

The Treaty of Paris of 1783

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After the Treaty of Paris was signed, British forces evacuated New York City on November 25, 1783. This painting shows General George Washington's triumphant entry into the city. Washington is riding a white horse. Image from the Library of Congress

The Battle of Yorktown, in October 1781, was the last major battle of the American Revolutionary War. British forces were decisively defeated by combined American and French forces. Following this loss, Britain decided to scale back its military operations in North America.

Britain's decision was spurred not only by the loss at Yorktown, but also by the widening of the war. Britain now found itself fighting France, Spain and the Dutch Republic on various fronts throughout the world. Through the fall and following winter, British colonies in the Caribbean fell to enemy forces. So, too, did the Mediterranean island of Minorca, which was retaken by Spain.

Beginning peace negotiations

In Britain, anti-war forces began growing in power, and in March 1782, British Prime Minister Lord North's government fell. It was replaced by one led by Lord Rockingham.

Benjamin Franklin, the American colonists' representative in Paris, then wrote Rockingham. Franklin proposed that the two warring sides begin peace negotiations. Rockingham quickly agreed, as he realized that making peace had become necessary for Britain. To begin the process, British negotiator Richard Oswald was sent to meet with the Americans. On the American side, the negotiators included Franklin, John Adams and John Jay.

The talks soon stalled, however. The most important stumbling block was that the British refused to make American independence a condition of the peace.

Meanwhile, the British also started negotiations with the French. In July 1782, Rockingham died, and Lord Shelburne became the head of the British government. The French tried to stall for time, as they were working with Spain to capture Gibraltar. This was a land under British control in the south of Spain. However, the Spanish and French attacks were failing, and all countries started looking for a way to end the war.



American independence accepted

In a letter to George Washington written in the summer of 1782, Shelburne agreed to accept American independence. With the issue of independence settled, the Americans resumed talks with Oswald. They began hammering out the details, which included determining what the borders of the new country would be.

The Americans were able to get the British to agree to the borders established before the Quebec Act of 1774. The 1774 agreement gave territory claimed by the American colonists to the French Canadians in Quebec.

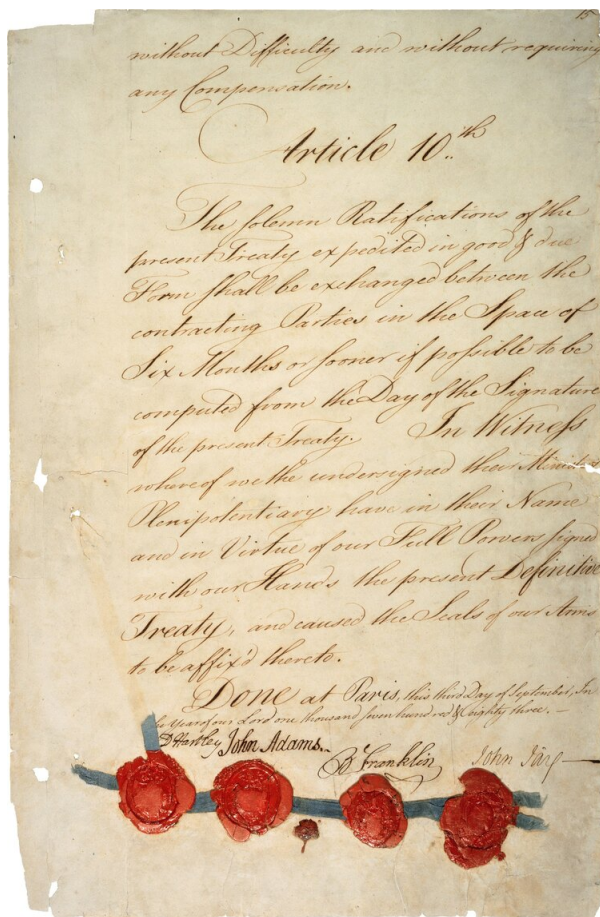
By the end of November, the two sides produced a preliminary treaty based on the following points:

- Great Britain recognized the 13 Colonies to be free, independent and self-governing states.
- The borders of the United States would extend west to the Mississippi River.
- All debts were to be paid to lenders on each side.
- Colonial Loyalists who had supported the British during the war would be paid for property taken from them.
- The United States would stop property from being taken from Loyalists in the future.
- All prisoners of war were to be released.

- Both the United States and Great Britain were to have permanent access to the Mississippi River.
- British territory captured by the United States after the treaty was written was to be returned.

Territory changes after ratification

On November 30, the Americans and Oswald signed the preliminary treaty. The terms of the treaty caused a political firestorm in Britain. Many in the country were angered that so much territory was being given up and many also felt that the Loyalists were being unfairly abandoned. This backlash against the treaty forced Shelburne to step down. A new government was formed under the Duke of Portland.



Portland replaced Oswald with a new chief negotiator, David Hartley. Portland then attempted to change the terms of the treaty. However, his efforts were

blocked by the Americans, who insisted no changes be made. As a result, Hartley and the American delegation signed the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783.

Peace of Paris

The treaty signed between Britain and the new United States was just one of several treaties Britain signed on or around September 3. The British signed a treaty with the Dutch on September 2, and treaties with the French and Spanish on September 3. Collectively, these four treaties are known as the Peace of Paris.

Under the Peace of Paris, Britain kept control of Canada, and won back the Bahamas in the Caribbean. However, it lost Minorca and Florida to Spain. It also lost Senegal, in Africa, and Tobago, in the Caribbean, to France. The Dutch also lost out, giving up the port city of Nagapattinam in India to Britain. The Dutch did get back from the British a port city in Sri Lanka that they had formerly controlled.