



# Foreign Policy Research Institute

# FOOTNOTES

Vol. 13, No. 20

Published by FPRI's Wachman Center

August 2008

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY

by Kyle F. Zelner

Early American military history is too often relegated to just a few early pages of military history textbooks or a few lines of general textbooks about American History, but the subject is vital to our understanding of both fields. The sheer number of wars that occurred in the period should highlight how important conflict was to the development of America. There was either a declared war or a conflict for 79 of the 179 years from just before the founding of Jamestown until 1785, nominally the end of the Revolution. That number grows if we include backcountry skirmishes and frontier raids, to say nothing of the times spent preparing for or recovering from war. In effect, American colonial society was in an almost constant state of conflict.

These conflicts can be broken down into three types. First, there are contact or settlement wars. As soon as the English colonists arrived in 1607, they either attacked or were attacked by Native Americans. We generally think of these contact wars as occurring only in the 17th century, during the earliest years of colonization, but I argue that they continue into the eighteenth century. The second type of colonial American war is imperial war, most often between France and England in the eighteenth century, but also between other European powers with interests in colonial America. The third type of war is revolutionary warfare, or more properly the War for American Independence.

### CONTACT WARS

The very first contact wars, which include conflicts like the Anglo-Powhatan (Tidewater) Wars in Virginia or the Pequot War in New England, were basically cultural clashes owing from misunderstandings, language problems, or general hostility toward “the other.” The Native Americans involved in these wars almost always outnumbered the colonists. The first group of settlers that came to Jamestown, numbering only 104 settlers, was quite literally surrounded by the 15,000-20,000 strong Powhatan confederacy, including upwards of 4,000-6,000 trained warriors. While the Natives had the numbers, at Jamestown as well as other earlier settlements, the Europeans had the technological advantage. These early contact wars were not strictly racial in composition (Europeans vs. Natives), as even in the earliest conflicts, some Native American groups allied themselves to the English against traditional native enemies.

A second series of contact wars were perhaps the most deadly of all the colonial wars. These included King Philip’s War in New England from 1675-76 and, in the Carolinas in the early 18th century, the Tuscarora and the Yamasee wars. These later contact wars had more to do disputes over land and trade than earlier conflicts. Indians no longer had a numeric advantage, given their decimation by disease and continued European immigration. The European technological advantage had also evaporated. Patrick Malone argues in *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics Among the New England Indians* (2000) that by this period Native Americans had not only acquired European weaponry, but also excelled in its use. This made the wars very dangerous affairs.

Both King Philip’s War and the Yamasee War were extremely deadly. During King Philip’s War in New England, the fighting reached within eight miles of Boston. In proportion to the populations involved, more people died in that war than any other war in all of American history. The New England frontier was ultimately pushed back almost to its 1640s level. In the Yamasee War, North and South Carolina were in such distress that they have to ask for help from England and even Virginia, despite the fact that the Carolinians had very little use for the Virginians otherwise.

The last series of these contact wars stretched into the 18th century and included two conflicts we don’t often think of as this type of warfare. Lord Dunmore’s War (1774) in the Virginia backcountry and Pontiac’s Rebellion at the end of the French and Indian War (1763) are in many ways contact wars, as Europeans moved westward into the trans-Appalachian region and were opposed by newly exposed Native American groups.

### IMPERIAL WARS

The next major type of colonial war fought in North America was imperial warfare between European colonizing powers. The colonies of these powers were thrown into the conflicts as well, and European wars came to America. Most of these wars have

two names, a European moniker and an American one (e.g., the American “Queens Anne’s War” was in Europe the “War of the Spanish Succession”). One of the most important of these is the 17th-century series of Anglo-Dutch Wars. In 1664, the English took the colony of New Amsterdam (New York) away from the Dutch, making the conflict very important to the future history of America.

The better known imperial wars are the conflicts between the French and English through the late 17th and early 18th centuries: King William’s War, Queen Anne’s War, and King George’s War. All of these were basically contests to see who would control the largest empire and its colonies, not only in America but throughout the world. These imperial wars were fought not only in North America, but also in Europe, India, Asia, and at sea. In these earliest imperial wars, colonial Americans took on most of the fighting chores in the region. There were very few British regulars involved in the American theaters of these wars, and according to some historians, the Americans formed their sense of pride in their association with the British Empire through their war service in these conflicts. However, these wars also created hardships, both economic and social, for colonial Americans.

The best known of the imperial wars is the 1754-63 French and Indian War, the final showdown between these two powers in America. It was the first time massive European--at least English--armies entered the American scene. Americans were relegated to the sidelines as auxiliary troops, which had important consequences later on. As we know, the French and Indian War ultimately led to the American War for Independence.

## REVOLUTIONARY WAR

The Revolution was a whole different type of war, on a scale never before seen in America. It was, by its end, a world war. The War for Independence was also an event with mass participation; historians estimate that two out of every five white American men who could serve did so, in either the state militias or the Continental Army.

Our students find it difficult to appreciate the reasoning behind the progress of the war, tending to see only disjointed battles and campaigns. In order to combat this, it helps to outline the conflict for students so they can understand how all of those parts fit together. Years ago, historian John Shy identified the three major phases of the war. These stages are really a product of British strategy, since the British had the upper hand militarily. The British Army was very strong, as evidenced by its defeat of the French years before in the French and Indian War; the British also had one of the world’s greatest navies. The Americans had a newly formed, untested Continental Army, thirteen squabbling state militias, and no navy at all.

The first British policy for dealing with the growing resistance movement in America was a police action strategy from approximately 1774-77. At the end of the French and Indian War, when the imperial crisis started with the American reaction to the Stamp Act (1765), the British became convinced that the center of the resistance movement in America was in New England and that in order to ensure that the situation did not get out of control, they needed to police the region. By 1774, the British had moved the vast majority of their American stationed troops (11 battalions) to New England, especially to Boston. In doing so, they stripped soldiers from other vital areas, including recently captured Canada (with a still hostile French-Canadian population) and the frontier. But Boston was the hot spot--the home of the Stamp Act Riots and Boston Tea Party--and needed to be watched.

The British tried to contain the conflict in New England throughout the mid-1770s. In fact, the April 1775 Battles of Lexington and Concord (the first of the actual war) occurred because the British were trying to confiscate arms and ammunition from the region’s colonists in a type of police action. The British continued to focus on New England for the first years of the war. There were two attempts, in 1776 and again in 1777, to invade south from Canada to physically separate New England from the rest of the American colonies. The 1777 attempt ended with the famous Saratoga campaign, known to all as the turning point of the war, when the American victory spurred the alliance with France. This police action phase of the war and its focus on New England was questioned among some British military and civilian officials as early as 1776, which is why there were two simultaneous British policies to win the war from 1776-77.

The second British strategy, which began in 1776, has been labeled the classical strategy. In this stage of the war, the British attempted to win the war in a classical European way, first, by bringing the main enemy army under Washington to battle and destroying it, and then by capturing the American capital city. The key campaign associated with the first stage of this plan is the 1776 invasion of New York. General William Howe realized that if he attacked New York City, General Washington would have to respond. Howe planned to use the topography of New York, with its islands and inlets, to trap and completely destroy Washington’s force, which he almost did.

While Howe did not destroy the Continental Army in 1776, he severely weakened it and in 1777 he moved on to the second part of the plan, to capture the American “capital” of Philadelphia. The British accomplished this with relative ease. Howe was surprised, however, that the strategy itself was a failure. First, Washington always found a way to escape with at least a part of the Continental Army intact. Second, capturing Philadelphia meant nothing, since the entire government (the Continental Congress) simply left the city, moving westward from town to town.

By the early 1780s, the British realized that they could not fight in America like they fought in Europe. They developed a third strategy: southern Pacification. They attempted to use the loyalists in a way that they had not before. The British could take their army almost anywhere and usually win, but when the main army moved to their next target, the just-conquered territory reverted back to American control. The new British plan was to arm loyalists so they could hold and control an area once the

British Army moved off. As loyalist support was strongest in the southern colonies, the British started with an invasion of Georgia and moved into the Carolinas. As the British Army defeated American armies in places like Charleston, they armed loyalists and set them up as provisional governments. However, as soon as the main British Army left the area, the region broke down into civil war, fueled by old grudges, family feuds, and even class warfare. Wayne Lee has detailed this brutal process in his *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War*.

It became incredibly bloody in the south during the war. As the war dragged on, the British populace grew weary of the conflict and the government in Britain was in serious trouble. In 1781, the Battle of Yorktown was a major British defeat and the British were forced into peace negotiations. In 1783, the Peace Treaty of Paris ended not only the War for Independence, it ended the colonial and revolutionary period as well.

Students need to know about all of these things, both because the military history itself is significant, but more importantly because war was so vital in its effects on the American people and the developing American society and culture.

## THE EFFECTS OF WAR ON SOCIETY

As we have seen, conflict was pervasive in early America. If you lived in the backcountry, you were in an almost constant state of either preparing for, fighting, or recovering from a war. And, the frontier was very close. The immediateness and proximity of war in early America meant that conflict made an impact on all aspects of society. Our students need to understand that. One way to ensure that is to move beyond the strictly military side of the equation and explain the myriad ways conflict influenced all the people of colonial America, from soldiers to wives to children to Natives to new immigrants to old planters. A number of possible suggestions for how to do so follow.

*Settlement Patterns.* One example of the effect of war on colonial Americans can be seen when looking at settlement patterns. Much of the colonial settlement pattern has to do with conflict or the hope of avoiding conflict. A good example can be seen in the New York backcountry. By 1720, the powerful Iroquois Confederacy had come to comprise six nations, not its prior five. The Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and other tribes were joined by the Tuscaroras. Much of the entire remaining tribe, after being badly defeated in the Tuscarora War, was forced to migrate from the Carolinas all the way to upstate New York and settle among the Iroquois for protection, perhaps the largest forced migration in colonial America other than the slave trade.

In another example, at the end of the French and Indian War, the British put in place the Proclamation Line of 1763, west of which white settlement would not be allowed. They did so, angering many colonial Americans, because they wanted to avoid future war with the Indians in the region. The British had just suffered through Pontiac's Rebellion, and in order to avoid future conflict they set up a series of treaties with Native Americans including the Proclamation Line. This became a direct cause of the American Revolution in many ways. In *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (1999), Woody Holton argues that the Line did not anger ordinary Americans, because low-class Americans who wanted to farm in the west went anyway. The problem was that many of the elite of Pennsylvania and Virginia had purchased land or land bounties, hoping to sell land, were stopped from doing so. The Proclamation Line, implemented in hopes of avoiding future conflict with Indians, instead caused major friction between American colonial elites, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and British imperial officials in the days just prior to the American Revolution.

*Community and war.* Another way war affected colonial life has to do with community. For example, Deerfield, Massachusetts, was the northwestern-most settlement in Massachusetts in the 17th century. It was attacked, destroyed and rebuilt time and time again from just before King Philip's War into the 18th century. In *New England Outpost: War and Society in Colonial Deerfield* (1992), Richard Melvoin talks about the impression that made on the town. Its members built a community, saw it destroyed, had to build again--this occurred over and over. The people who moved into the community subsequently changed. Demographically upstanding sons looking for a new start stopped coming and instead the colonial lower sort move in, as they were the only people willing to risk living on such an exposed frontier. Conflict thus changed the very social makeup of frontier settlers in the colonial period.

Another good example is Boston in the 18th century. During the imperial wars of the eighteenth century, because the French were in nearby New France (Canada), the vast majority of colonial soldiers who fought in those wars came from New England. In *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979), Gary Nash claims that the experience of war transformed Boston into a modern urban landscape. Nash argues that the many returning veterans (some wounded, all poor) and large numbers of war widows and orphaned children so transformed the class structure of that city that it ultimately resulted in a new class consciousness, which in turn helped bring about the Revolution.

*Captives and Witches.* Colonial warfare also involved extensive captive-taking. Taking captives was a normal practice of Native American warfare, and it became a normal part of warfare in colonial America. In the 17th century, most of the captives were women and young children. Captivity changed family structure in America, making New Englanders think and question religious and even racial ideas. James Axtell has written of a group of Americans known as "White Indians" in his book *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*, those people who, at the end of a war, decided to stay with their new Native American families, enjoying that lifestyle more than they did life in their former colonial homes.

Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002) suggests that even the Salem witchcraft episode was in part brought about by contact warfare. Many of the young women who were the chief witnesses in the

witchcraft outbreak had lived on the frontier and some were even orphaned because of warfare. Norton traced the language these teenage girls used in witchcraft testimony about those accused of being witches and found that it mirrored descriptions of Indian torture of enemies in battle from the frontier, which the girls would have heard in the dark days of war on the frontier. Perhaps the girls transferred their war experiences to civilian life and started another type of chaos in civil society.

*Women at War.* Women were affected by war over this period in a number of ways. Many of them fought on the home front. Catherine Schuyler, the wife of one of the commanders of the northern Continental Army, set all of the family's fields afire just as they were about to come to harvest rather than let the British capture them during the 1777 Saratoga campaign. Quite a few such examples of women fighting back survive from the period. Women were also victims of violence during wartime. For example, there was a major problem with rape during the Revolution, occasioning a propaganda war between the Americans and the British.

Perhaps most important, there's the experience of women who stayed home after their husbands went off to fight, having to take on every aspect of running the household. Carol Berkin, in her book *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (2006), has pointed out that women who stayed home during the war even changed in the way they viewed gendered roles of labor. Berkin points out that in their letters to their husbands early in the war, the women would write to say "your farm is doing well." By the middle of the war, they were writing "our farm is doing well" while by the end of the war, they often wrote of "my farm." Such a drastic change in perception shows just how powerful the experience of war truly was for women.

*Warriors and Veterans.* We still don't know enough about the experience of war for soldiers themselves. Combat obviously changes people. In addition, many soldiers returned home wounded and disabled; there must be an impact from this on families, communities, and society as a whole. We know that some of the earliest social welfare programs came about to help veterans. War service also gave a number of men, including some African Americans, an entree to citizenship and political participation that they wouldn't have had before. We need to let our students know that military service was not only a duty, it was a sacrifice with real costs and effects.

*Politics and War.* One of the areas we know most about is the effect of war on politics and government. Most teachers focus on the Proclamation Line, the Stamp Act, and the Boston Tea Party as reasons for the coming Revolution, but we cannot forget that it was the debt and security problems coming out of the French and Indian War that started the crisis in the first place. We must also talk about how military events and problems like the Newburgh Conspiracy (an almost military coup) and the veteran uprising of Shays' Rebellion helped bring about the Constitutional Convention. Charles Royster, in his masterful book *A Revolutionary People At War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (1996), claims that military service was the wellspring of the new "American" character, something that is hard to deny when you look at the military service and subsequent lives of those like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. In our new focus on society and culture, we can not forget that war and conflict were also political events with political consequences.

*Culture and National Character.* Lastly, we must remind our students that war and military service helped shape some of the ideas of America. The earliest bloody contact wars fostered a belief in Americans that Indians needed to be eliminated, an ideal which resonated from the Mystic Fort Fight in 1636 to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. In his new book on the subject, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1814* (2005), John Grenier argues that killing Indians was the key to America's first way of war. Just because the subject is unpleasant does not mean we can keep from talking about it with our students.

Other American cultural markers also come from our earlier conflicts and are very important to America life. The American reliance on the citizen-soldier is perhaps the best example. Born out of the American militia tradition and early English-American political thought, the idea of military service as widely shared (even if this is, in many ways, a myth in the colonial period) is part of American cultural identity. This seminal American belief began during these early American wars. Where it ends (or if it has) is a matter of debate only highlighted by scenes of National Guard troops flying overseas for duty today.

Thus, for all of these reasons and more, we must not relegate the wars of the colonial period to simply a five-minute discussion of the road to the American Revolution. And we must give the military side of the American Revolution its due as well. War and conflict in this early period has had major ramifications, not just in military history, but in all of American history. We must not only remember this ourselves, but teach it to our students in a way they can understand and appreciate it.

*Kyle F. Zelner is Assistant Professor of History and a Fellow of the Center for the Study of War & Society at the University of Southern Mississippi. This essay is based on his presentation at the FPRI Wachman Center's July 26-27 history institute, What Students Need To Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622-1919. The Institute was co-sponsored and hosted by the Cantigny First Division Foundation of the McCormick Foundation in Wheaton, Ill. It was webcast to registrants worldwide. For videocasts and texts of lectures, see <http://www.fpri.org/education/americaswars1>. Core support for the History Institute is provided by the Annenberg Foundation. Funding for the military history program is provided by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The next history weekend is Teaching the History of Innovation, October 18-19, 2008, in Kansas City.*

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org) or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).