

“TOWARD A MORE PERFECT UNION”

AUTHOR: Serena Zabin, Professor of History, Carleton College

In 1763, colonists in North America proclaimed their pride in being part of the vast British Empire. Two decades later, many of those same colonists enthusiastically ratified a treaty that acknowledged their new nation. In those dizzying 20 years, institutions from slavery to diplomacy were broken and reformed as Great Britain tried to integrate its colonies further into its empire. In hindsight it is easy for us who look back to see patterns of protest, resistance, and violence culminating in the birth of a country. No one who lived through those years, however, could foretell that the result would be an independent nation clinging to the eastern edge of North America.

PROTEST

When Great Britain vanquished France in 1763, it claimed huge swaths of Canada as part of its new empire. American Indian nations, which had not been invited to the treaty table, protested diplomatically and militarily. They forced the British to leave a significant military force in North America to manage these diplomatic relationships and conflicts between settlers and American Indian nations. At the same time, the British government began searching for new revenue sources to pay off the debt from the Seven Years' War (sometimes referred to in North America as the French and Indian War) and the expense of administering to its enlarged empire. The government decided the most effective way to pay off the debts meant closely regulating the laws and trade of its American colonies.

These new regulations annoyed some colonists more than others. For example, in 1763, the British government proclaimed that British colonists could not claim land west of the Appalachian Mountains. This Proclamation line attempted to reduce violence between colonists and the hundreds of Indigenous nations who lived in North America. When the British government argued that colonial settlement in the west was illegal, it frustrated trans-Appalachian speculators, such as George Washington, who wished to sell land legally to other European settlers. Nonetheless, colonial squatters simply took the land, in defiance of both the wealthy proprietors who claimed it and the British army that was supposed to enforce the ban.



1763 map of European claims to North America. Courtesy of the Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library (483704). To access a digital image of this map, go to <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-c2e5-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

At the same time, the British government proposed several new taxes in an attempt to raise more money. The first bills affected only a few men directly, and they passed with little notice. The 1765 Stamp Act, however, generated the greatest protests, likely because it angered the best-connected and most politically articulate men, including printers and lawyers. Most of Great Britain's 26 American colonies, including the wealthiest Caribbean colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados, lodged angry protests against the act in colonial newspapers and in London. About half the colonies also saw riots that included the destruction of property and the burning of tax collectors' figures in effigy. In response to the protests, the British government retracted the tax but passed the 1766 Declaratory Act, which reminded the colonies that the British Parliament retained the power "to make laws and statutes...in all cases whatsoever."¹

¹ "Great Britain : Parliament - The Declaratory Act; March 18, 1766." Avalon Project, accessed August 15, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declaratory_act_1766.asp.

WHERE AS this Province labours under a heavy Debt, incurred in the Course of the late War; and the Inhabitants by this Means must be for some Time subject to very burthensome Taxes: And as our Trade has for some Years been on the decline and is now particularly under great Embarrassments, and burthened with heavy Impositions, our Medium very scarce, and the Balance of Trade greatly against this Country:

WE therefore the Subscribers, being sensible that it is absolutely necessary, in Order to extricate us out of these embarrassed and distressed Circumstances, to promote Industry, Oeconomy and Manufactures among ourselves, and by this Means prevent the unnecessary Importation of European Commodities, the excessive Use of which threatens the Country with Poverty and Ruin, DO promise and engage, to and with each other, that we will encourage the Use and Consumption of all Articles manufactured in any of the British American Colonies, and more especially in this Province; and that we will not, from and after the 31st of December next, purchase any of the following Articles, imported from Abroad.

Loaf Sugar, Cordage, Anchors, Coaches Chaises and Carriages of all Sorts, Horse Furniture, Men and Womens Hatts, Men and Womens Apparel ready-made, Household Furniture, Gloves, Men and Womens Shoes, Sole-Leather, Sheathing and Deck Nails, Gold and Silver and Thread Lace of all Sorts, Gold and Silver Buttons, Wrought Plate of all Sorts, Diamond Stone and Paste Ware, Snuff, Mustard, Clocks and Watches, Silversmiths and Jewellers Ware, Broad Cloths that cost above 10s. per Yard, Muffs Furrs and Tippets, and all Sorts of Millenary Ware, Starch, Women and Childrens Stays; Fire Engines, China Ware, Silk and Cotton Velvets, Gauze, Pewterers hollow Ware, Linseed Oyl, Glue, Lawns, Cambricks, Silks of all kinds for Garments, Malt Liquors and Cheese—And we further agree strictly to adhere to the late Regulation respecting Funerals, and will not use any Gloves but what are Manufactured here, nor procure any new Garments upon such an Occasion, but what is absolutely necessary.

Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University (AB7. B6578.767w). To access a digital image, go to <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.HOUGH:10873406>.

Notice that the agreement in the image emphasized a wish “to promote Industry, Oeconomy and Manufactures among ourselves,” rather than an overtly direct refusal to pay the Townshend Acts. More subtly, the document also pointed to the local taxes that Massachusetts residents have set on themselves to pay for their contribution to the Seven Years’ War.

Women owned many of Boston’s shops, and they sold food such as “loaf Sugar” and clothing including “all Sorts of Millenary Ware.” This sheet of signatures (one of eight) contains many women’s names, including Catharine Thompson, who signed with an “X,” and Hannah Peters, who may have been an African American woman.

The image shows a sheet of signatures from the Boston Tea Party agreement. The signatures are arranged in three columns. The names include:

- Column 1:** Hannah Peters, Mrs. Jones, Nathaniel, James, Mary, Joseph, James, James, Rebecca, Tho, Non, Tony, Jos, John, Jos, Jos.
- Column 2:** New, Tom, Richard, Samuel, David, Mrs, Mrs, Joseph, Jane, Lydia, Elizabeth, Catharine, Rebecca, Elizabeth, Mrs, Mary, Mary.
- Column 3:** Jacob, Joseph, Thomas, John, John, Mary, Mrs, John, Jeremy, Philip, Edward, Martin, Rebecca, Nath, Elizabeth, Abigail, Mrs.

As a test of that power, the British Prime Minister Charles Townshend instituted a new tax on goods that the colonies could not produce at home, including tea, chocolate, and cloth. Colonists responded with boycotts. The wide public refusal to import or consume these goods turned ordinary items into political symbols that could be employed by all white colonists regardless of their political clout. Rich and poor white women played a central role in the boycotts, as they were responsible for so much household shopping. Consumer boycotts and the larger political implications of clothing and tea offered opportunities for male political leaders to co-opt women’s participation, but women also made explicit political statements of their own. In 1767, more than 600 Bostonians, including 53 women, pledged that they would not import the newly taxed goods.

These acts were not enacted to deny colonists their liberties, to burden them with taxes, to stifle their economy, or even simply to make them pay for their share of the empire (though that was certainly part of the goal). Rather, the acts worked to tie the colonies more closely to the mother country’s empire. Some British colonies were happy to enjoy the benefits of the empire. Most of the white colonists in the West Indies, for example, depended on British soldiers to enforce their regimes of racial slavery and were therefore willing to pay in exchange for military protection. Other colonists, however, especially on the mainland, preferred their autonomy and continued their protests.

In an attempt to enforce the Townshend duties in 1767 and 1768, the British government moved the Customs Board to Boston, which soon became the site of even more protests. After one particularly threatening riot, the Massachusetts governor, Francis Bernard, requested troops to help him keep order. From 1768 to 1772, a total of 2,000 soldiers, along with their wives and children, squeezed into the once-tiny peninsula of Boston. Soldiers and civilians became friendly and even married during those years, but their presence also emphasized to Bostonians how it felt to live in a more centrally organized empire.

Using the military as a police force was always a risky proposition, and few observers were surprised when a street scuffle ended in soldiers shooting five unarmed civilians in Boston's main square. Sons of Liberty, including Paul Revere, quickly dubbed the shooting "The Boston Massacre" and deployed it as a morality tale to colonists about the overweening power of the British government. The government, they argued, threatened colonists' liberties.

Hearing this argument, some enslaved colonists in Massachusetts began to make the case for their own liberty. In 1768, a woman in Lexington brought a successful suit against the man that she claimed illegally kept her enslaved. In 1772, the British case of *Somerset v. Stewart* led both white and Black colonists to believe—erroneously, as it turned out—that British courts had declared or would declare the practice of slavery illegal. Although the ruling was in fact very narrow, stating only that no one could be sold out of Britain into slavery, it nonetheless led white colonists to fear, and Black colonists to hope, that the British Empire meant to eliminate slavery as part of its new regulation of the American colonies.² In 1773, Felix Holbrook argued in a petition to the Massachusetts General Court that slavery itself should be abolished; other petitions followed regularly for another ten years, as enslaved Americans saw that they might be able to exploit the growing imperial crisis for their own goals.³

RESISTANCE

Meanwhile, the dynamic between the British administration and white colonists continued to ratchet up the imperial conflict. A decision in 1773 to more closely oversee the governance of British colonies in India led to a new tax for tea in the American colonies. Although the new tax was balanced by a subsidy on tea imported by the government-supported East India Company, colonists warned that the Tea Act itself was another example of "Parliamentary despotism."⁴

² Christopher Leslie Brown, "The Problems of Slavery," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Jane Kamensky and Edward G. Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 427–446, 435.

³ Chernoh Sesay, "The Revolutionary Black Roots of Slavery's Abolition in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2014): 99–131. For images of the originals, see <https://www.masshist.org/endofslavery/index.php?id=55>.

⁴ Scaevola [pseudonym], *To the Commissioners Appointed by the East India Company, for the Sale of Tea, in America Gentlemen: Your Appointment, Which Is Notoriously Designed to Enforce the Act of 7th Gill for Raising a Revenue in America*, broadside, 1773, Library of Congress (rbpel1430340a). <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe1430340a>.



This engraving by Paul Revere, showing a line of disciplined soldiers mowing down unarmed civilians, depicts the oppression of a people by the army of their own ruler. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (2008661777). To access a digital copy of this image, go to <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008661777/>.

Colonists again threatened boycotts of tea and insisted that they would ban British ships carrying the imported substance from entering their ports. Some importers in New York, Charleston, and Philadelphia agreed to send back their shipments, but not those in Boston. As a result, in December 1773, a small group of men threw the tea into Boston Harbor.

The British ministry reacted angrily to these protests and boycotts. The ministry passed another series of acts, referred to as the Intolerable or Coercive Acts, intended to punish Boston and force the colonists to pay for the destruction of the tea. The goal of isolating Massachusetts was unsuccessful. Instead, colonial legislators sent representatives in September 1774 to meet in Philadelphia as the First Continental Congress. Far from seeing themselves as Americans at that point, the representatives declared that they were entitled to the “rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural-born subjects of England.”⁵ As such, they insisted that British Parliament did not have the right to collect taxes without their representation in government. The Continental Congress authorized local associations to enforce more boycotts on British goods.

In an irate response, the British government urged the royal governors to act. In April 1775, the governor of Massachusetts sent British troops to look for military stores in the town of Concord; the troops encountered armed resistance both while there and in Lexington. In that same month, Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia, seized the military stores held in Williamsburg. When white Virginians protested, Dunmore invited enslaved Virginians to join him, promising freedom to anyone willing to bear arms for the British crown. Hundreds of Black women as well as men escaped to Dunmore’s warship. Seeing this, white colonists read Dunmore’s proclamation as an underhanded plot by the British crown to regulate slavery. These two events—bloodshed in New England and a declaration of freedom to enslaved Virginians—came together to shape the American Revolution.

When the Second Continental Congress opened in May 1775, the war had already begun, despite the absence of any agreement on either independence from Great Britain or confederation between the colonies. Even as the Congress quickly drafted a justification for taking up arms against British troops and appointed George Washington to act as general, it also sent the king what is now known as the Olive Branch Petition, asking for a “restoration” of “former harmony.”⁶ Two days after King George III received the petition, he declared the colonies in rebellion. For a decade, colonists had feuded with British Parliament while declaring their loyalty to the king himself. George III’s rejection of the petition turned public opinion in the colonies against him, as did the publication of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* a few months later. As one Massachusetts politician said after reading the pamphlet, “Every sentiment has sunk into my well prepared heart.”⁷

Nonetheless, the decision to separate from Great Britain did not come easily. Although many local governments wrote their own declarations of independence, it was clear to the Second Continental Congress that doing so created a new set of problems: fierce conflicts between the colonies about their claims to American Indian nations’ lands west of the Appalachian Mountains, a weak negotiating position with other European powers, and especially the necessity of creating new state governments. Some colonies expressly told their delegates not to vote for independence precisely because it invalidated their colonial charters.



British satirists mocked women’s participation in boycotts. In this image, a non-housebroken dog licks a baby left neglected under the table. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (96511606). To access a digital copy of this image, go to <https://www.loc.gov/item/96511606/>.

⁵ “Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, October 14, 1774,” accessed September 17, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/resolves.asp.

⁶ “Journals of the Continental Congress—Petition to the King; July 8, 1775,” Avalon Project, accessed August 15, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_07-08-75.asp.

⁷ Joseph Hawley to Elbridge Gerry, Watertown, MA; February 18, 1776, reprinted in James Trecothick Austin, *The Life of Elbridge Gerry: To the Close of the American Revolution* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1828), 161.



A print of the Battle of Lexington, April 19, 1775. Courtesy of the Marian S. Carson Collection, Library of Congress (2015650276). To access a digital copy of this image, go to <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015650276/>.

The document that Thomas Jefferson drafted, and that the Continental Congress approved, consists of two very different parts. The stirring preamble, asserting the equality of all mankind, sits in an uncomfortable juxtaposition with the long list of specific indictments against King George III, several of which alluded to the racial conflicts of the previous decade. The document included a clear reference to Lord Dunmore's proclamation and gestures angrily toward British attempts to restrain colonial settlement in the west. To Thomas Jefferson's distress, his fiery denunciation of the slave trade was cut from the final version.⁸

In New England, free and enslaved African American men also joined the Continental Army, hoping to win their freedom. Although George Washington hated the idea of any African Americans serving in the army, his desperate need for soldiers eventually compelled him to accept free and enslaved African American men as troops. In 1777, some states promised freedom to enslaved men who enlisted. In the American South, inspired by Lord Dunmore's proclamation, Black men—including some enslaved by George Washington himself—enlisted with the British army.⁹

VIOLENCE

In the year between the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord (1775) and the Declaration of Independence (1776), white colonists eagerly signed up to fight, although usually for terms of only three to six months.

⁸ For Jefferson's draft, see "Jefferson's 'Original Rough Draught' of the Declaration of Independence," The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University, accessed August 15, 2020, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/selected-documents/jefferson%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%99Original-rough-draught%E2%80%9D-declaration-independence>.

For the final version, see "The Declaration of Independence as Adopted by Congress," The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University, accessed August 15, 2020, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/selected-documents/declaration-independence-adopted-congress>.

⁹ Gary Nash, "The African Americans' Revolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Jane Kamensky and Edward G. Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 250–272.

Women joined the army as well. While few of them shot a gun, no campaign could have taken place without them. Colonial, British, and Hessian women provided material, social, and logistical support before, during, and after the Revolutionary War. Washington attempted to drive women away from the Boston military camps after the Battle of Bunker Hill in July 1775. He soon found, however, that he needed the women to help maintain the army.

His soldiers refused to wash clothes, insisting only women did that type of work, and his troops were then decimated by disease caused by body lice carried in dirty clothes. Following the example of the British army, the Continental army soon paid women to do laundry and prepare food.¹⁰ After the war, a few white women even received pensions. While free Black women probably worked for the army like their white counterparts, Congress made no provision for enslaved women to gain their freedom through service to the newly formed nation.

As the war continued, the British army occupied various cities, partially to attract the support of those colonists who remained loyal to Great Britain. Urban occupation created another kind of battlefield, one that brought civilians into the conflict and often changed hearts and minds. Loyalists in New York were so disappointed by their treatment at the hands of British officials that many of them began to consider switching sides. Likewise, when the British occupied Charleston, South Carolina, they forced white men to give up their weapons, swear loyalty oaths, and remain confined on their property. By contrast, white women and bondspeople, who previously had been under the control of those white men, discovered larger freedom to move about and even to leave home altogether.¹¹ Both men and women found themselves well rewarded by British authorities but ostracized when British troops withdrew. In places like New York's Westchester County, which was occupied repeatedly by both armies, most civilians (up to 80 percent, by some estimates) strove for neutrality and refused to join either side.¹²

Although the Revolutionary War was ostensibly fought between the British army and newly minted Americans, American Indians inevitably found themselves drawn into the conflict. Some nations, such as the Shawnee, tried to remain neutral, but most protected their homelands by riding the shifting diplomatic waves.¹³ Washington, however, seized the opportunity to drag American Indian nations into the Revolutionary War when he ordered a scorched-earth campaign against the Iroquois/Haudenosaunee in 1779, an act that earned him the sobriquet "Town Destroyer."¹⁴

When the British surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, the story goes, they marched off the field to the tune of "The World Turned Upside Down." The tale is likely fictitious, but the sentiment that underpins it is not. The idea that an underfunded army triumphed over one of the greatest imperial fighting forces of the eighteenth century shocked many. The 20 years that preceded the surrender, however, formed an even more remarkable crucible of political theory, racial ideologies, and democratic practices, out of which was forged a new nation.

Four years after American and British diplomats signed the 1783 Peace of Paris, 55 men met in Philadelphia to frame a new national constitution. After long months of hammering out issues of governance, property, and slavery, the convention turned over the document to the Committee on Style. It was this group of men who crafted the constitution's preamble. While the delegates' draft of their preamble was unadorned and workmanlike—"We the People of the States of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare and establish the following Constitution for the Government of Ourselves and our Posterity"—the Committee on Style offered a more soaring vision of the constitution's possibilities. The editing committee collapsed the individual states into a single "People" and asserted the goals of the new government, "We, the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice..."¹⁵

¹⁰ Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 140-142.

¹¹ Lauren Duval, "Mastering Charleston: Property and Patriarchy in British-Occupied Charleston, 1780-82," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 589-622.

¹² Sung Bok Kim, "The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (1993): 868-89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080407>.

¹³ Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015).

¹⁴ Colin G. Calloway, *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ William Treanor, "The Case of the Dishonest Scrivener: Gouverneur Morris and the Creation of the Federalist Constitution," *Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works*, January 1, 2019, <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/2163>.

At the time, the Committee on Style meant only to emphasize that collapsing individual states into a federal government (“We, the People,”) led to “a more perfect union.” But over time, that well-wrought phrase has come to mean much more. Generations of Americans have wondered what it means to create a “more perfect” country, to “establish justice,” and to live up to other parts of the U.S. Constitution’s preamble. Just as the story of the preamble itself is rooted in a particular historical moment and yet transcends it, so the history of the American Revolution both limits and inspires the country’s subsequent history. The complex political theory that underpinned ideas of protest, community, and citizenship has fostered new visions of a road to a perfect nation. The racial ideologies that suffused the world of revolutionaries opened up questions of who could be an American, even when the answers to those questions were often rigid and narrow. Democratic practices helped create a creed of equality that at times inspired change and, at other times, served only to trumpet its own hypocrisy.

The lessons that follow are stories about people’s attempts to make the nation a more perfect union. Sometimes people understood explicitly that such perfection was their goal. Other times, they pulled on strands of U.S. history such as racial separation, gendered expectations, and suspicion of outsiders. Nor did Americans always realize exactly what they were doing at any given moment. But these ideas—these conflicts—are baked into our history, and show up again with some frequency. “A more perfect union” is at the end of a path that circles around and loops over itself. But no matter where we are on that road, our origins—heroic, shameful, and sometimes downright contradictory—are always with us.



Howard Chandler Christy's 1940 painting, *Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, hangs in the East Stairway of the House Wing of the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. To learn more about the painting, go to <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/signing-constitution>.

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Lesson Plan: After the American Revolution: Free African Americans in the North
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/after-american-revolution-free-african-americans-north>

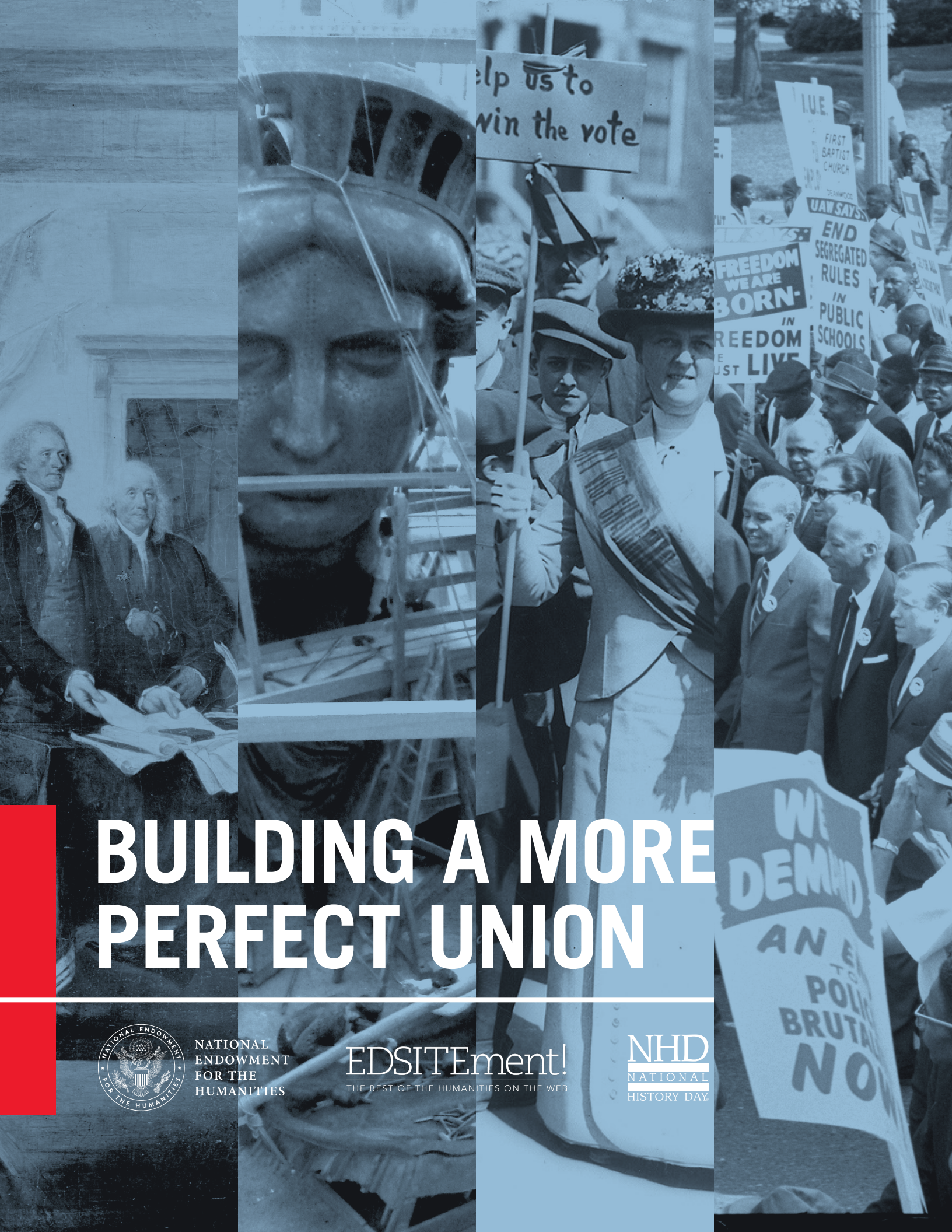
Lesson Plan: “Common Sense”: The Rhetoric of Popular Democracy
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/common-sense-rhetoric-popular-democracy>

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Lesson Plan: Voices of the American Revolution
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Student Activity: American War for Independence: Interactive Map
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/student-activities/american-war-independence-interactive-map>

Humanities Article: “Love and the Revolution”
<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/septemberoctober/statement/love-and-the-revolution>



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