

GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: 1766-1775

As indicated by the dates in the title of this book, the revolution described in it is not the Revolutionary War. It is, in fact, in the familiar words of John Adams, the revolution “in the minds and hearts of the [American] people” toward Great Britain. If eighteenth-century usage as to titles prevailed, a fitting title for this book would be:

GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 1766–1774

*Being an Account of the Change in the Minds and Hearts
of a Majority of the People of the Thirteen Colonies Who Rebelled
against Great Britain in 1775, together with a description of the Provocative
Conduct of the British Parliament and Government Accounting for this
Change and the Colonists' Responses to the said Conduct.*

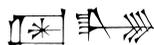
GROWTH OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION:

1766–1775

BERNHARD KNOLLENBERG

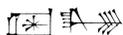
Edited and with a Foreword by

Bernard W. Sheehan



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Publishing Co., Inc.

Originally published by The Free Press,
a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 C 5 4 3 2 1
07 06 05 04 03 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knollenberg, Bernhard, 1892–1973.

Growth of the American Revolution, 1766–1775 /
Bernhard Knollenberg;

edited and with a foreword by Bernard W. Sheehan.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York: Free Press, 1975.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86597-415-2 (alk. paper)

ISBN 0-86597-416-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. United States—History—Revolution,

1775–1783—Causes.

2. United States—Politics and government—To

1775. I. Title.

E210.K64 2003

973.3'11—dc21

2003047743

Liberty Fund, Inc.

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300

Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

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FOREWORD

Bernhard Knollenberg left the manuscript for *Growth of the American Revolution*, the second volume of his study of the coming of the Revolution, virtually complete when he died at age eighty-one in 1973, after a career as a lawyer, tax expert, government bureaucrat in two wars, Yale librarian, and amateur historian. He was an amateur only because he held no formal academic position and because, since the close of the Second World War, for fourteen hours a day, he devoted his life to the study of the founding years of the republic, an age he loved. His two revolutionary volumes (the first, *Origin of the American Revolution*, published in 1960 and 1965 and also reprinted by Liberty Fund), together with two interpretive studies of the early career of George Washington, constitute his most significant historical contributions.¹

Origin of the American Revolution covers the story of the Anglo-American dispute from the Seven Years' War to the Stamp Act crisis. *Growth of the American Revolution* carries the events forward to the outbreak of hostilities in April 1775. Knollenberg was a narrative historian who stuck

1. Bernhard Knollenberg, *Washington and the Revolution: A Reappraisal. Gates, Conway, and the Continental Congress* (New York: Macmillan, 1940); Bernhard Knollenberg, *George Washington: The Virginia Period, 1732–1775* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964). “General Amherst and Germ Warfare,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41 (1954), 489–94, is Knollenberg’s most important article. But see his exchange with Donald Kent (*The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41 [1955], 762–63) in which Knollenberg modified his conclusion. For Knollenberg the editor, see Bernhard Knollenberg, ed., *Correspondence of Governor Samuel Ward, May 1775–March 1776. And Genealogy of the Ward Family*. . . . Compiled by Clifford P. Monahan (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1952).

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mainly to politics. Although he understood the importance of ideas, he did not dwell on them, and he largely avoided social history. This emphasis on politics and absence of the social background made Knollenberg a neo-whig historian, though he would probably have resisted the title. He stood on his own ground, apparently little coerced by the temper of the time. For him, deep research (one reviewer commented that he seemed to have read every source available on both sides of the Atlantic)² and vigorous interpretation were the bases of sound history.

Knollenberg's neo-whiggery can also be seen in his frank espousal of the American cause. He believed that the source of the imperial crackup could be found in England. Between 1759 and 1775, successive British ministries introduced measures that the colonists came quite reasonably to believe menaced their liberty. By 1775 they had no choice but to move toward independence. Ending his narrative short of the Declaration of Independence meant that Knollenberg did not treat in detail the moment when the Americans stated fully the Whig principles that drove them to resistance. One can only regret this lapse, but he undoubtedly believed that he had already examined the intellectual substance of the Revolution as it developed in response to British policy. But more on that later.

Although Knollenberg sympathized with the neo-whig interpretation of British policy, he realized that the Americans were not free of blame for what happened after the repeal of the Stamp Act. The Americans' critical error had been their failure to clarify their thinking on parliamentary taxation early enough. British politicians emerged from the Stamp Act crisis convinced that the colonists accepted Parliament's authority to tax the Americans externally but not internally, when in fact the resolves of the Stamp Act Congress had rejected any such distinction.³ The colonists opposed all taxation by Parliament, where they were not and could not be represented. This confusion over what the Americans would and would not tolerate led Charles Townshend to levy external taxes in 1767, thus igniting the controversy once again.

2. Benjamin W. Labaree in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 33 (1976), 534-36.

3. On taxation, see Edmund S. Morgan, "Colonial Ideas of Parliamentary Power," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 5 (1948), 311-41; Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764-1766* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

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For all the emphasis placed by historians on the argument over taxation, Knollenberg may well be right in contending that the dispute would eventually have been settled. In time the British would have agreed to refrain from levying a tax while maintaining the constitutional principle, which would probably have satisfied the colonists (Introduction, note 27). This was in fact the position taken by the Rockingham Whigs and conceded by a 1769 cabinet resolution and by Benjamin Franklin. Asked during the Townshend crisis what the Americans demanded of Britain, Franklin replied: "Repeal the laws, Remove the Right, Recall the Troops, Refund the Money, and *Return to the old Method of Requisition.*" He demanded a great deal, but it seems likely that he and his countrymen would have been content if the right to tax had been retained but not exercised.⁴ As it turned out, the taxation issue was soon folded into the larger question of parliamentary supremacy. At the time of the repeal of the Stamp Act, the broad assertion of supremacy in the Declaratory Act did not seem so significant because the Rockingham ministry had no plans to implement it.

Later ministries continued to insist on Parliament's authority to tax. The North ministry refused to include the tax on tea when it repealed the other Townshend acts precisely in order to preserve the right. And at least part of the justification for the Tea Act in 1773 was to establish circumstances in which the colonists would begin to pay that tax. The Americans, however, distinguished taxation from legislation. They believed that they could deny taxation and accept Parliament's legislative authority. The British never understood the distinction and continued to believe that Parliament's constitutional supremacy included both taxation and legislation. Thus, as the dispute continued into the 1770s, the broader question of supremacy tended to increase in importance.

Fearing an inevitable drift of the colonies away from the empire, British governments resorted to the assertion of parliamentary supremacy, which, of course, only exacerbated the drift. But the British political class was not wrong in its belief. The major political and economic developments since the late seventeenth century offered ample

4. P. D. G. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence: The Third Phase of the American Revolution, 1773–1776* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 111; Jack P. Greene, *Understanding the American Revolution: Issues and Actors* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 266–67.

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evidence. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, Parliament had been negligent in imposing its will, and consequently colonial legislatures had increasingly gained power. Simultaneously, the colonies increased in population, expanded into the interior, and became more prosperous. The stability and progress of Britain's economy depended on American commerce. The long-term trends were clear. A numerous and prosperous people who had learned the arts of self-government would not long remain within the orbit of an empire directed mainly toward the benefit of others.⁵ Parliamentary legislation as it applied to the colonies referred mainly to the navigation system, that body of law, initiated in the 1660s and thereafter supplemented, that tied American commerce to the interests of the empire. Lubricated by salutary neglect and a number of provisions that favored the colonies, the system had not been a major irritant before the late 1750s, when the ministry tightened enforcement. Then the colonists found something to complain about. With rigorous enforcement, they suddenly saw the navigation laws as an onerous burden and a threat to liberty.

In addition, the thoroughness of British regulation of commerce opened American eyes to the potential implicit in Parliament's determination to tax the colonies. As Knollenberg puts it: "Could there be any reasonable doubt as to what Parliament would do in the field of taxation if it established its claims of right to tax the colonists as it pleased?" (p. 159). Nor could one deny Parliament's persistence. Beginning with the Sugar Act (1764), through the Stamp Act (1765), the Townshend Acts (1767), and then the Tea Act (1773), which did not levy a tax but was designed in part to maneuver the colonists into paying the tea tax, in each succeeding ministry, except for the brief tenure of Rockingham, Parliament attempted to gain a revenue without colonial consent.

Of course the Americans never played the part of supine victims. They reacted vigorously. Colonial legislatures passed resolutions stating the American position, dispatched petitions and agents to London, organized economic retaliation against Britain, and sent delegates in 1765, 1774, and 1775 to illegal congresses representing the colonies that

5. Greene, *Understanding the American Revolution*, 2-3.

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soon turned into a nascent continental government. And early in the controversy, in response to the Stamp Act, the people took to the streets in riots that destroyed property, coerced imperial representatives, and brooked no serious opposition. There may have been no profound social revolution in America in the 1760s and 1770s, but there was certainly an awakening among classes of people who in past generations would have been more willing to follow the lead of their betters.⁶ By 1774, war was in the air. Certainly the British political class thought so, and by the following year open conflict began.

One cannot exaggerate the significance of the legislation passed by Parliament in response to the Boston Tea Party in provoking the Americans. The Coercive Acts completed the shift in power over the colonies from king to Parliament that had begun in the last half of the seventeenth century. Paradoxically, in the following decades, Parliament gained traction over the monarchy in the name of liberty, yet challenged the liberty of the colonies. Under the king, the charters always limited the prerogative; Parliament conceded no such limitations. Especially with the Massachusetts Government Act⁷ and the Quebec Act,⁸ Parliament established its unchecked jurisdiction over the colonies. The Massachusetts legislation changed the structure of the colony's government, and the act creating a political order for Quebec changed the boundaries of all of the colonies north of the Ohio River whose charters gave them claims in the West. By 1774 the threat of arbitrary power that the Americans had foreseen for a decade had become a reality, but from Parliament, not the king.

In response, the colonies sent delegates to the Continental Congress⁹ to state their case yet again and to organize opposition to parliamentary measures. This time, however, the stakes were higher. The implications of Parliament's recent actions were clear. If not reversed, the colonies

6. For a penetrating interpretation of the social origins of the revolution, see Greene, *Understanding the American Revolution*, 96–119.

7. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, ch. 5.

8. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, ch. 6; Philip J. Lawson, *The Imperial Challenge: Quebec and Britain in the Age of the American Revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989), 108–46.

9. David Ammerman, *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974); Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, ch. 8.

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would lose the local autonomy they had enjoyed for the better part of two centuries. Joseph Galloway¹⁰ tried to solve the problem by proposing a plan that would have restructured the imperial relationship, giving the colonies a veto over parliamentary legislation. But it was too new, too complicated, and too fraught with risks for the power of the colonial legislatures to gain acceptance. Besides, the delegates had no instructions to vote on such a sweeping change. Instead, the Congress threatened the use of force against the British in the Suffolk Resolves and laid out a scheme to coerce Britain economically in the Continental Association. Although threatening force exacerbated the controversy, it was no more than a reply to what the British were already planning. The Continental Association appeared on the surface to be a repetition of the policies adopted in the Stamp and Townshend crises, but in fact its implementation led to an immensely significant development. In the course of the following months, as imperial authority waned in colony after colony, the local committees appointed to enforce the cutoff of trade began to assume the character of government. They enforced the association's provisions and coerced the opposition. On the surface a small matter, but it was one of many that confirmed the gradual transfer of sovereignty.

The formal resolves of the Congress sounded much like the statements made in earlier crises, except in one significant matter. This time the colonies denied Parliament the constitutional authority to legislate general imperial regulations that would bind America. Perhaps overtaken with the audacity of their claim or in a fit of practicality, the delegates did admit that it might be best if Parliament continued to exercise such jurisdiction. Knollenberg argues that the concession was a mistake, that it detracted from the consistency of the colonial position (pp. 176–77). Perhaps so, but one can scarcely overestimate the constitutional significance of the step. In response to Parliament's broad claims of sovereignty, the colonists rejected all parliamentary power over them. Only their loyalty to the crown kept them within the imperial fold, and ultimately that tie proved too weak.

10. John E. Ferling, *The Loyalist Mind: Joseph Galloway and the American Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 26–32.

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By closing his narrative in April 1775 with the onset of war, Knollenberg does make a significant point. The colonies were surely on the verge of independence, but they had not yet reached a decision. They still faced a profound internal struggle before taking the final step. In fact, the colonists were in many ways reluctant revolutionaries. They argued with Westminster for ten years before clarifying their views of parliamentary power. And for fifteen months after the fighting had begun they clung to the monarchy. Why?¹¹

Their dispute with Parliament presented the colonists with a serious dilemma. From the last stage of the Seven Years' War, America struggled with the question of parliamentary authority, and by 1773–1774 the issue had been settled. In a series of pamphlets by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Wilson,¹² and then in the resolves of the First Continental Congress, the colonies enunciated what has come to be called the Dominion View of Empire.¹³ They excluded Parliament from the constitutional arrangement that bound the colonies to the empire. Their colonial legislatures in effect functioned in the New World the way the British Parliament did in the old. In the two areas in which legislatures exercised power, regulation and taxation, the colonial institutions were sovereign. For the British political class this was a very strange idea. It ran counter to the major constitutional achievements of the previous two hundred years, through which the Parliament had emerged supreme over the king. By denying Parliament its historic sovereignty, by making it in a sense a legislature of only local jurisdiction within the British Isles, the Americans seemed to have resurrected the power of the crown. For many Whig politicians this sounded like rank Toryism.

If the colonists hoped to preserve the gains they had made in estab-

11. Jerrilyn Green Marston, *King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy, 1774–1776* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

12. Thomas Jefferson, "Draft of Instructions to the Virginia Delegates in the Continental Congress (MS Text of *A Summary View*, &c.," in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 1 (1950–), 121–37; James Wilson, "Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament" in Randolph G. Adams, ed., *Selected Political Essays of James Wilson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 47–82; John Adams, "Letters of Novanglus," Robert J. Taylor, Mary-Jo Kline, and Gregg L. Lint, eds., *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 216–385.

13. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 235–39.

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lishing local autonomy by shunting Parliament aside and placing themselves under the king's prerogative, they would certainly be disappointed. For one thing, George III was no friend of America. Despite all that certain Whig politicians had said about him, the king remained loyal to the Glorious Revolution. He was a Whig and stood behind Parliament. Nor did he oppose any of the measures that had so vexed the colonists since the Seven Years' War. When the controversy reached a climactic stage in the 1770s and the ministry feared American independence, the king supported those who advocated force. He had no intention of letting his empire slip away without a fight.¹⁴ Furthermore, the king's prerogative over the years had proved less than beneficent toward America. Though not as spectacular as parliamentary efforts to tax and regulate trade, the steps taken by the royal governors to stem the growth of legislative power showed that the prerogative could also be grasping. Besides such major disputes as the controversies over the suspension of colonial laws and the agreement over the tenure of judges, the sixties and seventies witnessed a series of local differences between governors and legislatures over the distribution of power. The king and his prerogative power turned out to be no safe haven for the harassed colonists.¹⁵

Yet the Americans did not easily abandon the king. Not until the publication of *Common Sense* in January 1776, in which Thomas Paine called into question all monarchy, did loyalty to the crown begin a serious decline.¹⁶ The colonies had been at war since the previous April. An army besieged the British in Boston, the Congress appointed a Continental officer to lead it, and in the fall of 1775 two American forces invaded Canada. The king had already declared the colonies in a state of rebellion.¹⁷ Through all of these events the Americans had taken no formal steps to separate themselves from the empire. They continued to blame their troubles on the ministry. When the time came to break with the crown, many radicals like John Adams and his cousin Sam, who had

14. P. D. G. Thomas, "George III and the American Revolution," *History* (1985), 16–31; Marston, *King and Congress*, 62.

15. Jack P. Greene, "Ongoing Disputes over the Prerogative, 1763–1776," in Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 171–77.

16. Greene, *Understanding the American Revolution*, 285–308; Marston, *King and Congress*, 22–23.

17. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, 327–28.

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long been agitating for independence, found cause for celebration, but others saw it as an occasion for profound regret. They felt as though they had been expelled from their home in the empire. Edward Rutledge of South Carolina spoke of bidding adieu “to Ease and Happiness.” Henry Laurens of the same state thought he had been “Driven away by my King”; he was not a rebel but “at worst a Refugee.”¹⁸

The king was more than a constitutional monarch who in the eighteenth century wielded little real power and served as head of state. His person represented the vestiges of sacral legitimacy left over from the Middle Ages. Through myth and sentiment, kingship claimed the deepest loyalties of Englishmen. Legal arguments of various sorts did well enough to undermine the claims of Parliament because, as important as that venerable institution may have been, it did not evoke the same kind of passion summoned by the king. Parliament was a political instrument conceived for the exercise of power and the distribution of patronage. Never mind that the king did some of the same things; he could still stand above the fray. If he did wrong, others could be blamed. No doubt the tissue of sentiment and loyalty proved much thinner in America than it was in England, but the colonists remained Englishmen. They believed in the glorious cause, the Protestant religion, and the superiority of Britain over its continental neighbors. Only the long train of abuses described by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, which they slowly came to believe had been designed by the British ministries to destroy their liberty, could drive them to sever ties with the mother country. And that in the end meant blaming the king, as Jefferson did in the Declaration. Paine’s assault on monarchy came at a time when the colonists’ disillusionment with Parliament and acute sense of betrayal by the king made them ripe for independence.

Knollenberg recounts the formative stages of the story that brought the colonists to that state of mind. The cumulative effect of British policy from the Sugar Act of 1764 through the Coercive Acts a decade later was to drive the colonists to the brink of independence. But it would be a mistake to suppose that independence was no more than a response to external provocation. In fact, the Americans had been drifting in

18. Quoted in Marston, *King and Congress*, 63.

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that direction from the early eighteenth century, a tendency recognized by a number of British politicians. As Knollenberg notes, power slowly slipped from the imperial authorities, and Americans created new institutions of local control. The Stamp Act Congress, the committees designed to enforce economic sanctions against Britain, Committees of Correspondence, the provincial congresses that replaced colonial legislatures, and the Continental Congress that exercised political authority beginning in 1774, all of these asserted a measure of independence and laid the foundation that would become the American republic. Knollenberg offers the reader a deeply researched and compelling account of how the Americans and the British reached the point of separation.

BERNARD W. SHEEHAN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Certainly the happiest years of Bernhard Knollenberg's life, which ended suddenly the sixth of July, 1973, were the years since 1945, when he was able to give full time to his research into the origin and growth of the revolutionary spirit in this country and the writing of his two books covering the years from 1759 up to the actual outbreak of hostilities in 1775. This was a totally absorbing task to which he devoted an average of fourteen hours a day. The second and final volume was virtually complete when he died.

It was his express wish that I call on John R. Alden for help, should he be unable to see his book through its publication. An old friend and a fellow historian, Professor Alden undertook this task with eagerness, generosity, and devotion. He was firm in insisting that nothing be changed. In addition to proofreading, he has been helpful in every possible way. I cannot overstate my appreciation and gratitude.

Thanks also are due to all those friends, historians, and members of the staffs of Yale University Library and all other libraries and archives whose cheerful, prompt, and intelligent assistance made this book possible.

For the past thirteen years our friend and neighbor, Mrs. Marian Renchan, has typed and retyped B. K.'s chapters with a zeal second only to his zeal in writing them. Her knowledge of his working methods and her help in countless ways have been invaluable.

Finally, a word must be said about our indebtedness to Wilmarth S.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lewis, whose role in the appointment of my husband as Librarian of Yale University in 1938 gave him his start on the way to this life of study, research, and writing in which he found such satisfaction. “Lefty” Lewis’ never failing encouragement, understanding, and perceptive advice have been inextricably woven into our lives all these years and I can only offer for us both my heartfelt thanks.

MARY TARLETON KNOLLENBERG

Chester, Connecticut
December, 1973