

# **FREEDOM AND DIGNITY PROJECT**

## **Economic Impacts of the American Revolution**

**Developed by:** Amy Wright, Pine Plains Central School District

**Topic:** The economic influence of the American Revolutionary War on several different groups in society. Or the economic impact on several different professions during the American Revolutionary War.

**Grade Level:** 7th grade can be adapted for 11th grade

New York State Core Curriculum Unit of Study Unit III: A Nation is Created  
V. Economic, Political and Social Changes Brought by the American Revolution

**NY State Learning Standard(s) assessed** (identify by # and title):

Standard 1- History of the United States and New York

- The students will be able to see that the American Revolution was a key turning point in New York State and United States history and explain why this event is significant
- Students will be able to describe the roles played by various groups in New York State during the American Revolution

**Learning Objectives:** To understand the economic effects the war had on various parts of society in the Hudson River Valley. To understand how the livelihood of some groups were affected during the American Revolutionary War.

### **Background-**

The Revolutionary War in the Hudson River Valley (1775-1785) impacted both negatively and positively the local economic institutions. Blockaded ports, routine shortages of necessary items, hyperinflation and an increasingly worthless currency all contributed to economic disorder but also revitalized community trade and exchange networks. Authorities enforced customary market controls and regulated prices of necessary items, as well as forbid the exportation of locally needed foodstuffs.

**Essential Questions:** To what degree was the individual's decision to become a patriot or loyalist influenced by how the war impacted them economically? Do humans always act out of self-interest?

### **Overview of the Learning Experience Module**

This lesson gives students the opportunity, using primary sources, to examine the economic impact of the war on various occupation groups within the Hudson River Valley. Students will consider to what degree the economic issues were a determining factor for a person becoming a patriot, loyalist or remaining neutral.

**Time Allotment:** 2-3 class periods

**Vocabulary (key terms):**

Whig	privateer
Hyperinflation	boycott
Tory	

**Materials/Resources:**

Teacher provided handouts (see below)  
My Brother Sam is Dead (Optional)  
Large white paper or poster board  
U.S. History Textbook

**Procedure:**

1. Prior to starting this unit, students will be aware of the issues that led to the American Revolution. They should also know that the colonists were divided. Some were loyal to Britain, some were in favor of independence and some were undecided. The teacher will engage in a discussion of the economic impact individuals face while involved in a war.
2. After establishing a background to the causes of the American Revolutionary War. A brief discussion with students about the daily struggles people faced to support their families while the American Revolution was being fought including the difficulty to operate a household while fathers, sons and brothers were off fighting the war.
3. Students will be broken into several groups, at least four. Each group will be given a description to read. There are four different descriptions of the economic impact of various occupation groups: merchants, privateers, family farmers and tenant farmers. They will discuss the relationship of the revolution to the lives of the people in their passages. Targeted questions will be asked of the students. The group will record their responses.
4. After writing their responses the class will convene together. On a sheet of large white paper, the teacher will have each occupation group written at the top of the page. The teacher will write the results of each group's findings. The class will compare and contrast each group's findings of the influences the war made on their occupation group.

**Assessment:**

Using the information provided on the large white paper, students will write an essay discussing the economic impact the American Revolutionary War had on different occupational groups. Students will address the question as to what degree the economic impact influenced a person becoming a patriot or loyalist.

Students will create several fictional characters based on the information provided them in the passages. They will write dialogue among several different characters to demonstrate the economic impact the war had on their characters. Through the dialogue students will illustrate how the war impacted different occupations. They will read this dialogue aloud in front of the classroom.

### **Group A: Family Farmers**

[The following descriptions are primary accounts of individuals taken from the following sources:

Rip Van Winkle's Neighbors: The Transformation of Rural Society in the Hudson Valley, 1770-1850, written by Thomas S. Wermuth

A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence written by Ray Raphael

"Robert R. Livingston and the American Revolution" by Lorna Skaaren]

The British blockade of New York City halted the importation of manufactured goods, encouraging increased household production of textiles and other items. In addition the encampment of the Continental Army in the mid-valley offered farmers a large stationary market for their agricultural produce.

Many farm families benefited from wartime inflation, since this increased their profits on farm produce. Others had suffered from depressed currency and soaring prices at shopkeepers' stores.

The books from an army commissary, records the opportunities open to Ulster farmers to participate in war-created markets. Alcohol, in the form of distilled grain whiskey and rum earned the highest profits for local farmers (40%), meat products, primarily beef and pork, accounted for nearly 35 percent of local earnings,. agricultural goods, in the form of wheat and flour, formed twenty-five percent of farmer's earnings. However, more farmers engaged in the production of beef or grains than in whisky. 40 engaged in whisky, 183 produced meat products, and 266 produced wheat and flour from a sample of 440 farmers.

Farmers in Ulster and Orange counties marketed between 25 and 38 percent of their grain and livestock. If farmers did not sell, the army would simply have requisitioned whatever they needed anyway, leaving the farmer in no position to decide what could or could not be sold. Almost all of the produce was sold to an army agent who paid cash. This was new to many farmers. The paper money fluctuated in value and according to James Henretta, "forced nearly every family to look out more carefully and more persistently for its economic self-interest."

In the years before the Revolution, the North American colonies imported more than 10 million yards of linen and other cloth from England annually. During the Revolution farmers manufactured the cloth domestically. During the war, the Committee of Safety employed hundreds of Ulster women to sew stockings, and blankets, and to weave the fabric needed for uniforms for the troops. The state government assessed local towns a quota of shirts, shoes, and other products, and sent to the towns the wool, cloth or other raw products for producing these goods. The local committees distributed the materials to local farm families who spun and wove the finished products, which were then collected by the committees and sent to the army supplier.

**Group B: The Livingston Manor/ tenant farmers**

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"Robert R. Livingston and the American Revolution" by Lorna Skaaren]

In New York, some of those who opposed the Revolution were poor tenant farmers from the 160,000-acre Livingston Manor in the Hudson Valley. Livingston Manor was described as "The most Tory-ridden part of the country."

In the spring of 1777, coinciding with the completion of New York's Constitution, about five hundred tenants on Livingston Manor took arms to aid the British in the hope that a British victory would lead to their obtaining freehold title to their farms. Livingston's tenants, according to historian Staughton Lynd, saw in the revolution a chance to oppose their Lord and possibly take possession of the land they worked.

Almost every body in the upper manor, particularly the eastern part of it, appears to be engaged with the enemy, first by taking an oath of secrecy, and then an oath of allegiance to the King of Great Britain; it appears to have been their design to have waited till the enemy came up, when they were to rise and take the whigs prisoners.

Henry Livingston, meanwhile, wrote to Robert from the upper part of the Manor: "The Tenants here are Great Villans. Some of them are resolved to take advantage of the times and make their Landlords give them Leases forever

Margaret Beekman Livingston, wife of Robert R. Livingston, wrote to her son regarding the tenants on the manor, "..... they boast that in a fortnight they shall have what they want. I think the powder mill in danger. Your father says he will write for a guard when the powder arrives."

### **Group C: The Livingston Privateer**

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"Robert R. Livingston and the American Revolution" by Lorna Skaaren]

Livingston Manor located in Dutchess County, New York consisted of 160,000 acres. Robert Livingston, Jr., the lord of the manor, was a Whig Revolutionary. This was mostly due to the fact that his political opponents in New York politics were all Tories.

John Robert Livingston, the third son of Margaret Beekman and Judge Robert Livingston, became a merchant in the Revolutionary period in America. He came to see the Revolution as a chance to make his fortune and sought any possible lucrative venture to reach that end. He focused his full energy on privateering and trade.

He invested in a powder making business. In early 1776, the New York Provincial Government announced a need for gun powder mills in various counties and offered loans for their construction. John responded and built a mill in Dutchess County. Between June 1777 and June 1778, the mill furnished New York with eleven tons of powder.

John soon began investing in privateering ships. He began procuring English goods, which were in great demand among the populace. An extensive illicit trade developed during the Revolution between patriot traders in upstate New York and New York City British traders. Alexander Hamilton estimated that by mid-1782, the British in New York City sold goods upstate amounting to £30,000 a year.

John was especially active in privateering in Boston. A privateer at the outbreak of the Revolution was a ship armed and fitted out at private expense for the purpose of preying on the enemy's commerce to the profit of her owners, and bearing a commission or letter of marque from the government authorizing her to do so. Usually the government claimed a portion of the money realized from the sale of prizes and their cargoes. The owners of the privateers received the lion's share and a considerable portion was divided among the officers and crew as an additional incentive to securing prizes.

Englishmen engaged in trade continually complained about the loss of ships to American privateers. For example, in February of 1778 testimony was given in the House of Lords that the number of ships lost by capture or destruction by American privateers since the beginning of the war was 733; their cargoes were estimated to be worth over ten million dollars. Merchants protested to Parliament the continuance of the war.

### **Group D: Merchants/Shopkeepers/ Tavern Owners/ Trades People**

[The following descriptions are primary accounts of individuals taken from the following sources:

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The wartime trade of mid-valley shopkeepers was not carried on unregulated, but came under the careful scrutiny of the local Committees of Observation and Inspection. This system subordinated the individual economic concerns to the public interests of the community. It was designed to guarantee access to foodstuffs and staple products for the poor during times of economic crisis. These ideas are what underlay the nonimportation agreements. The nonimportation agreements restrained the right and ability of a merchant or public official to profit excessively from the shortage of British imports. The committees fined shopkeepers and merchants who violated these price maximums, confiscating goods and foodstuffs.

In 1777, the Ulster Committee met at Andrew Oliver's home on November 11 and forbade the exportation of flour, meal, or grain outside of the county. In 1778, during the height of wartime shortages, the town leaders of Marbletown gave permission to export flour, but "no more than four barrels" per person, and only on the condition that an equal value of salt be brought into town.

Each year from 1777 through 1780, price controls were reinstated at the state level in an attempt to halt hyperinflation. The prices of all grains, plus flour, vegetables, leather and shoes and a variety of other products were set by the Provincial Congress.

The Kingston committee stated that if anyone was guilty of actions endangering the community, "they should be punished in the publick newspapers as enemies to the liberties and privileges of American subjects." And all residents should abstain from commerce with the guilty offender.

In each community, revolutionary committees of Safety, Observation and Inspection sprung into power, and throughout the war years maintained a strong presence by exerting their influence not only in the political sphere, but also in the regulation of prices, importation of goods, wages and labor.

The committees also attempted to punish price gougers and engrossers. Mrs. Jonathan Lawrence was accused by her New Windsor customers of selling teas 2s a pound above the rate set by the committee. Mrs. Lawrence claimed she only charged 6s, "but will not let the purchaser have the tea unless he takes a paper bag to put it in at two shillings."

Group (letter) \_\_\_\_\_

Student Names \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:**

Read the passage assigned to your group carefully. Following a discussion, respond to the following questions. Answer the questions as completely as you can.

1. According to the passages, what affect did the war have on the daily life of the people/person described in the passages? Please give some specific examples of the effects.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What challenges did the people/person described in your passages have to face as a result of the war? What benefits did the people receive as a result of the war?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How did the people/person in the passages adjust to the changes the war made?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What information in the passages surprised you the most about the people/person in your occupation group?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Based on the experiences of the people/person in the passages, how do you think the decision to be a patriot or loyalist was influenced by the economic impact they experienced?

\*Optional read the novel, My Brother Sam is Dead. The story centers around the Meeker family during the American Revolutionary War. The Meekers (the father is a Loyalist) own a tavern in Connecticut. The story illustrates the problems they face as merchants as the war progresses. It discusses the shortage of items and the danger of selling cattle during the war. It is a wonderful story for 5th-7th graders.