chapter on Indians.

Battle itself was strangely formal. Armies marched at each other in tidy rows — a single regiment ran to over 800 men, drummers and fifers included — halted, leveled their muskets, fired one crashing volley, and reloaded while the enemy did the same; then came the bayonets. Muskets could barely hit anything past fifty yards, so the killing was done up close. The British wore their famous scarlet coats; the Americans wore whatever they had until Washington settled on blue. Both sides leaned on spies: the patriot Nathan Hale was caught and hanged by the British, and the British officer John André, working with the traitor Benedict Arnold, was caught and hanged by the Americans.

Major Battles

The fighting ranged up and down the same thin ribbon of coast. Here is where the war was won and lost.

[15] One was a ship anchored in New York Harbor, packed with rats and disease, where the commander pocketed most of the food money. The prisoners did not fare well.

Major Battles of the Revolutionary War

There were hundreds of battles and many commanders, though we're going to focus on some of George Washington's major battles only.

Lexington & Concord (1775).
The British marched out of Boston to seize the militia's weapons and met armed colonists instead. Someone fired — nobody knows who — and the British were chased back into the city. The war was on.

New York & New Jersey (1776).
General Howe drove Washington out of New York and nearly destroyed his army; a lucky fog let them slip away. Washington retreated across New Jersey to a miserable winter at Morristown, where many soldiers starved or went home. Britain would hold New York for the rest of the war.

"Washington Crossing the Delaware" (Leutze, 1851).

Trenton (Christmas 1776).
Washington ferried his men back across the icy Delaware at night and fell on the Hessian garrison, which was sleeping off the holiday. The famous painting of that crossing was made decades later and gets most of the details wrong, but it captured the daring of the thing. A win at Princeton followed.

Some Things Wrong With This Picture

- It was painted in 1851, in Düsseldorf, Germany — not in 1776 in New Jersey.
- The original was destroyed in World War II.
- Washington and his men are heading the wrong way.
- The ice could not have been that big or that thick.
- You cannot stand up in a small boat on choppy water like that.
- Boats like those could not have carried horses.
- The flag pictured did not yet exist.

Valley Forge (1777–78).

A winter of cold, hunger, and disease, while the British wintered in comfort in Philadelphia. What held the army together was the news that France was joining the war.

Yorktown (1781).
A French fleet sealed off the sea while French and American troops closed in by land, and the trapped British surrendered. Britain could have fought on — yet the war had grown unpopular at home, and the Caribbean sugar islands were worth far more. The Treaty of Paris ended it in 1783.

Hazanim of the War

The war split the small Jewish community exactly as it split everyone else — sometimes down the middle of a single congregation.

Gershom Mendes Seixas of New York was a fierce patriot.[16] When the British seized the city in 1776, he refused to live under their rule — better to close the shul, he said — and led many of his congregants to Philadelphia for the duration, returning only after independence was won. Then a loyalist Hessian ran what remained of the congregation.

Isaac Touro of Newport chose the other side. The Dutch-born hazan of the Sephardic congregation there was a Loyalist; when the British took Newport he stayed, then followed the Crown to occupied New York and finally to Kingston, Jamaica, where he died in 1783.[17]

And **most of the world's Jews** stayed out of it entirely. The great centers of Torah learning were in Eastern Europe, where the Vilna Gaon lived out his life in Washington's lifetime;[18] America was far from those centers, and the Jews who did cross the ocean tended to be the most ready to assimilate. Even Adams and Jefferson, friends of Jewish rights in principle, were uneasy with traditional, Yiddish-speaking Jews. The great waves would come later — from Germany in the mid-1800s, then from Eastern Europe after the 1880s.

The two hazanim made opposite bets, and both made sense. Seixas left New York when the British took it because staying would mean living under the authority he reject-

[16] The name Seixas comes from the word for "six."

[17] Jamaica had so large a Jewish community that the colonial government shut down on Shabbos.

[18] Chassidim might name the Ba'al Shem Tov as the towering figure of that age instead.

ed; Touro moved *to* New York because the British were there and he was loyal to the Crown. That most of the world's Jews were untouched by either choice — going on with their lives in Vilna or Warsaw — is a reminder that the American Jewish community of 1776 was a small and isolated outpost, not yet the center of gravity it would later become.

The Touro Synagogue & Washington's Letter

The Touro Synagogue in Newport — the oldest still standing in America.

In Newport stands the Touro Synagogue, the oldest still active U.S. synagogue building — a serene Sephardic sanctuary so devoted to symmetry that its builders added false doors just to keep the walls balanced. After Washington became president, a few synagogues wrote a letter to Washington to ask about how Jews would be treated. In August 1790, President Washington came to visit Newport, and the congregation's warden, Moses Seixas, a fellow member of "The Freemasons," greeted him with a letter having many of Seixas's words. Washington's reply has echoed ever since. Here it is, nearly in full:

"The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights."

> *... the Government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance ...*

"It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration... May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy."

That last image — every person safe under his own vine and fig tree — comes from the prophet Micah,[19] a few verses before the famous promise of beating swords into plowshares. A war that began with a tax on paper had ended with a king's authority traded for a citizen's promise.

Washington added phrases of his own to Moses Seixas's words — by making the promise his government's, he turned a congregation's hope into a national commitment. Jefferson, who likely helped draft such replies, was personally comfortable with Jews who behaved like Protestants; the letter is more generous than that. The famous phrase

[19] Micah 4:4. Washington reached for the same verse more than once in his life.

about bigotry and persecution originated with Seixas, but Washington gave it the force of federal policy. Fine words and full acceptance are not the same thing — the ideal was real, but so were its limits.

Looking back: the Revolution was not a majority movement — perhaps a third of colonists were Patriots, a third neutral, a third Loyalist. Britain had the finest navy on earth and a professional army; the colonists had the ocean between them, France, and an enemy who ran out of political will before they ran out of troops. Haym Salomon kept the new government solvent long enough for all of it to work, and was never repaid. Whether the war was justified is the question historians still argue, and should.