In this chapter, you will learn some essential background to United States history since 1877. This background includes a review of three documents that have greatly influenced the development of our nation — the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. You will also learn about some key individuals who participated in the American Revolution, and about the values Americans forged in these years. Finally, you will see how participation in the democratic process continues to shape our cultural beliefs, patriotism and civic responsibility as we try to achieve a "more perfect union."
A. Americans won their independence during the American Revolution. Jonathan Trumbull was the only colonial governor to side with the colonists. John Peter Muhlenberg was a Protestant minister who recruited soldiers and rose to the rank of general.

B. The Declaration of Independence stated the colonists’ decision to separate from Britain. The Declaration listed colonial grievances against Britain and provided a theory of government: government’s purpose is to protect individuals’ unalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” When a government oppresses citizens’ rights, they have a right to overthrow it.

C. Signers of the Declaration included John Hancock, Benjamin Rush, Charles Carroll, and John Witherspoon.

D. The first national government established by the new United States was a weak association. Americans created a stronger federal government when they ratified the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution created a national executive, a two-house legislature known as Congress, and a national judiciary. John Jay was the nation’s first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. To ensure the national government would not challenge citizens’ rights, the Constitution rested on certain key principles — limited government, the separation of power, federalism, checks and balances, and popular sovereignty.

E. The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution in the form of the first ten amendments to further protect individual rights from government abuse.

F. The First Amendment protects freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and the right of citizens to petition their government.

G. The Second Amendment protects the right of citizens to bear arms.

H. The Third Amendment says government cannot “quarter” soldiers in private homes without their consent.

I. The Fourth Amendment protects people from “unreasonable searches.”

J. The Fifth Amendment protects individuals from double jeopardy, and from being forced to incriminate themselves, and further guarantees citizens “just compensation” for property taken by government’s right of eminent domain.

K. The Sixth Amendment guarantees those accused of a crime a fair and public trial by a jury and the assistance of a lawyer.

L. The Seventh Amendment guarantees jury trials in some civil cases.

M. The Eighth Amendment prevents judges from setting bail that is too high, or from inflicting “cruel and unusual” punishments.

N. The Ninth Amendment lists certain rights and does not deny other rights.

O. The Tenth Amendment reserves powers not granted to the federal government to the state governments and the people.

P. Alexis de Tocqueville observed five American values: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.
**Essential Questions**

- What do the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights say?
- What has been the importance of these three documents to American history?
- What qualities led to America's exceptional success as a democratic republic?
- How did the characteristics of American culture found by John de Crevecoeur compare to those later identified by Alexis de Tocqueville?

**The Declaration of Independence**

One of the most important formative events in American history was the American Revolution.

**The American Revolution**

After the French and Indian War (1754–1763), the British government was left with a large debt. To help repay this debt, the British government imposed a series of new taxes on the colonists, including the Stamp Act, Townshend duties, and the tea duty. Parliament acted without consulting the colonists, and many colonists saw this “taxation without representation” as a violation of their rights as “freeborn” Englishmen.

In 1773, a group of protesters, disguised as Indians, threw tea off British ships in Boston Harbor. The British government closed the harbor and banned public meetings until the tea was paid for. When British soldiers and colonists fired on one another at Lexington and Concord in 1775, they started the American Revolution. Other colonies quickly entered the war in support of Massachusetts. The Second Continental Congress appointed a Virginian, George Washington, to command the new Continental Army.

From Boston, British General Thomas Gage requested the assistance of Connecticut in support of the King. Governor Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., however, refused to help, informing General Gage that he would act instead in support of the colonial patriots. A close friend of Washington, Trumbull was the only colonial governor to side with the colonists. He developed a reputation as one who spoke in favor of colonial rights and against English abuses. During the Revolutionary War, he supplied Washington's army with food, clothing, and munitions. Trumbull was also the only colonial governor to remain in office throughout the war, becoming Connecticut's last colonial governor and first state governor.

*Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. (1710–1785)*
Strong support for independence came from several colonial religious leaders. In colonial times, these religious leaders held great influence. Many colonists attended church on Sundays, where ministers made their views known in weekly sermons. John Peter Muhlenberg was born in Pennsylvania, studied in Germany and America, and became a Protestant minister.

At one of his sermons, Muhlenberg pulled off his clerical robe to reveal a uniform underneath. Then he enlisted more than a hundred men into the Continental Army. Rev. Muhlenberg became part of a group known as the "Black Regiment" — ministers who wore black clerical robes while preaching and who worked to recruit large numbers of volunteers for the Revolutionary cause. During the war, Muhlenberg rose to the rank of general under Washington. Later, he served as a U.S. Senator and Congressman.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Representatives at the Second Continental Congress began discussing the issue of American independence early in 1776. After much debate, the delegates decided to go ahead and declare their independence from Britain. A "Committee of Five" was charged with the task of writing a draft for the Declaration of Independence. The members of the Committee decided that Thomas Jefferson should write most of the document.

The final Declaration of Independence, issued on July 4, 1776, explained the reasons why the colonists sought independence from Great Britain. The Declaration not only freed the colonists from Britain, but also put forward a theory of government. Many of its ideas were borrowed from John Locke. The Declaration explained that the purpose of government should be to protect citizens’ unalienable rights. These were rights that cannot be taken away, such as the rights to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’

The Declaration further argued that ordinary citizens had the right to overthrow an oppressive government that failed to protect these unalienable rights. The Declaration of Independence then went on to list the grievances of the colonists against King George III. Most of these grievances were based on the belief that the British Crown was threatening the colonists’ rights in favor of tyrannical rule.
ACTING AS AN AMATEUR HISTORIAN

The most important part of the Declaration of Independence is presented below:

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. — Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.”

★ Briefly summarize what each paragraph says in your own words.

★ What justification do these paragraphs give for the American Revolution?

SIGNERS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The Second Continental Congress consisted of more than 50 delegates representing all thirteen colonies (although Georgia sent representatives later). At the beginning of July, they accepted the June resolution of Richard Henry Lee to end all connection between themselves and Great Britain. Fifty-six delegates then met again to sign the Declaration.
They signed by state from North to South, starting with New Hampshire. They acted courageously since the British viewed the Declaration as an act of treason, punishable by hanging. Who were some of these signers of the Declaration?

**John Hancock.** The most recognizable signature on the Declaration of Independence was that of John Hancock, a prosperous merchant from Boston and the President of the Continental Congress. Hancock made his signature so large so that King George III could read it without his glasses. When the first version of the Declaration was printed and sent to each colony, it carried only John Hancock’s signature, since the official document had not yet been drawn up for others to sign. Hancock’s name quickly became second only to that of George Washington as a symbol of freedom in the colonies.

**Benjamin Rush.** Another signer of the Declaration, Rush was a physician, educator, and humanitarian. Dr. Rush is sometimes known as the “Father of American Medicine.” He was a pioneer in the fields of physiology and psychiatry. Rush is also known for his proposal to establish a national public university to train public servants. He favored the education of women, and helped to establish and finance the oldest African-American church in the country (the African Methodist Episcopal Church) in Philadelphia. His son later became U.S. Ambassador to England.

**Charles Carroll of Carrollton.** One of the wealthiest men in the colonies, Carroll helped finance the Revolution with his own money. Carroll was one of the first to recognize the necessity for independence from Britain and strongly argued for armed resistance to Britain. From Maryland, Carroll was a Catholic. At that time, Catholics made up less than two percent of the colonial population and lacked political rights. Carroll helped in the struggle for the acceptance of the Roman Catholic religion in America.

**John Witherspoon.** A Scottish immigrant, Witherspoon became a leading member of the Continental Congress and took part in more than a hundred of its committees. Shortly after signing the Declaration of Independence, he responded to a person who argued that the colonies were not ready for independence. Witherspoon commented that it “was not only ripe for independence, but in danger of rotting for the want of it.” He was a Presbyterian clergyman, and he became President of the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton University. Under his leadership, the college rose to become a leading institution of learning in America.
THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

The Declaration of Independence only set up a series of aspirations, or goals, for Americans. It promised a system of government that promoted liberty, equality, and individual rights, and that was based on the will of the people. The U.S. Constitution actually turned these goals into a concrete system of government with a series of specific, fundamental laws.

The Constitution was not the first central government that the colonies established after independence. The colonies originally set up a very weak national association under an agreement known as the Articles of Confederation. This association was an experiment in government that failed. In 1786, American leaders met at Annapolis, Maryland, and decided that a stronger government was needed.

They decided to meet again and invited delegates to Philadelphia to revise the Articles. The Constitutional Convention, meeting in Philadelphia in 1787, quickly decided to abandon the Articles altogether and to write an entirely new constitution.

PRINCIPLES OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

The U.S. Constitution, written by the Constitutional Convention, established the basic structure of our national government. It established a government in which power rested with the people, who elect their own representatives. The framers of the Constitution sought to create a national government strong enough to defend the nation’s interests and to promote its general welfare. They gave the new national government many important powers, and made federal law supreme over state law.

The new Constitution created an elected President, a Congress with two houses, and a Supreme Court. To ensure that this new national government was not too strong, the new Constitution also adopted a number of important principles:
John Jay was a member of the Continental Congress who favored independence. He was absent at the time when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Later, he helped negotiate the peace treaty with England ending the Revolutionary War. After the new Constitution was written, it had to be ratified, or approved, by the states before it could be put into effect. Jay was the author of three essays in the Federalist Papers, which argued strongly in support of ratification.

In 1789, Washington appointed Jay as the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Five years later, he was appointed as envoy to Great Britain to resolve conflicts over certain territories. His appointment resulted in the Jay Treaty (1795). When he returned home, Jay found that his friends had worked to get him elected Governor of New York. He was a popular Governor who introduced many changes, such as penal reform and the abolition of slavery. He also undertook extensive road and canal projects.