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World Turned Upside Down

Remember that the way you get common people to risk their lives, when many weren't too threatened by British policies, is to convince them how great things will be afterward.

So radical elites used republican ideology to frame the conflict with the English as one in which American liberty was being eroded. Eventually all colonists would become "slaves" in the British system because tyranny and corruption and power would take away their freedom.

In reality, the major change that Revolutionary was merely replacing the British as the new rulers, though they did plan to implement other changes, like representative government rather than monarchy.

The common people, including African slaves, Free blacks, servants, laborers, the working class, women and children, though, once they bought into the republican ideology and heard words like liberty, freedom and independence would reject the simple replacement of one set of tyrants with a new set (that also was closer to home!).

Words can be dangerous things. Once you put words like liberty, freedom and independence out in the public, you lose control over the meanings. Definitions will vary greatly from person to person and circumstance to circumstance.

The common people believed certain things about these words and their meanings. The especially believed that they would be able to rule themselves. But other far-reaching economic and social possibilities were opened by these concepts. The world might truly be "turned upside down!" The Revolution then started as a political revolt and became a social one. It removed, not reinforced, traditional constraints.

The elites never expected this result. Yet, fifty years later groups like women and African-Americans had made little headway. In the end, it was white males who made the most significant gains. Still, initially, a short window of opportunity existed for many.

Stories –

Ben Russell was a schoolboy, maybe 14 years old when the Revolution started. He ran away to join the army and served as a camp follower doing soldiers laundry. He really wanted a rifle and a chance to fight the redcoats. His parents, who were distressed, eventually found him (he had advanced to a clerk) and proving his age took him home.

His father feared that he would run away again, so apprenticed him the Isaiah Thomas (not the basketball player!) to learn printing trade. Typically, this is how

a person became a craftsman or artisan during the period. As an adolescent parents would contract children to master craftsmen and the children would spend years in training moving from apprentice (menial tasks) to journeyman (doing the job) to master (which certified them to set up their own shop as a self-employed artisan).

Unfortunately, Russell runs away again to the army. This time Thomas, as his master, tracks him down and forces him to return. Russell, of course is very discontented. He's looking for action and all the journeymen, who are older are off fighting, so he's really doing their work without the recognition.

Eventually, Thomas is drafted. He has no desire to risk his life so hires Russell to go in his place. Russell now has bargaining power and the two agree that if Russell survives the war, Thomas will certify him as a master and release him from the contract.

Russell does live and sets up his own shop in his early 20s. had there not been a war, he likely would have had to work 10-15 more years before his release.

The Revolution, then, seems to have undermined the traditional system. Self-interest replaced deference.

Joe Hosmer was a militia leader and a cabinet-maker. His army service and leadership skills made him popular amongst the soldiers. After the war he's elected to the Massachusetts Assembly as the "peoples" candidate. He frequently disagreed with John Hancock who was frustrated by Hosmer's "pretensions." In other words, Hancock looked down on Hosmer. But, the war had created opportunity for Hosmer that he otherwise wouldn't have had.

William Thompson was a tavern owner in South Carolina. He also ran for and won a seat in the state legislature and had a brief run in with the **slave** of John Rutledge (prominent revolutionary leader). Not Rutledge, OK, but his slave! Rutledge was so offended Thompson that he gets a law passed banning him for the state, even though he's a state legislator. Every year, Thompson runs and is elected, campaigning on the theme that the elites are corrupt and using his situation as an example of the disrespect Rutledge showed to the people.

Women – Abigail Adams wrote her husband John as he was helping prepare the Declaration of Independence and reminded him the the representative should 'remember the ladies.' She noted that men were tyrants and acting unfairly when dealing with women. Otherwise, she warned, women might foment their own revolt.

Lucy Knox wrote her husband Henry, one of Washington's leading generals,

that she hoped “you will not consider yourself as commander in chief of your own house.”

Women, too, were impacted by the Revolution. Many found themselves in charge of family farms and businesses as men went off to fight. Obviously, they had some prior knowledge of these operations, or learned quickly.

Those who didn't run the family's affairs still contributed in many other ways. Even before the war, they protested the Stamp Act, boycotted British goods, and upheld the non-importation policies.

One of the main contributions was in educating children. The concept “republican motherhood” was frequently applied to mothers who inculcated children with the republican ideals like liberty, freedom and independence. Education of male children was important, but females, the future republican mothers also needed education so they could teach their own children some day.

Elisa Pinckney ran her father's farm during the war and raised two children, who later became prominent government officials. George Washington praised her service because she had created a stable domestic sphere that included republican training.

Practically speaking there were some changes in the legal status of women. Divorce became easier and there were greater protections in abuse and adultery cases. But political and property rights remained unchanged

African – Americans – There was a huge contradiction between the ideas of the Revolution and black slavery.

Nearly 1 out of 10 slaves fled to freedom during the Revolution. After the war, there was a brief window of opportunity apply republican principles and end slavery. Only the North exercised the option (this doesn't mean that racism ended, though). In the South, slavery was maintained as a method of social control and strengthened as a labor system.

However, there was a rise in manumissions (masters voluntarily freeing their slaves) immediately after the Revolution as some Southerners applied revolutionary principles. George Washington freed his slaves, but his will provided this only after he and Martha died. This meant that 200 slaves lived waiting for her to die! Jefferson, who frequently objected to slavery did nothing.

The number of free blacks in Virginia rose from 2000 in 1782 to 20,000 by 1800.

Blacks, who obviously heard words like liberty and freedom thrown about, expected that they would share in the freedom. When they didn't, some, like

Gabriel Prosser, aggressively pursued freedom. Prosser planned to march on Virginia's capital failed.

In the North, state's emancipated black slaves in a variety of ways.

1774- Rhode Island and Vermont abolished slavery in their constitutional and slaves were immediately freed.

1780 – Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman sued and the State Supreme Court outlawed slavery.

1780 – Pennsylvania gradually freed slaves providing that those born after a certain date, or reaching a certain age, would be freed. Slaves could remain enslaved if they wished.

North and South, having converged at the time of the Revolution, were now heading in opposite directions.



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