The Battle of Lexington and Concord—“The Shot Heard ‘Round the World”

**Following resolutions made by the Continental Congress, armed conflict seemed imminent. King George, who declared the colonies in a state of rebellion, had authorized the deliverance of British soldiers to reinforce those who had occupied Boston since 1768. General Thomas Gage was sent to Boston to disarm the colonists and arrest the leaders of the rebellion, namely John Hancock and Samuel Adams. After learning of the existence of a large colonial arsenal in Concord, about 20 miles northwest of Boston, General Gage sent a unit of 700 troops under Colonel Francis Smith to march to Concord for the purposes of seizing and destroying artillery and ammunition. The Colonists, however, already knew their weapons were in jeopardy and had moved most of them to secret locations before the arrival of the Redcoats.**

**As British troops mobilized in Boston, Dr. Joseph Warren alerted members of the Sons of Liberty – Paul Revere and William Dawes. Dawes promptly rode to Concord to warn Hancock and Adams and Revere rode through the countryside yelling “The Regulars are Coming” or “The Regulars are Out.” By dawn, about 70 armed minutemen (Massachusetts militia) had gathered in the Lexington town common awaiting the arrival of the Redcoats.**

**When the British arrived on the scene, someone fired a shot that would become known as “The Shot Heard Round’ the World.” To this day, historians disagree on which side fired first, or, if the shot came from a spectator. Nevertheless, the Redcoats subsequently unleashed devastating volleys before charging the minutemen with their bayonets. As the Redcoats marched on to Concord, eight minutemen were killed and ten wounded. As the Redcoats marched on to Concord, the numbers of Minutemen arriving from surrounding towns swelled and the substantial militia retreated to a ridge about a mile from Concord across the North Bridge. Meanwhile, British troops had occupied Concord, destroyed several cannons, and burned leftover ammunition. A gun battle erupted as the two sides crossed at the North Bridge. In a stunning turn of events, the Minutemen held the bridge, forcing the Redcoats to retreat.**

**As the Redcoats exited Concord on their way back to Boston, hundreds or even  thousands of farmers and other colonial workers had positioned themselves behind trees, rocks, in pastures, under bridges, and in places they could not be seen, firing at the Redcoats as they marched on. Desperate Redcoats, frustrated by an enemy they could not see, and in revenge for the brutal scalping of one of their dead, sometimes pillaged houses and communities along the way, killing dozens of colonists. Colonial militias, however, continued to snipe away the lines of Redcoats. By the time they finally had made it back to Boston, 73 Redcoats were killed and 174 were wounded. The American Revolution had officially begun.**

**The Battle of Trenton—Washington’s Crossing**

**For the most part, and with the exception of the publication of the Declaration of Independence, 1776 had been a brutal year for Patriot morale. The Continental Army, under the command of George Washington, had been more or less routed in and around New York City, suffering tremendous casualties. Morale was low and the ragtag Continental army was forced to retreat through New Jersey to the west side of the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. On the other side of the river, in Trenton, N.J., were three regiments of Hessian soldiers (German soldiers) numbering about 1,400.**

**General Washington planned an attack on the Hessians from three directions to be executed on December 26, 1776, the day after Christmas. As the Continental Army prepared to cross the Delaware River on their way to Trenton, sleet and snow had begun to fall, delaying the crossing. With great effort and difficulty, the army eventually crossed the river in Durham boats, and the horses and artillery were ferried across. Two men fell overboard during the crossing, but both survived. Two other generals who were to assist Washington were delayed by the adverse weather. By 4:00 in the morning, however, the crossing was completed and the Continental Army began the nine mile march toward Trenton. During the march, Washington continually encouraged his troops, many of whom lacked shoes and were bleeding from their feet.**

**The first gunfire of the battle happened about a mile north of Trenton at a Hessian outpost, where the Hessians stationed there began a desperate retreat. Once in Trenton, Washington instructed the escape route to Princeton cut off. Washington’s army was soon joined by armies under the command of Generals Nathaniel Greene and John Sullivan. Cannons and artillery were set up at the heads of King and Queen Streets, the two main streets running through the city, which did tremendous damage to the Hessian ranks. Hessian soldiers advancing up the streets were quickly repulsed. Elsewhere in the city, Hessian forces were being overrun. Eventually, the majority of Hessian forces would become surrounded by American forces in an orchard. They were forced to surrender. Others surrendered when their escape routes had been cut off.**

**In the battle, only two American soldiers were killed and five were injured, though many more suffered from hypothermia and disease. The Hessians suffered 83 casualties, 22 of which were fatalities. 896 Hessians were captured, though several hundred did manage to escape. All four Hessian colonels, however, were killed. Although the battle was not important tactically, it inspired the American war effort and raised the morale of the army, which seemed to be threatened with dissolution.**

**The Battle of Saratoga**

**1777, British war generals devised a plan to bring a quick end to the war: They would effectively sever New England from the rest of the colonies by taking control of New York City, Albany, and the Hudson River. First, British General John Burgoyne would lead 8,000 troops from Canada. Barry St. Leger would direct his troops east from Lake Ontario, and General Howe would move his troops north from New York City, where all three would meet at Albany to destroy the Rebel armies.**

**General Howe, however, had different plans. Howe brought his army south from New York and invaded the Patriot capital of Philadelphia. Although he succeeded in capturing the city and forcing Congress to flee to York, Pennsylvania, he decided to camp his army in the capital for the winter, rather than proceeding with the plan and marching to Albany. Furthermore, stubborn Patriot resistance under the infamous General Benedict Arnold kept St. Leger from making it to Albany, and Burgoyne’s progress was slowed by excess baggage and entire groves of trees felled by the Patriots to make his travels even more difficult. Slow on supplies, Burgoyne sent a detachment to capture an American supply base at Bennington, Vermont. The detachment was defeated by John Stark and the Green Mountain Boys, causing Burgoyne to withdraw to Saratoga, N.Y.**

**Burgoyne’s army soon became trapped in Saratoga, blocked in the south by Patriot General Horatio Gates’ army. Howe’s army remained in Philadelphia, and St. Leger’s Army was defeated at Fort Stanwix. On October 7, 1777, Burgoyne made a desperate attempt to attack the larger Patriot force at Saratoga which now comprised the armies of both Gates and Arnold. Despite initial success at Freeman’s Farm, Burgoyne’s Army would be routed by Arnold’s at Bemis Heights. Beset by a lack of supplies and horrendous casualties, Burgoyne had no choice but to surrender.**

**The Patriot victory at Saratoga is often seen as the turning point in the war. Not only did it renew the morale of the American public, but it convinced potential foreign partners, such as France, that American could win the war, and that it might be in their best interests to send aid. In February of 1778, with the help of Benjamin Franklin and his charisma while Minister to France, the United States and France signed a treaty of alliance. As a result, France sent generals, troops, ships, supplies, and money to America to help in the war effort. France declared war on England. Spain would declare war on England in 1779.**

Winter at Valley Forge

During the 1700s and 1800s, major fighting during wars generally ceased for the winters and armies took up winter encampments. As winter descended upon Pennsylvania in 1777, General George Washington chose Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, some eighteen miles west of Philadelphia as site of the winter encampment of the **Continental Army**. The area was far enough away from the British in Philadelphia to discourage surprise attacks and its location between high hills and the Schuylkill River made it easily defensible.

The Continental Army, however, was in bad shape. Of the 12,000 soldiers, many lacked the supplies or clothing to survive the winter and many others were starving at this point. At Valley Forge, defense lines were built along with over 1,000 huts to provide some relief from the brutal elements. Moisture from rain and melting snow made it impossible for many soldiers to stay dry and allowed for the spread of disease. The only reliable food that the soldiers received was a mixture of flour and water known as “firecake.” Occasionally, soldiers received meat and bread. Furthermore, many soldiers had inadequate supplies of clothing and were forced to endure the winter in tatters and without blankets. Many lacked shoes. Wounded soldiers often died from exposure to the elements. Unsanitary and crowded conditions led to the proliferation of diseases and sicknesses such as typhoid and pneumonia. Over 2,000 people died from such sicknesses.

On February 23, 1778, former German General Baron von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge to train the **Patriots** how to march in formation, fire guns quickly, use **bayonets** and become soldiers. Though von Steuben spoke little English, he developed a training manual in French that would be translated on the grounds into English. Unlike many American generals, von Steuben worked directly with the soldiers, endearing him to the thousands suffering at Valley Forge. Von Steuben’s presence did much to improve the morale of the army during the bitter winter and also helped them develop into a more tactical, effective military machine, capable of fighting the British.

On June 19, 1778, the Continental Army left Valley Forge in pursuit of the British who were moving north to New York.

The Siege at Yorktown

In 1780, the Revolutionary War was raging in both the North and the South, and French forces had fully committed in the American effort to defeat the British. French General Comte de Rochambeau and George Washington devised a plan to encircle British forces under **General Charles Cornwallis**, who were camped at Yorktown, Virginia. French and American land forces, which included 5,500 new French soldiers, had met near New York City to begin their movements to Virginia. Their meeting outside of New York confused British intelligence, which assumed they planned to liberate New York City. This prevented British General Henry Clinton and British forces occupying New York City from sending aid to Cornwallis in Virginia.

During September of 1781, the combined land forces of Rochambeau and Washington marched south. The plan was strictly confidential, and the generals kept their final destination secret from even the soldiers. American forces marched over 200 miles in a period of about two weeks. The plan worked perfectly. By the end of September, American land forces under Rochambeau and Washington had trapped Cornwallis’ army in the west, and Comte de Grasse’s naval forces had trapped Cornwallis from the east. A siege had begun. There would be no British reinforcements.

On October 6, 1781, Washington’s land troops began digging a trench that would be 2,000 yards long, running from Yorktown to the York River. The trenches were dug to allow the movement of larger artillery toward the British fortifications. Three days later, cannons and guns were dragged into place. By the afternoon, French and American guns were spraying bullets into the British defenses from land and water. The gunfire persisted all through the night, destroying British firepower. Many British soldiers began deserting. By October 12, French forces had destroyed a number of British frigates in the harbor. As the days dragged on for the British, trenches were dug closer and closer to the British fortifications. On October 14, American and French forces stormed two French fortifications (redoubts) successfully, with Alexander Hamilton leading the way for the Americans. Large guns were moved to the newly won locations, rendering all of the British defenses within range.

Cornwallis, desperate for reinforcements that would never reach him in time, hatched a plan to try to escape across the York River. Bad weather, however, disabled his transport boats and Cornwallis was finally forced to surrender. On October 17, surrender negotiations began and were finalized two days later. As a result of the surrender, the Americans took more than 7,000 British troops prisoner and the entire Revolutionary War had nearly come to an end. According to legend, as the British soldiers formally surrendered, their drummers and fifers played the tune to the The World Turn’d Upside Down. Yorktown would be the last major battle of the war.