After the Battle of Lexington and Concord, New Englanders from Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and what would later become the state of Vermont streamed into the vicinity of Boston. Not really an army, this armed mob wanted the British out of Boston.

The sheer numbers of those gathered on the hills outside of Boston deeply troubled British Military General Thomas Gage and his newly arrived subordinates, William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne.

On the evening of June 15/16, the patriots moved forward to Breeds Hill, a more prominent location closer to Boston on the Charlestown peninsula, where they prepared a fortified position that all but invited a British response. General John Stark from New Hampshire recognized that the left flank of the fortified position was exposed along the south bank of the Mystic River. He and his men assembled a makeshift split-rail barricade to blunt any flanking action employed by the British. When the British officers looked out at what had been erected in the short span of one evening they were stunned. Gage knew he had to take action.

On the hot afternoon of June 17, 1775, Gage and his commanders ordered British soldiers to be transported across Boston Harbor and disembarked in lower Charlestown. Gage would force the mob’s hand with an assault.

As the British moved into position, the fatigued but spirited defenders took position inside their hastily thrown up fortifications. They could see what was coming. Amongst the defenders were several enslaved and free African Americans, most notably Salem Poor, who would play a pivotal role in the coming fight.
Led by the courageous General William Howe, King George’s troops climbed Breeds Hill in perfect battle formation. Allegedly, one of the American commanders of the improvised garrison, William Prescott, encouraged his men to “not fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” As British troops neared the fortification, the patriots unleashed a withering volley of bullets, creating an absolute slaughter. One patriot said afterwards, “They advanced toward us in order to swallow us up, but they found a choaky mouthful of us.” It was a bloodbath as the British retreated back to their lines. Once more they pushed up the hill, stepping over the bodies of their dead and wounded comrades, and once more they received the rage of a patriot volley. The heat and humidity did not take sides as patriots and British dripped sweat while the haze of gunfire blanketed the hill.

The British had underestimated the resolve of the patriots and their skill in crafting a fortified position. Regrouping for a third time, the British once more stepped off to assault the hill. This time they succeeded in breaking through as the patriots ran out of gunpowder. Intense hand-to-hand fighting broke out inside the fortification once British troops breached the patriot works. In the close-quarters fight, Salem Poor brought down British Maj. John Pitcairn, who had risen to infamy at Lexington and Concord.

The patriots eventually retreated and returned to their lines outside of the perimeter of Boston. British casualties had been great, with 282 of the King’s troops dead and another 800 wounded. Patriot casualties were less than half of the British total.

Though defeated, the patriots were not demoralized. Those who chose to stay and keep the British bottled up in Boston became the nucleus of the Continental Army. The transformation of the mob into an army would fall upon the shoulders of the Virginian, George Washington, as the Continental Congress commissioned him to take charge of the rebels outside of Boston and mold them into an organized fighting force. Known for his military intelligence, compassion, and bravery on the field of battle, Washington elicited unquestioned loyalty, courage, and a sense of calm within the ranks. Washington assumed command in Cambridge, Massachusetts within two weeks of the incorrectly named Battle of Bunker Hill (the battle was actually fought on Breed’s Hill). After June 17, 1775 reconciliation between England and her colonies was no longer possible.
The Siege of Boston, March 5, 1776

The Siege of Boston was the first major action of the Revolution. Following the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, the British army under General Thomas Gage withdrew to the relative safety of Boston. Hot on their heels were the Massachusetts militia, commanded by General Artemas Ward, who quickly surrounded the town and settled in for a siege.

The Americans controlled the land approaches, but were unable to blockade the harbor. By this early stage in the war, the American Navy did not exist, nor could it ever contend with the might of the Royal Navy. In the aftermath of the British victory at Bunker Hill, both sides resigned themselves to a long siege. On July 2, George Washington arrived and took command of the American forces, now officially the Continental Army. American reinforcements also arrived from New England, the Middle Colonies, and Virginia. Some of these men were armed with the famed Kentucky, or Pennsylvania, Rifle, a critical addition to Washington’s firepower. Washington, however, lacked heavy artillery, and could not risk the losses of a direct assault. The British also could not attack the American position without risking heavy losses.

The winter was hard on both armies, with supplies running low and disease rampant. Fort Ticonderoga, which had been captured by the Americans in May, provided a key opportunity to bolster Washington’s firepower, and winter provided the means to get the heavy artillery cannons to Boston. Ticonderoga was an old British fort located at the southern end of Lake Champlain in New York. The Americans had little use for the run-down fort, but its guns would prove priceless. As winter set in, Knox loaded 59 cannons onto huge sleds and dragged them 300 miles to Boston.
Knox’s 42 sleds also carried 2,300 pounds of lead for making bullets. By March, these cannon were finally in position. On March 2, the Americans began their cannonade, with the British responding in kind. For two days, both sides hammered away with little effect.

On the night of March 5, Washington would make the critical decision to fortify Dorchester Heights and emplace a number of the heavy cannons. This would give him a commanding position of both the town and harbor, threatening both the Royal Army and Navy. In the morning, General William Howe, seeing the American works on Dorchester Heights exclaimed, “my god, these fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months.” The strength of this position, and with an assault impractical because of the weather, compelled the British to withdraw.

By March 8, the British were ready to negotiate. Some prominent citizens of Boston sent Washington a letter offering to not burn the town if they were allowed to leave unharmed. Ships carried 9,000 British troops as well as 1,100 Loyalists who preferred to leave their homes behind rather than live with rebels. Some Americans hoped the war was over. Washington, however, knew it was only the beginning. Nevertheless, Washington had achieved a key victory, proving that the Continental Army was a match for the British. After securing the town, on April 4, Washington and his Continentals quickly departed and headed south to defend New York.
After compelling the British evacuation of Boston in the early months of 1776, George Washington accurately guessed that their next target would be New York City. Washington transferred his Continental Army to the city in April and May, hoping to turn back or at least severely hurt the next wave of British invaders.

Discipline was sorely lacking among the Americans, many of whom had never been nearly so far from home and had never served in a professional military. They were awed by the arrival of the British fleet in late June. One man remarked that it looked like "all London afloat." The British infantry disembarked on Staten Island.

The British warships could dominate the river waterways that cut through New York City, rendering the American defense unsustainable. Nevertheless, Washington sought to fight a battle and inflict some damage before abandoning his position. His defensive arrangement, however, was fatally flawed. He split his forces between Brooklyn and Manhattan, preventing easy reinforcement or escape across the Hudson and East Rivers. Furthermore, his line atop Guan Heights did not stretch to cover the Jamaica Pass, a hole that would soon be exploited by British soldiers.

On August 22, British transports moved 10,000 infantrymen to Long Island. Wrongly thinking that this was a diversion for a main attack on Manhattan, Washington did not assemble his forces to meet the new threat. On August 27, the British launched an attack on the Americans stationed at Brooklyn.
The Americans were in two lines: Guan Heights to the south and Brooklyn Heights farther north. The fighting for Guan Heights raged throughout the morning. British troops filtered through Jamaica Pass and broke through several other American positions, eventually gaining control of the ridge. The battle’s bloodiest fighting occurred near "Battle Pass," where Hessian mercenaries fought the patriots hand-to-hand.

As the Americans pulled back towards Brooklyn Heights, one contingent was nearly surrounded by the onrushing British. 300-400 Maryland soldiers, now known as the "Maryland 400," countercharged in order to buy time for their comrades to escape. More than 250 Marylanders were killed as they battled desperately against the British legions, but the rest of the army managed to escape. Washington, watching the battle, remarked, "what brave men I must this day lose." By nightfall, the Americans were trapped on Brooklyn Heights with the East River behind them. British General William Howe deiced to entrench and lay siege rather than loose men unnecessarily.

Washington, however, would not consent to a siege and eventual surrender. In the dark of night, he coordinated a retreat across the river without losing a single life. When the British probed the American lines, they found them empty. Despite his tactical defeat, Washington had scored strategic points by keeping his army intact. He would be hard pressed to continue that streak as the British, now very much annoyed, moved to occupy Manhattan. The Battle of Brooklyn was the largest battle of the Revolution and the first fought after the Declaration of Independence was announced.

When the American Revolution began, both sides adopted the same military strategy. That strategy was to defeat the enemy in one big battle. After barely escaping from his loss in New York, Washington revised his strategy. In the future, he wrote Congress, he would avoid large battles that might put his army at risk. Instead, the war would be a defensive. Rather than defeating the British, Washington hoped to tire them out.
Battle of Trenton, December 26, 1776

Christmas 1776 proved bleak for the fledging Continental Army and their commander, George Washington. Since the previous summer, they had been pummeled by the British under Lord William Howe at every turn. Driven across New Jersey and now huddled in a frozen encampment in Pennsylvania on the western banks of the Delaware River, Washington was desperate. His men were poorly clothed, in ill health, starving, and many of their enlistments were due to expire. In order to keep his band together and improve morale, Washington sought to take the initiative from Howe. He knew that across the Delaware River, encamped and housed in Trenton, New Jersey, was a garrison of German Hessians [mercenary soldiers hired by the British government]. He thought that attacking the Hessians at dawn on the day after Christmas was a gamble worth taking. If the Americans won, they would not only defeat a force of European troops, on their own terms, but they would also secure much-needed supplies and provisions.

His plan was daring. He would move his 2,400 man force, including horses and eighteen cannons, across the ice-choked Delaware River, and strike from the north at sunrise on December 26, the morning after Christmas. The task of ferrying everything across the Delaware River fell on General John Glover and his rugged band of Massachusetts fishermen. After revealing his plan at a council of war, Washington ordered as many boats as possible be located and ferried to his position ten miles above Trenton. The freezing soldiers of the Continental Army were given meager provisions for three days and were not told the objective, only that it will be “Victory or Death.”

The moon was full on Christmas night. As men and material loaded into the transports Henry Knox, Washington’s Chief of Artillery recalled in a letter to his wife, “Floating ice in the river made the labor almost incredible.” The river’s strong and swift current complicated matters, as did a nasty nor’easter which began pelting everyone with snow, freezing rain and sleet, accompanied by a steady and stiff wind. By 2:00 am, Washington’s troops were across. “Perseverance” [determination], wrote Knox, “accomplished what first seemed impossible.”
On the outskirts of Trenton, Washington divided his army into three columns. General John Sullivan’s command would approach Trenton along the River Road on the west edge of the town. To the center and the left Washington left those columns under the command of General Nathaniel Greene, who would enter the town by its two principal road arteries. It was to be a coordinated attack.

Delays in the crossing meant that it was daylight by the time they reached Trenton, but Washington did still achieve the surprise he sought. The storm that had delayed the crossing had provided a small amount of cover. The Hessian outposts on the edge of town were quickly overrun, and on cue, the main body of troops from all sides rushed into Trenton. Recalling the assault, one American officer said, “I never could conceive that one spirit should so universally animate both officers and men to rush forward into action.”

Knox’s guns sprang into action too, covering the length of the streets and permitting no avenue of escape for the stunned Hessians who poured out of their barracks to repel the invaders. Close quarters, hand-to-hand fighting raged in the narrow streets of a town now fully awake. Knox wrote, “there succeeded a scene of war of which I had often conceived but never saw before.” It was as if the pent-up rage of the Continental Army had been unleashed by the furies of war.

For two hours the battle raged with the Americans never relenting. The Hessians pulled back in as orderly a fashion as they could through the streets of Trenton only to be surrounded by the Americans in a peach orchard on the outskirts. Hessian commander Col. Johann Rall attempted to rally his men, but it was of no use. They were demoralized and frightened. An American soldier hit Rall with one shot, mortally wounding him. The remaining Hessians threw down their weapons and pleaded for mercy.

The Hessians lost 22 men killed in the fight with another 86 receiving wounds and close to 900 were taken prisoner. The Americans also seized much-needed supplies, including additional cannons and 1,200 muskets. The Americans suffered only five casualties, all only wounded. Among them was eighteen-year-old James Monroe, future President of the United States, who suffered a severe wound in the shoulder. It was a stunning victory that proved a vital boost to the American cause when it desperately needed it. News of Washington’s victory electrified Patriots.
As Washington’s revised strategy called to tire the British out, the British developed a new plan that would divide the rebels by taking control of New York’s Hudson River Valley. Control of this waterway would allow the British to cut New England off from the rest of the states. Without men and supplies from the New England states, the Continental army would surely collapse.

To carry out this plan, General John Burgoyne headed at snails-pace from Canada with 7,500 British soldiers, German Hessians, American Indian warriors, and 600 wagons—30 of them filled with his own personal baggage—to meet General Howe, who was supposed to march his army north from New York City to Albany. All the luggage slowed his company down significantly. Even in the wilderness, “Gentleman Johnny” Burgoyne sipped champagne with his supper.

However, General Howe made other plans, and instead marched his troops to Philadelphia, the rebel’s capital, in hopes to lure Washington into another major battle (Howe hoped it would be the last one). Washington, however, refused the bait. Instead he played hide-and-seek with Howe, ambushing Howe’s men and disappearing into the countryside like the French and Indians did so well during the French and Indian War.

Meanwhile, by the time the slow-moving Burgoyne and his army finally reached Saratoga Springs on the Hudson River Valley, American forces outnumbered him.

General Horatio Gates commanded the Northern Department of the Continental Army. He was supported by General Benedict Arnold and by Col. Daniel Morgan, leader of 500 crack shot Virginia riflemen. Gates’ army numbered 8,500 strong. To disrupt the British advance south, Gates ordered his men to erect defenses on the crest of Bemis Heights, which was part of a series of bluffs from which both the Hudson River and the paralleling road could be seen. From there, American artillery
had the range to hit both the river and the road. In order to attack, the British would have to use the road, as the forest and vegetation to the east were too dense to permit effective troop movements.

The Americans also erected a fortified wall a little less than a mile from Bemis Heights. The wall extended about three-quarters of a mile, creating a line shaped like a large "L". Twenty-two cannons were emplaced behind the wall, providing the Americans with ample artillery cover. It would be a difficult position for the British to crack.

On September 19, 1777, Burgoyne divided his army into three columns. He wanted to use each column to probe American defenses. Col. Daniel Morgan's light infantry engaged with the center column on September 19 near the farm of John Freeman. It was a hotly contested fight, and very fierce at times, with the field changing hands several times. By evening, the British (reinforced by 500 German Hessians) held the field, but the action had blunted their forward motion. Hoping to be reinforced with additional troops from New York City, Burgoyne chose to dig in.

As food dwindled, the army was reduced to half-ration and literally stuck in the middle of the New York wilderness. The British began looking for ways to escape. While the British remained stuck, the American army grew to 13,000 strong. Receiving intelligence that Burgoyne's men were on the move, they attacked the British position, forcing them back.

American General Benedict Arnold galloped into the fray and rallied the Americans in the attack on the British defensive position. A fellow officer in the Continental Line said that Arnold "behaved more like a madman than a cool and discreet officer." During this engagement he sustained a serious wound in his left leg.

By early evening, the Americans gained a tactical advantage and could easily get behind British lines. Realizing their plight, the British pulled back near the river and held out for several weeks. On the morning of October 8, Burgoyne's army attempted to escape north, but a cold, hard rain forced them to stop and encamp near the town of Saratoga. Cold, hungry, and weary, they dug in and prepared to defend themselves, but within two days the Americans had them surrounded.

After a week's negotiation, Burgoyne's army surrendered on October 17, 1777. The British had been humiliated. The Americans had proved their worth on the battlefield against the greatest army in the world, lifting American morale, inspiring the cause of independence further, and convincing the French, and later other European nations, to back the new United States. A formal Treaty of Alliance was signed with the French and the balance of the war tipped in favor of the Americans.
Southern Campaign, 1778-1781

The Southern Campaign began with British concern over the course of the war in the North. Failure at Saratoga, fear of French intervention, and over-all failure to bring the rebels to heel persuaded British military strategists to turn their attention to the South. Some in Britain even suggested that New England was a lost cause anyway and not worth the effort. The British did have some success in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, but their efforts failed to gain momentum. They appeared, in fact, to lack any over-all strategy to crush the rebels.

British General Henry Clinton, in his memoirs, *The American Rebellion*, stated that the British goal in the South "was to support the Loyalists and restore the authority of the King’s government". Some even envisioned British forces in the North driving south toward Virginia and trapping American forces. The British had additional motives for the South. Southern agricultural products—notably tobacco, rice, and indigo—were important to British trade interests. Moreover, Charleston was coveted, especially, as the most important southern port and the fourth largest and richest city in North America. The fall of Charleston on May 12, 1780, was perhaps the worst defeat Americans suffered during the entire Revolution.

The American cause was further bolstered in December 1780 with the arrival of Nathanael Greene, one of Washington’s most trusted generals, to command the Continental Army in the South. In late 1780, Cornwallis detached part of his force under Tarleton to continue to hamper patriot activities in the Carolinas. Greene sent one of his own favored commanders, Daniel Morgan, to counter Tarleton. The two detachments met on January 17, 1781 at the Battle of Cowpens, near the North and South Carolina border, where Morgan’s superb tactical abilities soundly defeated Tarleton.
Further, “guerillas”, soldiers not part of the regular army, kept the American cause alive. One of them was Francis Marion, who was also known as the “Swamp Fox.” Marion’s band of rebels harassed the British with hit-and-run raids. They attacked and then faded into swamps and forests like foxes. Late in 1780, Washington sent General Nathanael Greene to slow the British advance through the South. Greene’s army was too small for Cornwallis’s to meet at a major battle, so instead, Greene led Cornwallis’s troops on an exhausting chase through the southern backcountry. Greene’s strategy worked, and by April 1781, Cornwallis wrote that he was “quite tired of marching about the country” and retreated his army to Yorktown in Virginia.
With his back to the York River, British General Charles Lord Cornwallis intended to resupply and refit his 9,000 man army in the fall of 1781. Sensing an opportunity, General George Washington’s Continental Army, close to 20,000 strong, and now reinforced by several thousand French troops, opted to lay siege to Cornwallis’s Army. Cornwallis had thrown up a series of fortifications on the outskirts of Yorktown while the majority of his men hunkered down in the town. When the American and French army arrived at Yorktown, the French secured the left flank and the Americans the right. The Royal Navy had intended to sail up the Chesapeake Bay in order to provide supplies and much needed reinforcements to the encircled Cornwallis, however, no such aid arrived. On September 5, the British aid and resupply fleet, met by French warships at Battle of the Capes, was heavily defeated and forced to abandon the British Army at Yorktown. Cornwallis was trapped.

With the help of French engineers, American and French troops began to dig a series of parallel trenches, which brought troops and artillery close enough to inflict damage on the British. Feverishly working night and day, soldiers of the combined forces employed spades and axes to create a perimeter line of trenches that would encircle the British. British deserters alerted the Allies that British morale inside Yorktown was low. As the work on the parallels continued, the British attempted to disrupt Allied operations by using what little artillery they had left. Their attempts proved pointless.

On October 7, the Allied lines were now within musket range of the British. Two days later American and French artillery were in place. On the afternoon of October 9 the Allied barrage began, with the French opening artillery fire. On the American side, George Washington touched off the first American canon to commence their assault. The American artillery consisted of three
twenty-four pounders, three eighteen pounders, two eight-inch howitzers [short gun for firing shells on high trajectories at low velocities], and six mortars, totaling fourteen guns. For nearly a week the artillery barrage was ceaseless, shattering whatever nerve the British had remaining and punching holes in British defenses. Deliberately firing all night, Washington’s forces pounded the British in an effort to prevent them from repairing their damages.

On October 11, Washington ordered that a second parallel be dug 400 yards closer to the British lines. On the evening of October 14, after incessant artillery pounding to weaken their defenses, American and French forces assaulted additional British fortifications. Washington chose to launch the attack on a moonless night adding to the element of surprise. Soldiers were told not to load or prime their weapons so as not to alert the enemy. The catch phrase for the assault was “Rochambeau,” which the Americans translated as “Rush on boys!”

The operation commenced with a diversionary attack on a fortification further to the north of Yorktown at 6:30 pm, giving the appearance that the town itself was to be stormed. Then, Alexander Hamilton's force consisting of a detachment of 400 of his light infantry, assaulted the remaining British fortification with bayonets fixed and muskets unloade. To prevent the British defenders from escaping the coming onslaught, Hamilton dispatched troops to cover the rear of the fortification. Serious fighting ensued in close quarters, but the British were overwhelmed. It was a stunning victory with the Americans sustaining only 34 casualties.

On the morning of October 17, a lone British drummer boy and British officer waving a white handkerchief tied to the end of a sword were seen at the forward position of the British lines. Blindfolded and brought inside American lines, the British officer secured terms of surrender for the British Army. Two days later on October 19, 1781 in a field outside of Yorktown the capitulation took place as British troops and their Hessian allies with flags furled and cased marched sullenly between contingents of American and French forces.

The British sought honorable terms of surrender, but Washington refused as American forces were denied the same honor in Charleston, South Carolina earlier in the war. Legend has it that the British band played the nursery tune, “The World’s Turned Upside Down” as they surrendered. That legend has become part of American folklore, but the world changed that day as the military operations of the War for Independence ceased. Two year later, in 1783, the British would abandon New York City and Washington’s forces would victoriously enter that city. The war was over and a new nation was born.