

# A Comparative History of North American Independence

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Empires, Peoples, and the Atlantic World before 1763
- **Chapter 2** War, Peace, and Proclamation: The Seven Years' War and 1763
- **Chapter 3** Reform or Revolution? Imperial Crisis and Diverging Political Cultures, 1763–1776
- **Chapter 4** Independence and Displacement: The American War and the Loyalist Diaspora, 1775–1784
- **Chapter 5** Experiments in Union: The Articles of Confederation and Provincial Governance
- **Chapter 6** Constitutions Compared: Philadelphia 1787 and the Constitutional Act of 1791
- **Chapter 7** Indigenous Sovereignties and Settler Frontiers in Two Emerging Orders
- **Chapter 8** Commerce, Credit, and Land: Political Economy across the Border
- **Chapter 9** Borderlines Forged in Fire: The War of 1812 and Its Legacies
- **Chapter 10** Rebellions and Reform: 1837–1838, Durham, and Responsible Government
- **Chapter 11** Slavery, Abolition, and the Underground Railroad as Continental History
- **Chapter 12** Opening the Interior: Louisiana, Oregon, Rupert's Land, and the Northwest
- **Chapter 13** Crisis and Calculus: The U.S. Civil War and the Road to Confederation
- **Chapter 14** Federation and Reconstruction: 1867–1877 as Parallel State-Building
- **Chapter 15** Courts, Crowns, and Congress: Adjudicating Federalism
- **Chapter 16** Settler Colonialism Institutionalized: Removal, Treaties, and Residential Schools
- **Chapter 17** Populations in Motion: Immigration, Urbanization, and Nation-Making, 1880–1914
- **Chapter 18** Empire, War, and Autonomy: 1898–1931 and the Statute of Westminster
- **Chapter 19** Welfare States and Regulatory Republics: 1930s–1960s
- **Chapter 20** Rights Revolutions and National Identities after 1945
- **Chapter 21** Constitutions Revisited: Patriation, the Charter, and Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. Constitutionalism
- **Chapter 22** Markets and Borders: The Auto Pact, Free Trade, NAFTA, and USMCA

- **Chapter 23** Remembering Independence: Holidays, Textbooks, Museums, and Monuments
  - **Chapter 24** Indigenous Renaissance and Jurisdiction: From Calder to McGirt
  - **Chapter 25** Models, Myths, and Lessons: Rethinking Independence in North America
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## Introduction

This book asks a straightforward but surprisingly elusive question: why did the thirteen British colonies on the Atlantic seaboard pursue a violent break that yielded a republic, while the northern colonies moved—over generations—toward a federated Dominion that retained the Crown and only gradually severed imperial bonds? *A Comparative History of North American Independence* treats “independence” not as a single event but as a series of political, economic, and social processes that unfolded on both sides of an evolving border. The result is two federations with striking commonalities and crucial differences in how they distribute power, protect rights, and remember their origins.

Our approach is comparative and accessible. Rather than narrating two separate national stories, we place them in the same frame: empires and markets that spanned the Atlantic; peoples who migrated, resisted, and built communities; and institutions that took shape through conflicts both local and global. Each chapter juxtaposes developments in the United States and in what became Canada, tracing how cross-border influences—from the movement of Loyalists and refugees to the spread of ideas about representation, sovereignty, and rights—shaped outcomes that later seemed inevitable but were anything but.

Independence in Anglo-America was also a settler-colonial project. This book foregrounds Indigenous nations as diplomatic actors and legal orders in their own right, not merely as obstacles or victims. We follow how treaties, proclamations, removals, reserve systems, and residential schools structured power and dispossession, and how Indigenous resistance and jurisprudence have reshaped constitutional debate into the twenty-first century. Similarly, we examine the place of slavery and abolition in continental perspective, from bondage in the early republic to freedom-seeking along the Underground Railroad, and onward to civil rights and human rights frameworks that continue to reverberate across the border.

Political economy is a recurring thread. Mercantilist regulation, wartime finance, canal building, railway booms, and industrialization created incentives and constraints that no constitution could ignore. The plantation South, New England’s commercial capitalism, and the fur-and-timber economies under the Hudson’s Bay Company all produced different coalitions with distinct visions of sovereignty and citizenship. The

interplay between resource frontiers and capital markets helps explain why Americans prioritized republican self-rule early, while British North Americans bargained for responsible government and, later, a federation designed to manage regional diversity under the safeguards of imperial connection.

Constitutional development provides the book's backbone. We compare moments of founding and refounding: the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution; the Constitutional Act of 1791, the Durham Report, and responsible government; the emergence of judicial review under the Marshall Court and the distribution of powers shaped by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council; and the long arc from Dominion status to the Statute of Westminster and the patriation of the Canadian Constitution with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Alongside these, we track the evolution of American constitutionalism through Reconstruction, the rights revolutions of the twentieth century, and debates over federalism that never quite end.

Finally, we trace the dense web of cross-border connections: a boundary forged in war yet porous to people, money, and ideas; security anxieties that nudged Canadians toward Confederation during the U.S. Civil War; continental markets institutionalized by the Auto Pact and later by free trade agreements; and shared challenges around environment, migration, and Indigenous self-determination in the present. Throughout, we emphasize how memory—holidays, monuments, schoolbooks—turns complex, contested pasts into national origin stories, and how revisiting those stories can open space for a broader, more inclusive understanding of independence.

The chapters that follow proceed roughly chronologically while pausing for thematic comparisons at key turning points. Readers interested in constitutional design, settler-colonial dynamics, and cross-border influences will find concise syntheses alongside case studies that complicate familiar narratives. By the end, our aim is not to crown a single model of statehood but to clarify the choices, contingencies, and compromises that produced two federations sharing a continent—and to consider what their intertwined pasts suggest about the futures they might yet build.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Empires, Peoples, and the Atlantic World before 1763**

Empires thrive on paperwork almost as much as on force, and in the early eighteenth century the documents that crossed the Atlantic described an Anglo-America still in the making. The thirteen colonies that lined the seaboard from New Hampshire to Georgia already looked restive in their own ways, while to their north the French colony of Canada and the smaller British holdings in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland

formed a different kind of frontier. Indigenous nations, for their part, were less footnotes than full participants in a diplomatic and commercial swirl that spanned watersheds and mountains long before surveyors strung boundary lines. These pages sketch the stage on which independence would later be imagined, fought for, or resisted by people who could not yet see the plot's end.

What we now call the United States began as a cluster of experiments in profit and piety stitched together by ocean lanes. Virginia's tobacco and then wheat, Carolina rice and indigo, Pennsylvania's wheat and iron, and the bustling ports of New England exported timber and fish and rum to a world hungry for commodities and credit. Planters and merchants built fortunes and debts at the same time, relying on enslaved Africans whose coerced labor gave those economies a cruel but undeniable pulse. Cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston grew into hives where printers, lawyers, sailors, and ministers argued about taxes, faith, and the price of bread, all under the distant eye of Parliament and a king who claimed the authority to regulate their trade.

To the north, New France stretched in a long arc along the St. Lawrence, its seigneurial farms giving way to fur posts that crept into the pays d'en haut. Montreal and Quebec were nodes in a network that depended on alliances with Wendat, Anishinaabeg, and other nations willing to trade pelts for cloth, metal, and guns. French officials preached conversion and loyalty even as they bargained hard, while missionaries learned languages and recorded kinship ties with the same diligence others applied to ledgers. When the British took Acadia in 1713, they watched French settlers cling to their marshes and tides, uneasy neighbors who would resist oaths and surveys with the stubborn patience of people rooted to soil and memory.

Britain's hold beyond the St. Lawrence was thinner still. Nova Scotia straddled worlds of French Catholic fishers, Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik hunters, and a trickle of New England migrants willing to take woodland grants from a Crown that offered security more than salaries. Newfoundland's rocky coasts filled each summer with fishers curing cod on stages, a seasonal economy supervised by naval officers who sometimes acted like governors and sometimes like bouncers. Even here, empire was less a monolith than a collection of claims, some backed by forts, others by paper titles, and all vulnerable to the ambitions of rival powers and the autonomy of local actors.

Indigenous nations held power even when their influence went unacknowledged in European correspondence. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, having navigated Dutch and English rivalry for generations, played a sophisticated balance-of-power game, granting passage and permission rather than submitting to it. Farther west, the Miamis, Illinois, and Osages managed riverine corridors where furs and information moved at canoe speed, calibrating alliances as French and English traders elbowed for position. On the Plains and in the Subarctic, nations like the Lakota, Cree, and

Niitsitapi pursued their own commercial and military objectives, incorporating horses and guns into older patterns of mobility and diplomacy.

War sharpened these relationships. The struggle often called Queen Anne's War and then King George's War seeped from Europe into American forests, turning palisades into strongpoints and treaties into temporary pauses. When New Englanders assaulted Port-Royal or Quebec, they found that local defenses rested on Indigenous scouting and French-Canadian militia as much as on regular troops in blue coats. Peace brought commissions that redrew lines on parchment while doing little to settle who actually controlled hunting grounds, portages, and the loyalty of nations with their own reasons to bargain.

Commerce provided a language everyone understood, even as it favored some speakers over others. The Atlantic market drew Chesapeake tobacco and Carolina rice toward London and Bristol, while northern merchants sent fish, timber, and ships south to the sugar islands and east across the ocean. Credit spun webs from countinghouses in Europe to planters' desks and shopkeepers' shelves, encouraging speculation and anxiety in equal measure. Smuggling flourished along quieter coves, and customs officers learned to distinguish between legitimate enterprise and the stubborn pragmatism of people determined to feed their families.

Beneath the flow of goods lay a darker current. The slave trade funneled Africans into British and French American holdings, threading suffering and skill through plantation, dock, and household. Enslaved people resisted with tools, words, and feet, running toward Spanish Florida or French Louisiana where legal doctrine sometimes offered thinner chains. In port towns, free Black communities grew by accretion, hosting churches and mutual aid societies that nurtured ideas about rights and dignity even as legislatures tightened codes to keep human property profitable and pliable.

In British America, notions of liberty were growing pricklier. Colonists learned to speak the constitutional language of Englishmen while adapting it to places where Parliament felt distant and assemblies close. Virginia's House of Burgesses and Massachusetts' General Court were classrooms in self-rule, where planters, lawyers, and merchants practiced the arts of petition, debate, and logrolling. When governors tried to impose prerogative courts or new fees, colonists responded with pamphlets and protests that sharpened a vocabulary of consent and interest that would later serve more radical ends.

French Canada offered a different repertoire of politics, shaped by royal officials, Catholic bishops, and seigneurial notables who negotiated authority through ceremony and kinship. The habitants who farmed long strips along the river knew their obligations to seigneurs and clergy, yet they also pressed for boundaries and burdens in language that could sound humble in French and stubborn in translation. Militia captains carried weight in wartime and harvest alike, and when assemblies were

called or suppressed, local power simply curled into other crevices of community life.

Religion suffused these societies with moral color and practical constraint. New England's Congregational establishment policed doctrine and town boundaries, while Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers challenged monopolies from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas. The Great Awakening rippled through the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, preachers drawing crowds who wept and swooned and then argued about grace and governance with an energy that spilled into print and politics. In Canada, the Catholic Church bound French settlers to a global institution whose authority was spiritual and temporal, its schools and sacraments shaping loyalties that Protestant rivals found difficult to pry apart.

Women's work and influence, though often minimized in official records, kept households and communities functioning across this Anglo-American landscape. They managed labor, nursed the sick, brewed beer, spun cloth, and kept accounts, sometimes operating taverns and shops when opportunity or necessity allowed. Enslaved women added the burdens of coercion and reproduction to lives of skill and endurance, while Indigenous women in many nations held influence over agricultural production, diplomacy through marriage, and the rhythms of seasonal movement. These gendered patterns shaped how resources were used and how power was passed along, even when they did not fit neatly into imperial charters.

Knowledge traveled as fast as ships could carry it. Newspapers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia reprinted items from London and the West Indies, folding foreign news into local disputes, while printers in Quebec and Louisbourg translated and framed European events for French readers. Books and pamphlets about liberty, virtue, and corruption circulated in colonial taverns and coffeehouses, mingling with rumors of Indian raids, prize courts, and tax collectors. Literacy rates varied widely, yet the hunger for information was strong enough to support a continental gazette that let distant readers imagine a shared world.

That world was becoming an Atlantic system with American dimensions. British officials sought to tighten customs enforcement after the Molasses Act of 1733 and again in the 1740s, sending more ships and officers to patrol estuaries and capes, often with mixed results. Colonists responded by refining the arts of evasion and by appealing to Parliament when their interests aligned with imperial regulation. A fragile equilibrium emerged, one that balanced London's desire for revenue and order against colonial demands for protection and profit, all without resolving the deeper question of who ultimately held the power to decide.

By the 1750s it was clear that this equilibrium depended on a peace that was growing brittle. France and Britain circled each other in Ohio Country, where traders and emissaries from Pennsylvania and Virginia bumped against French forts and Indigenous diplomats who refused to grant either side an exclusive right to pass.

Virginia speculators formed companies to claim lands beyond the mountains, while French officials built chains of posts meant to hem in British expansion and bind Indigenous allies closer. The land itself seemed to invite collision, its rivers and gaps promising wealth to whoever could secure them.

Indigenous nations watched these maneuvers with practiced calculation. Some leaders welcomed the chance to play French and English ambitions against each other, extracting gifts and guarantees while holding their own councils about hunting territories and peace belts. Others grew impatient with promises that evaporated as soon as rum wore off and traders demanded more furs. The Iroquois Confederacy claimed a diplomatic primacy in the middle ground, yet younger men and western nations like the Shawnees and Delawares chafed at arrangements made by elders whose authority was slipping under the weight of alcohol, debt, and guns.

When war finally came again, it arrived with all the noise and confusion that Europeans had learned to export. The clash called the Seven Years' War and, in its American theater, the French and Indian War would redraw maps and unsettle assumptions from the Bay of Fundy to the Ohio Valley. Yet even as armies marched and burned, the patterns already visible in 1763's shadow were hardening: colonies accustomed to assemblies and grievances, Indigenous nations accustomed to leverage and territory, and imperial powers accustomed to thinking they could manage people who had long since learned to manage themselves.

Among ordinary people, the rhythms of life continued alongside the drums of war. Farmers planted and harvested, fishers mended nets, and mothers taught children prayers and boundaries. Enslaved Africans sang songs that remembered rivers and homelands, while indentured servants counted years and kept their eyes on the horizon. Traders packed canoes and wagons with cloth, kettles, and rum, knowing that roads and rivers favored those who learned their moods and seasons. These routines gave the colonial world its texture, its stubborn continuities that would outlast the treaties yet to be signed.

Cities along the coast sharpened their identities through contrast. Boston's narrow streets and fierce town meetings nurtured a politics of reputation and print, while Philadelphia's grid and market projected an image of sober calculation. Charleston's blend of planter elegance and slave-market bustle spoke of a lowcountry cosmopolitanism that looked south as much as north. In Halifax, military engineers laid out a town that seemed to value order over comfort, its citadel watching the harbor like a question mark. Each place was a node where empire met local desire, and where independence would later be defined in ways no one could yet predict.

The northern woods held their own logic, one that rewarded patience and punished haste. French *coureurs de bois* and Indigenous traders moved through a landscape of rivers and portages that had its own grammar, one learned through frostbite and

friendship alike. When British rangers and light infantry began to master these woods in the 1750s, they adapted Indigenous styles of scouting and raiding even as they despised the people who taught them. The border between civilization and wilderness was less a line than a gradient, shifting with each season's snow and each treaty's small print.

By 1763 this continental space would be reshaped by a peace signed in Paris, but its deeper contours were already set. Empires claimed to channel history toward order and profit, yet they shared a continent with peoples who had their own maps, memories, and measures of power. The thirteen colonies and the northern clusters of British and French settlement had grown accustomed to a kind of self-rule that was practical more than legal, and to Indigenous nations that treated diplomacy as a permanent project rather than a prelude to submission. In this light, independence would not emerge as a single rupture but as a series of choices made under pressure and possibility, choices that we can now trace back to the worlds that existed before the maps were redrawn.

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