

Note: the following is the entire text content from the interactive historic scene.

WAR'S END: THE PROMISES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

As the long war drew to a close, Americans looked forward to the freedom and prosperity they believed peace and independence would bring.

West Point, New York, June, 1783

Overview

Peace at Last

The war for independence was all but won by 1783. Soldiers and civilians alike rejoiced. The army could be disbanded; officers and enlisted men could go home. The bad news was that eight exhausting years of conflict had left the United States with an empty treasury and a staggering [war debt](#). How would the government pay the long-overdue money it owed to the soldiers of the [Continental Army](#), let alone the special [bounties](#) and other reenlistment incentives so liberally offered during the darkest hours of the war?

A Precarious Situation

Entire Continental regiments had mutinied over the lack of pay during the war. Now, some officers wanted to march the whole army to Philadelphia. They argued that only the threat of force would prevent Congress from abandoning its promise to provide Continental officers half pay [pensions](#) for life once the war ended. A moving address by Commander-in-Chief George Washington in March, 1783, defused this so-called [Newburgh Conspiracy](#), but the situation remained precarious. The government shifted its attention to dispersing the angry, still unpaid rank and file.

Emergency Measures

Congress decided to [furlough](#) rather than discharge most of the army in the months leading up to the ratification of the peace treaty. Entire regiments marched to their home states under the tight control of their officers. An emergency loan enabled the government to give each soldier one month's pay in cash. Each man received the remainder of his back pay in government certificates redeemable for cash, plus interest at a future date. At General Washington's suggestion, soldiers were permitted to keep their uniforms, muskets and other army-issued equipment. Lacking decent clothing, food and other necessities, many men quickly spent what little cash they received and sold their certificates, muskets and other possessions to support themselves and their families. Only a few regiments remained under arms at [West Point](#), New York, when Congress began formally discharging the entire army in the fall of 1783.

Government

A Dangerous Situation

The end of the war was in sight by 1783, and not a moment too soon. The United States treasury was empty. Congress needed to shed the costly burden of maintaining the [Continental Army](#) as soon as possible. Yet, how could Congress peaceably disband these soldiers when it lacked the means to pay them? Whole regiments had

rioted and even mutinied over the lack of pay and other perceived grievances during the war. Discharging officers and enlisted men without giving them their back pay, pensions and bonuses could spark a full scale uprising.

Promises to Pay

Superintendent of Finance Robert Morris managed to negotiate a hasty cash loan that would put one month's pay in the soldiers' pockets. The remainder of their pay would be issued in government [scrip](#) that could be redeemed for cash at a later date. The government also generously allowed soldiers to keep their army-issued [weapons](#), uniforms and [equipment](#).

Crisis Averted

Congress decided to furlough most of the men, rather than discharge them. After all, the peace treaty had not yet been finalized. The British army still occupied New York City; the army might be needed again. Regiments marched home under military discipline, thus preventing any disgruntled, ill-disciplined soldiers from looting the countryside or marching on Congress. Once they were safely dispersed, Congress issued official discharges to these men. The few remaining regiments stationed at [West Point](#), New York, were discharged over the summer and fall. By the winter of 1783, the army was safely disbanded, and Congress had averted a serious crisis.

Army

Peace?

Rumors of peace raced through the [Continental Army](#) in the spring of 1783. According to Private [Thomas Foster's](#) diary, two questions seemed to be on every soldier's lips: "when do you expect to be discharged and go home and be rid of this army"? and, "how we are to be paid off"?

An Ungrateful Nation

Despite the rumors, the year wore on with neither [discharge](#) nor pay in sight. An ungrateful nation once again turned a cold shoulder to the soldiers whose sacrifices had preserved it time and time again from disaster. Soldiers frustrated by Congress' continuing refusal to either discharge or pay them, chafed under army discipline. Anonymous letters urged officers to hold Congress to the promises it had made to pay officers half pay [pensions](#) for life once the war ended. Personal appeals by General Washington kept matters in check, but morale and relations between enlisted men and officers continued to deteriorate.

Useless Scrip

Most soldiers received [furloughs](#) instead of the long awaited and longed-for discharges. The single month of pay the Congress grudgingly paid each man fell disgracefully short of the years of back pay it owed. The government [scrip](#) the soldiers received for the remainder of their pay was of little use to those in desperate need of ready money for themselves and their families. Many men traded their certificates for goods or cash at a fraction of their face value. Some sold their [muskets](#) and other possessions.

A Bitter Betrayal

Congress discharged the army, including the few remaining Massachusetts and Connecticut regiments at [West Point](#), New York, through the fall of 1783. The joy soldiers experienced at returning home to familiar scenes and loved ones was offset by poverty and a bitter sense of betrayal by a government and people who had failed them.

Rollovers

Text for rollovers in the interactive scene illustrations.

A Final Exchange

Lt. Colonel Hugh Maxwell of Charlemont, Massachusetts, buys government certificates from a soldier in his regiment who is in immediate need of cash. [Click for more information.](#)

Deceived and Destitute

In his journal, Private Thomas Foster writes of enlisted men's anger at being sent "into the country naked and destitute of money" and their belief that their country has "most shamefully deceived and baffled" them. [Click for more information.](#)

A Long Journey

John Chaloner of Greenfield eagerly takes the first steps of his long journey back to Greenfield, Massachusetts. [Click for more information.](#)

Final Preparations

Moses Sash of Worthington gathers his things and prepares to return home to Massachusetts. [Click for more information.](#)

Duties Done

Female non-combatants have been part of the daily life of the army throughout the long war. This washerwoman prepares to leave West Point as the last regiments disband.

A Civilian Once More

This man already has exchanged his torn and threadbare uniform for civilian clothing.

Worth Keeping

Eight-year army veteran Thomas Foster carried this kettle on campaign; now he carries it home to Barnstable, Massachusetts. [Click for more information.](#)

Quick Cash

A soldier sells his flintlock for quick cash. [Click for more information.](#)

Civilian and Military Wear

Hats are part of daily wear for all men. The tricorne is a popular civilian as well as military style. [Click for more information.](#)

Among the Last

Both the drum he is allowed to carry home and the reversed colors on his uniform coat identify this soldier as a musician. [Click for more information.](#)

Long Barracks

The stone barracks at West Point are far superior to the living conditions soldiers experienced throughout the Revolutionary War. [Click for more information.](#)

Final Volley

Before disbanding, a company fires a final volley to honor a popular officer. [Click for more information.](#)

Cartridge Papers

Used cartridge papers litter the ground in front of the soldiers firing a final salute. [Click for more information.](#)

Badge of Honor

Only enlisted men with at least three years of service, and who have shown "bravery, fidelity and good conduct," are permitted to wear the white chevron this man proudly displays on his tattered uniform coat.

Emergency Repairs

Unable to afford new footwear, John Chaloner hopes some strategically-wrapped string will keep his shoes from falling apart.

Badge of Ill-treatment

Some men angrily display in their hats the practically worthless government certificates they have received as pay in place of cash.

Brisk Business

This civilian sutler sold food and supplies to soldiers during the war. Now he does a brisk business purchasing their muskets, government certificates and other possessions in exchange for food and much-needed cash.

Promises to Pay

Congress scrapes together one month's pay in cash for the army. Officers and soldiers receive the remainder of what they are owed in interest-bearing government certificates.


Hard Usage

Buttonless, tailless, ragged and hopelessly stained uniforms testify to the hardships the army has endured.

Final Chore

Joseph Plum Martin of Connecticut carries wood, part of the two cords of firewood he was ordered to split and stack before being discharged.

Related to this scene

-  [American Flintlock](#)
-  [Bullet Mold](#)
-  [Canteen](#)
-  [Cartridge Box](#)
-  [Declaration of Independence](#)
-  [Deerfield Town Warrant](#)
-  [Fife](#)
-  [Flag Remnant](#)
-  [Hoyt Armchair](#)
-  [Liberty Pole](#)
-  [Society of the Cincinnati Diploma](#)
-  [Silhouette of Hugh Maxwell](#)
-  [Revolutionary War Payroll](#)
-  [Print of West Point](#)

Observers

Major General Friedrich Von Steuben Philadelphia, October, 1783

"The soldiers engaged for the war can not on any pretence be retained against their inclination after the proclamation of Peace –those who desire to retire immediately on their accounts being settled shall receive their discharges and one months pay with Provision to carry them to their States where Officers shall conduct them."

James Madison April 23, 1783

"The resolution permitting the soldiers to retain their arms was passed at the recommendation of Gen'l Washington. The resolution for granting furloughs or discharges was a compromise between those who wished to get rid of the expence of keeping the men in the field, and those who thought it impolitic to disband the army whilst the British remained in the United States."

[Click for more information.](#)

Robert Morris to George Washington May 29, 1783

"I shall cause such Notes to be issued for three Months Pay to the Army and I must entreat Sir that every influence be used with the States to absorb them together with my other Engagements by Taxation. The present collections are most shameful and afford but a sad Prospect to all those who are dependent upon them."

General George Washington Rocky Hill, New Jersey, November 2, 1783

"the Officers and Soldiers may expect considerable assistance in recommencing their civil occupations from the sums due to them from the public, which must and will most inevitably be paid. It is earnestly recommended to all the Troops that...they should prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as Citizens, than they have been persevering and victorious as Soldiers."

[Click for more information.](#)

Themes

Getting By and Getting Ahead

The interest-bearing certificates Congress paid soldiers of the Continental Army in lieu of cash at the end of the war proved a poor substitute.

[Click for more information.](#)

We the People

In the months leading up to and following peace, Americans preferred to forget the indispensable role a professional army had played in winning independence.

[Click for more information.](#)

The Wider World

The coming of peace presented a new challenge for the United States: how would it peaceably demobilize the Continental Army?

[Click for more information.](#)

Everyday Life

By the end of the war, most rank and file soldiers in the Continental Army were young men who lacked both income and status.

[Click for more information.](#)

