

*Craig Nordquist*

# *Revolutionary War Colonial Soldier*



## STUDY GUIDE

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## PROGRAM

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The impression Craig Nordquist wears is that of a Colonial Soldier from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The dress includes: knee breeches, linen shirt, long tailed tunic, tri-cornered hat, musket, and bayonet. A fascinating look at the life of the colonial commoner set in the struggle with the greatest military power in the world at the time. How were the colonies able to field armies to fight against Britain? Was there unanimous support for the war? Did we really fight behind trees and rocks as the movies show? How were the battles fought and with what weaponry? We will look at the common soldier through the war, as well as a look at how people lived in the culture of colonial America. Tools, weaponry, and clothing styles are examined. Many artifacts including original newspapers, coinage, and household goods will be shown.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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A Cincinnati native, Craig "Deks" Nordquist is an Eagle Scout and has been active as adult leader in Scouting for over 14 years. He attended Finneytown High School and graduated with a BA degree in Military History and a minor in Archaeology from Miami University in 1977. Over the last 25 years, he has given over 250 lectures and performances to schools and organizations. Some of the more notable lectures have been to the West German military in Frankfurt on WWI, Cincinnati Art Museum on Vikings, and to the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa on Romans. Hobbies are many, but include coin and artifact collecting and Roman, Viking, Revolutionary War, Civil War, WWI and WWII reenacting.

## A SOLDIER OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

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The Army faced long odds in the American Revolution (1775-1783), which began in 1775 when American colonists demanded independence from Britain. The British army was larger, better equipped, and backed by the world's most powerful navy. German mercenaries known as Hessians bolstered the size of the British force. The colonials main force, the Continental Army, consisted mainly of inexperienced, poorly equipped volunteers who had joined in response to an offer of a cash bonus and a promise of land after the war. The states refused most of the Continental Congress's requests to provide money and supplies for the troops. Local militias reinforced the Continental Army. Many militia soldiers were experienced and better equipped than their Continental Army counterparts, but they were generally not prepared to fight far from home or for extended periods.

The weakness of the combined militia and the Continental Army left General George Washington few options at the outset of the war. Washington's forces fought well in localized battles and skirmishes, but had far less success waging sustained offensive maneuvers. By the summer of 1776, the American troops struggled for survival against a skillful British offensive in New York and New Jersey. The Continental Army won few significant battles until late in 1776, when Washington made his famous Christmas night crossing of the Delaware River to surprise British forces in Trenton, New Jersey.



*Pictured:  
American Soldiers  
of the Revolutionary  
War.*

Through the next several years, Washington gained the upper hand over the British by avoiding direct confrontations, focusing instead on stealth and surprise to weaken the enemy. The success of the Continental Army and local militias brought the French into the war as an American ally, and eventually forced the British to cave in to the colonials' demands for independence in 1783. About 4000 soldiers died in the war.

## COLONIAL LIFE

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### POPULATION

Britain's 13 North American colonies experienced an extraordinary rate of population growth. In 1700 the population was about 250,000; seven decades later there were about 2,500,000 inhabitants, a tenfold increase. This phenomenal growth was a prerequisite for a successful independence movement. In 1700 there were 20 people in Britain for every American colonist; by 1775 this ratio had fallen to 3 to 1. The American population also changed in composition. The proportion of the colonists who were of

English culture and ancestry steadily declined during the 1700s as the result of the arrival, by forced or voluntary migration, of new racial and ethnic groups. Diversity existed not only in the population but also in religious life. Many of the American colonists were not members of any church. Of those who had a religious affiliation, the vast majority were Protestant Christians. There were significant numbers of Roman Catholics in Maryland and Delaware, and a small number of Jews, mostly in Rhode Island. Among the Protestants, there were also significant regional variations.

This growth in population and diversity made the American colonies more difficult for Britain to rule. It was therefore an important precondition for the rise of an independence movement and the subsequent emergence of a unique American nationality.

*Pictured:  
British Colonies  
before 1763.*



## POLITICAL STRUCTURE

In 1750 there was little political basis for a national consciousness in the colonies of British North America. Each of the 13 colonies was a separate entity, with its own governor and legislative assembly. The inhabitants' first political allegiance was to their own colony. Nevertheless, the colonies shared one important political institution. Each colony had a representative assembly with authority to make laws covering most aspects of local life. The assemblies had the right to tax; to appropriate money for public works and public officials; and to regulate internal trade, religion, and social behavior. Although the British government was responsible for external matters, such as foreign affairs and trade, the American colonists had a great deal of self-government during the colonial period. The capable leaders of the assemblies took the lead in the independence struggle. These well-functioning representative institutions would form the basis for the new state governments.

## ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

In addition to the rapid growth and diversity of the population and the experience in representative government, the emergence of a prosperous agricultural and commercial economy in the colonies during the 18th Century helped pave the way for the independence movement. This economic system was based on the production of wheat, cattle, corn,

tobacco, and rice in America for export to the West Indies, Britain, and Europe.

The contrast between the rich and the poor was stark in the colonial cities. In 1774 about 29 percent of the adult men in Boston possessed no taxable property at all. These men were wage earners, working for others. They lived in the back of shops, taverns, or rented rooms. Since they had little or no property, they could not vote, and thus lacked direct political power.

Next in social rank were the artisans and small shopkeepers. Constituting almost half of a town's population, they owned about one-third of the total wealth. As threatened social groups, artisans and shopkeepers were vital to the revolutionary upheaval. They took the strongest stand against the new British measures of taxation and control.

Urban merchants also played key leadership roles in American resistance. By 1770 these men, about 10 percent of the taxpayers, owned from 50 to 60 percent of the total wealth of these towns. Their wealth also gave them much prestige and enabled them, and their lawyer allies who handled complex commercial transactions, to dominate political life.

The gap between rich and poor was much narrower in the farming regions of the Northern colonies. However, even in rural communities, where most Americans lived, social differences were increasing.

In 1775 it was not clear whether the many divisions within American society—among racial and ethnic groups, religious denominations, and social classes—and the fragmented character of colonial political institutions would prevent a unified movement for independence. But it was increasingly apparent that the battle with Britain for American home rule would also involve a struggle among Americans over which people would rule in the new country.

## ARMOR OF A REVOLUTIONARY WAR SOLDIER

**BAYONET** – a steel blade attached at the muzzle end of a shoulder arm (as a rifle) and used in hand-to-hand combat.

**KNEE BREECHES** – short pants covering the hips and thighs and fitting snugly just below the knee.

**LINEN SHIRT** – a shirt made of flax and noted for its durability.

**LONG-TAILED TUNIC** – a long tailed, close fitting jacket with high collar, worn especially as part of a uniform.

**MUSKET** – a shoulder gun carried by infantry.

**TRI-CORNERED HAT** – a military hat worn during the revolutionary era, with three corners.

## DISCUSSION

1. What were the 13 colonies when the American Revolutionary War begun? Was there other land (“territories”) at the time? If so, why weren’t they a colony or state?
2. The British, French and Spanish all had interest in the Americas. Who controlled what parts? Did they consistently hold these areas? Did these three countries influence the cultural development of those areas? (see map below)
3. Why would France become an ally of the Americans who declared independence from Britain?
4. What was the status of the Native Americans during the Revolutionary War? Where did they live? Did they participate in the Revolutionary War? Why or why not?
5. Many important political documents were written around the time of the American Revolutionary War. Discuss the significance of each: Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights (part of the Constitution, why was it added?).
6. Why “united” states? Why are states significant (versus political power concentrated in the capital of the country)? Compare to other countries. Do they have states? How is their political power organized?

