

From 1776 to 1861

How the American Revolution Shaped the Civil War Generation

By: Amy L. Williams
Pennsylvania Department Patriotic Instructor
Auxiliary #276 Capt. Geo A. Cribbs President

It seems that everywhere we look this year, we are seeing **America 250**.

Across the country, communities, museums, historical organizations, schools, churches, and heritage groups are marking the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and remembering the Revolutionary generation that gave birth to the United States.

For those of us who love history, anniversaries like this give us an opportunity to do more than commemorate the past. They invite us to look at familiar history again and sometimes ask different questions.

For those of us who study, preserve, and honor the history of the Civil War generation, there is a particularly interesting question to consider:

How did the American Revolution influence the Civil War?

Or perhaps an even more interesting question:

When Americans went to war against one another in 1861, what did 1776 mean to them?

The more we look at that question, the more interesting it becomes. When Americans began fighting one another in 1861, they were still arguing about what had happened eighty-five years earlier.

- They were arguing about what the Revolution meant.
- They were arguing about what the Founders intended.
- They were arguing about sovereignty, liberty, equality, the Constitution, slavery, and whether the Union created by the Revolutionary generation could actually be dissolved.

And what makes this particularly fascinating is that **both sides believed the Revolution belonged to them.**

- Unionists claimed the Revolution.
- Confederates claimed the Revolution.
- Antislavery Americans claimed the Revolution.
- Defenders of slavery claimed the Revolution.

They could look backward at many of the same people, the same documents, and the same events and come away with remarkably different understandings of what 1776 meant for the crisis of 1861.

The Civil War, then, was not simply another chapter in the history of the nation created by the American Revolution. In some very important ways, it became **a struggle over the meaning and inheritance of the Revolution itself.**

The Contradiction Was There from the Beginning

We must begin with one of the most familiar contradictions in American history.

July 1776:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”[1]

Yet slavery existed in every one of the thirteen colonies. What matters for our purposes is not simply that the contradiction existed, but what happened to it over the next eighty-five years. It did not remain static.

African Americans themselves began using Revolutionary language to make claims for freedom. Antislavery Americans used it. Abolitionists used it. Eventually Abraham Lincoln would use it.

At the same time, slavery not only survived independence, it became enormously more powerful in large parts of the new nation. Something remarkable was happening. The language of American liberty was expanding. American slavery was expanding too. That tension runs from the Revolution directly toward the sectional crisis.

The Constitution did not settle it. It is probably more accurate to say that the Constitution **managed** it. The Three-Fifths Clause, the Fugitive Slave Clause, and the protection of the international slave trade from congressional prohibition until 1808 were compromises that helped make the constitutional Union possible.[2] They did not answer the larger question.

“Could a republic that proclaimed principles of natural rights permanently sustain hereditary human bondage?”

The Revolutionary generation did not resolve that question. The Civil War generation inherited it.

The Founders Get Drafted Into the Fight

By the 1840s and 1850s, Americans were doing something fascinating. Everybody started recruiting the Founders. If you were antislavery, you could build a historical case. You could point to the Northwest Ordinance. You could point to restrictions upon slavery in federal territory. You could quote Founders

who described slavery as an evil. You could emphasize the abolition of the international slave trade.

If you were proslavery, you could build a historical case too. Many of those same Founders owned enslaved people. The Constitution protected important slaveholding interests.

The original Union had been created with slavery firmly embedded within it. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and the Revolutionary generation became participants in a political fight occurring decades after their deaths.

Historian Michael F. Conlin explores this phenomenon in *One Nation Divided by Slavery*. He demonstrates how selectively antebellum Americans remembered the Revolution. Proslavery and antislavery Americans could appeal to the same founding generation and produce remarkably different versions of the nation's past.[3]

Americans were not simply asking: **“What happened during the Revolution?”**

They were also asking: **“Which version of the Revolution supports us?”**

Consider George Washington. For a Unionist, Washington was a powerful symbol of American nationality. He was commander of the Continental Army, president of the Constitutional Convention, and first president of the United States.

A Southern nationalist could look at Washington and emphasize something different. He was a Virginian. He was a slaveholder. And he was a man who had taken up arms against a government accused of violating the liberties of his people.

Same Washington. Different memory.

Historian Michael D. Hattem has shown how Americans repeatedly reshaped the memory of the Revolution according to the political and cultural needs of their own generations. For our purposes, his treatment of the years from 1826 through 1865 is especially important because this was the period in which Revolutionary memory became increasingly sectionalized.[4]

That gives us an important distinction. There is **the history of the Revolution**. And there is **the memory of the Revolution**. Those are not necessarily the same thing.

What Kind of Union Had the Revolution Created?

Slavery was central to the sectional crisis, but another question inherited from the Revolutionary and Constitutional generations became inseparable from it:

Where did sovereignty reside?

The Revolution had not left Americans with an entirely uncomplicated answer. The colonies acted together. They also understood themselves as distinct political communities. The Articles of Confederation explicitly stated that each state retained its “sovereignty, freedom and independence.”[5]

Then came the Constitution: “We the People of the United States...”[6]

Those words mattered. So did the federal structure that followed them. By the nineteenth century, Americans had developed competing constitutional traditions. One emphasized the states as the political communities that had ratified the Constitution. Another increasingly emphasized the American people and the Union as a national political community.

Once slavery became attached to that constitutional disagreement, the consequences became enormous. If the Union was fundamentally a compact among sovereign states, what happened if a state believed the compact had been violated?

- Could it leave?
- Could it decide for itself that the agreement had been broken?

Those questions appeared repeatedly in American history, including in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, the nullification controversy, the constitutional thought of John C. Calhoun, and ultimately secession. By 1860, slavery and sovereignty had become deeply entangled. Then South Carolina left the Union.

Was Secession Another 1776?

This is where the Revolutionary connection becomes especially interesting. Read South Carolina’s *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union* alongside the Declaration of Independence.

The Revolutionary model is difficult to miss.[7] Secessionists faced a serious historical problem. The United States had itself been created through resistance and political separation. How, then, could separation itself be inherently illegitimate?

Secessionists offered an answer: **We are doing what the Revolutionary generation did.**

Historian Jonathan B. Crider has examined this use of Revolutionary memory in *De Bow’s Review*, one of the South’s most influential periodicals. Crider demonstrates that Americans on both sides of the sectional crisis competed to present themselves as the legitimate custodians of the legacy of 1776. *De Bow’s Review* encouraged white Southerners to see themselves not simply as rebels

against the United States, but as guardians of authentic American liberty and character.[8]

Think about the power of that argument in 1861. You are not destroying the Founders' republic. You are behaving like the Founders. You are not betraying 1776. **This is 1776.**

That helps explain why Revolutionary imagery became so useful to Confederate political culture. But there was an enormous problem with the comparison.

What Liberty Was Being Defended?

When we read the secession documents themselves, slavery is not hidden in the margins. Mississippi may have stated the issue most directly: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery." [9]

Georgia discussed slavery extensively.

South Carolina focused heavily upon Northern resistance to constitutional obligations concerning fugitive slaves.

Texas explicitly discussed slavery and racial hierarchy.

So we have to hold two historical realities together. Many Confederates genuinely understood themselves as heirs of the American Revolution. At the same time, the political crisis that produced secession was fundamentally bound up with the protection of slavery. Those facts are not mutually exclusive. Putting them together actually helps us understand Confederate ideology more clearly.

Southern secessionists could embrace one part of the Revolutionary inheritance, particularly the right of a political people to resist authority and establish an independent government, while rejecting increasingly egalitarian interpretations of another part of that inheritance.

Alexander H. Stephens made the distinction particularly clear. In his 1861 "Cornerstone" speech, Stephens directly confronted the equality proposition associated with Jefferson and the Declaration. He argued that the new Confederate government rested upon a fundamentally different understanding of racial equality.[10]

By 1861, then, Americans were drawing very different lessons from 1776. One interpretation emphasized resistance, independence, self-government, and the right of a people to alter their political relationship. Another increasingly emphasized natural rights, equality, popular government, and national purpose.

That second interpretation brings us to Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln and the Revolutionary Inheritance

Lincoln did not simply praise the Founders. He interpreted them. More importantly, he gave the Declaration of Independence an increasingly important place in American political thought.

For Lincoln, “all men are created equal” did not mean Jefferson and the Revolutionary generation had created an equal society. They clearly had not. His argument was that they had stated a **principle**. The nation had failed to fulfill that principle completely, but failure to fulfill it did not make the principle meaningless.

Lincoln’s “Fragment on the Constitution and Union,” generally dated to early 1861, gives us an important window into his thinking. He used a biblical image of an apple of gold in a picture, or frame, of silver. The principle of liberty was the apple. The Union and Constitution formed the protective framework around it.[11] That is important because Lincoln did not simply pit the Declaration against the Constitution. He connected them. The Declaration supplied purpose. The Constitution supplied structure. And the Union preserved the possibility of fulfilling that purpose.

For Lincoln, preserving the Union was therefore about more than preserving a political arrangement. **The Union carried the Revolutionary inheritance forward.**

“The Union Is Much Older Than the Constitution”

Lincoln made that argument explicitly in his First Inaugural Address. He declared: “The Union is much older than the Constitution.”[12]

Lincoln deliberately traced the Union backward:

- The Articles of Association.
- The Declaration.
- The Articles of Confederation.
- The Constitution.

His argument was historical as well as constitutional. Secessionists maintained that sovereign political communities had entered the Union and could withdraw from it. Lincoln rejected that interpretation.

For him, the American Union had developed through the Revolution itself. The Constitution had been adopted to form “a more perfect Union,” not to transform the Union into something temporary. That made preservation of the Union part of preserving the Revolutionary achievement.

The men who answered Lincoln's call for troops in 1861 were therefore defending more than the government then sitting in Washington. In the Union understanding of the conflict, **they were defending a nation whose history stretched backward through the Constitution to the Revolution itself.** That connection mattered.

The generation of 1861 had grown up surrounded by Revolutionary memory. The Revolution was not ancient history to them. In many families, it was the history of fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. The Union they marched to preserve was the Union they believed the Revolutionary generation had helped create.

And Then Comes Gettysburg

Perhaps nowhere is the connection clearer than Gettysburg. November 19, 1863.

Lincoln begins: "Four score and seven years ago..."[13] We know the arithmetic. But think about the choice. Lincoln could have dated the nation to 1787 and the Constitution. He did not. He took his listeners to **1776**. He said the nation had been: **"conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."**[14]

There is an important word in that sentence: **proposition**. Not achievement. Not description. Proposition. Something asserted. Something is still being tested. Lincoln immediately tells us what is doing the testing. The Civil War.

The war was testing whether that nation, "or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."[15] Gettysburg therefore becomes more than a memorial address. Lincoln is making an argument about American history. He is connecting the Union dead lying around Gettysburg with the political experiment begun in 1776.

Hattem's scholarship is especially helpful here. His study identifies a specifically antislavery interpretation of the Revolution developing during the sectional crisis, with the Declaration's equality language becoming increasingly important.[16] Lincoln's 1776 was not primarily a precedent for separation. It was the source of the proposition of equality and the beginning of a national experiment worth preserving.

Frederick Douglass and the Revolutionary Promise

Lincoln was hardly the first person to expose the tension between Revolutionary principles and American slavery. Frederick Douglass had already done so with extraordinary force. In his 1852 Fourth of July address, Douglass did not simply reject the Revolution because its promises had been denied to Black Americans. He did something much more interesting. He praised the

principles of the Revolution and then used those principles to indict the nation that celebrated them while maintaining slavery.[17]

Douglass could honor the Declaration while condemning America's failure to live according to it. **That is another example of Revolutionary memory becoming part of the sectional conflict.**

Hattem's work shows how abolitionists increasingly centered their interpretation of the Revolution upon the Declaration's statement of equality and debated whether the Constitution itself should be understood as a proslavery or antislavery document.[18]

By the 1850s, Americans could use the Revolution to support radically different political positions.

- It could justify resistance.
- It could defend slavery.
- It could attack slavery.
- It could defend Union.

Eventually, it could help redefine the purpose of the Civil War itself.

The War Changes the Meaning of the Founding

The war of April 1861 was not yet the war Lincoln described at Gettysburg. The original publicly stated war aim was preservation of the Union. But the war changed.

- The Emancipation Proclamation changed it.
- Black military service changed it.
- The destruction of slavery changed it.
- The Thirteenth Amendment changed it permanently.

The contradiction that had existed since 1776 was being confronted in a way the Revolutionary generation had never managed. This is where we need to be careful with the phrase **"Second American Revolution."** There is certainly a case for it. Approximately four million enslaved people emerged from slavery.

The constitutional relationship among individuals, states, and the federal government was transformed. The **Reconstruction Amendments** fundamentally altered the constitutional order. That was revolutionary change.

Yet something else is important. The people producing some of that change often presented themselves as **fulfilling the original Revolution rather than abandoning it.** Lincoln's argument was not that America needed to discard its

founding. His argument was closer to this: **The Founders stated something greater than they themselves achieved.** That allowed enormous transformation to be understood as fulfillment. It also helps us understand why Revolutionary memory mattered so much to the Civil War generation.

So, Who Owned 1776?

That brings us back to our original question. Who owned the Revolution in 1861?

The **Confederates** looked backward and saw a people who had withdrawn their allegiance from a government they believed had violated their liberties.

Unionists looked backward and saw the creation of an American nation that individual states could not simply dissolve. **Proslavery Southerners** looked backward and saw a republic created in substantial part by slaveholders.

Antislavery Americans looked backward and emphasized natural rights, Revolutionary opposition to bondage, and the Declaration's equality principle.

Frederick Douglass looked at the Declaration and demanded that Americans apply its principles to people whom the nation had excluded. And Abraham Lincoln stood at Gettysburg and said that the United States had been born when a proposition was announced in 1776. Not when that proposition had been fully achieved. When it had been **announced**. That distinction matters.

The Revolutionary generation declared the principle while living with the contradiction. The Civil War generation inherited both.

By 1861, the political system could no longer contain the conflict produced by slavery's expansion, sectional power, competing theories of sovereignty, and incompatible interpretations of the nation's founding. Americans went to war carrying weapons. But they also went carrying **competing memories of 1776**.

The Revolution did not simply create the nation in which the Civil War later occurred. It provided the language through which Americans understood the crisis. It provided their heroes. Their constitutional arguments. Their definitions of liberty. And even their justifications for taking up arms.

The Confederacy invoked the Revolution to justify separation. The Union invoked the Revolution as part of the inheritance it sought to preserve.

Lincoln eventually went further and connected preservation of that nation with the unfinished promise of freedom. At Gettysburg, he took his listeners back eighty-seven years and essentially asked: **What was this nation created to be?**

That question had not been settled at Yorktown. It had not been settled at the Constitutional Convention. It had not been settled at Fort Sumter. In November 1863, Lincoln was telling the country that it was being tested on the battlefield.

Remembering 1776 and 1861

As we commemorate America's 250th anniversary, perhaps that is something worth remembering. The men and women of the Civil War generation did not regard the American Revolution as ancient history. It was part of their living national inheritance.

- They quoted its words.
- They honored its heroes.
- They debated its meaning.
- They looked to its principles as they faced the greatest crisis the nation had known.

For the Union soldiers and sailors whose service we remember and honor, preservation of the United States meant preserving a nation whose story reached back to the Revolutionary generation. Many would not live to see the Union restored. They would fall at places such as Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chickamauga, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and on hundreds of lesser-known fields.

Others returned home carrying the physical and emotional consequences of the war for the remainder of their lives. Together, their service preserved the United States through its greatest national crisis. But the nation they preserved was changed by the struggle. Slavery was destroyed. The Constitution was transformed. And the meaning Americans attached to the promise of 1776 was changed as well.

Perhaps, then, the connection between the Revolution and the Civil War can be expressed simply: **The American Revolution gave Americans their independence. The Civil War forced another generation to confront what that independence, liberty, Union, and equality would mean.**

For those of us who preserve the memory of the Union veterans of the Civil War, there is something especially meaningful in that connection.

When we remember the Civil War generation, we are also remembering a generation that understood itself in conversation with 1776.

- They inherited the nation the Revolutionary generation had created.
- They inherited its achievements.
- They inherited its ideals.
- They inherited its unresolved questions.

And when the Union was threatened, a new generation was called upon to determine whether that nation would endure.

As we mark America's 250th anniversary, we honor the Revolutionary generation that helped create the nation. As members of the Auxiliary to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, we also remember the generation that answered the call when that Union stood in peril.

One generation helped establish the Union. Another sacrificed to preserve it. Our generation has the responsibility to remember them both.

Notes

1. Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.
2. U.S. Constitution, art. I, sec. 2; art. I, sec. 9; art. IV, sec. 2.
3. Michael F. Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery: Remembering the American Revolution While Marching toward the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2015).
4. Michael D. Hattem, *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), especially Part Two, "Sectionalizing the Revolution, 1826 to 1865."
5. Articles of Confederation, art. II.
6. U.S. Constitution, preamble.
7. South Carolina, *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union*, December 24, 1860.
8. Jonathan B. Crider, "De Bow's Revolution: The Memory of the American Revolution in the Politics of the Sectional Crisis, 1850–1861," *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 3 (2009): 317–332.
9. Mississippi, *A Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union*, January 9, 1861.
10. Alexander H. Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech," Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861.
11. Abraham Lincoln, "Fragment on the Constitution and Union," ca. January 1861, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 168–169.
12. Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861.

13. Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Hattem, *The Memory of '76*, Part Two, "Sectionalizing the Revolution, 1826 to 1865."
17. Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" address delivered at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.
18. Hattem, *The Memory of '76*, especially chap. 5, "The Abolitionist Revolution," and chap. 7, "Creating an Antislavery Revolution."

Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Conlin, Michael F. *One Nation Divided by Slavery: Remembering the American Revolution While Marching toward the Civil War*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2015.

Crider, Jonathan B. "De Bow's Revolution: The Memory of the American Revolution in the Politics of the Sectional Crisis, 1850–1861." *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 3 (2009): 317–332. DOI: 10.1080/14664650903122950.

Hattem, Michael D. *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024.

Primary Sources

Articles of Confederation. 1777. Ratified 1781.

Constitution of the United States. 1787.

Declaration of Independence. July 4, 1776.

Douglass, Frederick. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Address delivered at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.

Lincoln, Abraham. First Inaugural Address. March 4, 1861.

Lincoln, Abraham. "Fragment on the Constitution and Union." Ca. January 1861. In *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Edited by Roy P. Basler. Vol. 4. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953.

Lincoln, Abraham. Gettysburg Address. November 19, 1863.

Mississippi. *A Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union*. January 9, 1861.

South Carolina. *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union*. December 24, 1860.

Stephens, Alexander H. "Cornerstone Speech." Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861.