

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The British Empire

Episode 3 – The British Empire in America

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And I'm Katie Charlwood, and this is Bitesize History.

Datshiane: This is the third episode in an eight-part series on the British Empire, and in this episode, we look at the loss of the British ruled American colonies in the late 1700s.

Katie: It might help if you have something to make notes on and do feel free to press stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: OK, let's begin with those 13 American colonies. Katie, give us the who, what, where and when.

Katie: The 13 colonies were established by Britain along the eastern coast of North America during the 17th and early 18th centuries.

Datshiane: Nice. And let's throw in a why. Why did people leave Britain to go to these North American colonies?

Katie: Well, people left Britain because of high unemployment and low wages on farmland. They were struggling to survive and sometimes faced starvation because of failed harvests. Also, Britain had turned from a Catholic to a Protestant nation and many Catholics, Puritans and Quakers left Britain fearing religious persecution and settled in the North American colonies.

Datshiane: But life wasn't easy for these early British migrants to America. They faced hardship and failure in growing crops, and they suffered diseases such as malaria. But despite all of this, people still kept emigrating.

Katie: Absolutely. In 1606, King James I gave permission for a group of businessmen to sail to Virginia to establish a new colony called Jamestown, to see if it was fit to grow crops and find gold. Here's a quote written in 1607 by George Percy. He is a colonist and the leader of Jamestown. 'Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases as swellings, fluxes, burning fevers and by wars, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part, they died of mere famine. There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we were in this new discovered Virginia.'

Datshiane: These colonists had little luck with gold, but eventually they began to farm the land successfully. Initially, the workers were indentured servants from Europe and then, after

1619, enslaved Africans who had been forcefully transported and made to perform the gruelling agricultural labour.

Katie: And there were some efforts by the colonists to use Native Americans as well, without success, as well as a small number of free labourers and the settlers themselves.

Datshiane: Tobacco planting in particular led to the success of Jamestown, and it made high profits. These high profits attracted more and more British migrants to seek their fortune in America.

Katie: But it wasn't just tobacco. They grew other crops too, like corn and cotton and, later on, sugar in huge plantations. But they did this through enslaving Africans that they had forcibly transported from their home where they were then made to work relentlessly to produce crops which were then sent back to Britain to sell and make money. And the more money that was made, the more people came, and more settlements sprung up along the east coast of America that eventually became the 13 colonies for Britain.

Datshiane: So, these colonies grew both geographically and numerically, expanding westwards and increasing in population. Britain was able to expand the economies and benefit from farming, trade and manufacturing in the colonies. Now initially, the relationship between the colonists and indigenous people was one of trade and cooperation. But as the colonies grew, this changed to one marked by exploitation, displacement, violence and the long-term erosion of indigenous culture and society. So, let's have a look now at how the relationship changed between Britain and its colonies in North America.

Katie: You see, the early relationship was mutually beneficial. The colonies relied on British trade and protection. But over time, tensions began to rise because of Britain's attempt to exert more control and impose taxes to pay for their war against France. This led to a growing resentment amongst colonists.

Datshiane: Colonial leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were influenced by Enlightenment ideas and became vocal advocates for colonial rights. The British also fuelled the resentment with some new taxes.

Katie: In particular, the Stamp Act in 1765, which imposed a direct tax on the colonies for stamped paper, legal documents and other items. It was highly unpopular and led to widespread protests in the 13 colonies. They argued that the colonies should not be subject to British taxes and laws without representation in the British Parliament, and the snappy saying, 'no taxation without representation.'

Datshiane: This essentially meant that they thought it was unfair for the British government to impose taxes on them without allowing them to have any say or representation in the government's decision-making process.

Katie: Whilst at the same time, the UK Parliament's Tea Act of 1773 allowed the British East India Company to sell imported tea from China into American colonies without paying taxes.

Let's hear from our time-travelling Bitesize History reporter Kitty and their eyewitness report from 1773 Boston, where things have reached a head.

Kitty: This is no ordinary protest. This is now being referred to as the Boston Tea Party. One by one crates of tea are smashed open, their contents spilling into the harbour, staining the water a murky brown. It's being carried out by members of the Sons of Liberty, a colonial group opposed to British taxation without representation. The colonists are enraged by Britain's taxes on their tea, have had enough. The men have been shouting: 'We're done paying for Britain's empire.' The British have been squeezing the colonies for years, starting with the Stamp Act in 1765, but this action is in direct response to the controversial Tea Act passed earlier this year. It's forcing the colonies to buy their tea solely from the British that has finally pushed these colonists over the edge. Now they're making their defiance loud and clear. 'We will not stand for tyranny any longer,' one protester shouted as the crates were thrown into the icy water. Only time will tell how this extraordinary event will shape the future of British rule in America. This is Kitty reporting for Bitesize History. Back to the studio.

Datshiane: Thanks, Kitty. Now, here's a couple of sources to help us understand different perspectives on the Boston Tea Party.

Katie: This first one is from a British newspaper report in December 1773. It reads: 'A group of lawless colonists, disguised as savages, has committed an act of rebellion by destroying valuable tea belonging to the East India Company. This defiance against lawful trade must be met with strong punishment.'

Datshiane: And the second source is a letter from a colonial merchant in January 1774. It says: 'The destruction of the tea was a necessary act of protest against the tyranny of British taxation. We have borne the burden of unjust laws for too long, and this bold stand will awaken all Americans to the cause of liberty.'

Katie: What these two sources show is that the British and the American colonists had completely opposing perspectives about what exactly was taking place. For the British this was seen as an act of tyranny, whereas the colonists saw this as a legitimate protest against British taxation.

Datshiane: So, Britain did not back down, and in 1774 they introduced the Coercive Acts, also known as the Intolerable Acts. These were harsh measures taken in response to the Boston Tea Party and included the closure of Boston's port and the imposition of British military rule in Massachusetts. But all they managed to do was to anger the colonists and unite them in opposition to Britain.

Katie: The 13 American colonies had enough and formally wrote a Declaration of Independence from Britain, written by Thomas Jefferson on the 4th of July 1776. But unsurprisingly, Britain did not recognise this.

Datshiane: Now you might get an exam question which asks you to briefly explain the impact of Enlightenment ideas on the American colonists' decision to declare independence from Britain.

Katie: Datshiane, any tips to start us off?

Datshiane: I do indeed, Katie. You might write about the principles which inspired the colonists to question British rule, especially when they felt their rights were being violated by unfair laws and taxation without representation.

Katie: Nice one.

Datshiane: So, King George III maintained his support for the enforcement of British laws and taxes in the colonies, and he ordered military action. This is war. The American Revolutionary War had begun.

Katie: There were five years of bitter fighting, with key battles in Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill in the state of Massachusetts, and Saratoga in New York. Together, these battles were a turning point because it convinced France to support the colonies, but it was the British surrender at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781 that was seen as the decisive end of the war.

Datshiane: Now, Yorktown was humiliating for the British because the Americans completely surrounded them and they forced Lord Cornwallis, the British Army leader, to surrender. The Americans were helped by the French here, and so eventually Britain had little choice but to agree to the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and recognise the independence of the United States.

Katie: Britain had paid a heavy price for the war, with 10,000 soldiers and 20,000 sailors losing their lives. And on the American side, there were around 25,000 losses. However, Britain was getting wealthy from industrialisation, and trade with the USA resumed soon. But this included the British slave trade with America. We'll be examining this further in Episode 5.

Datshiane: So, time for a quick test. You know the rules. Three questions, five seconds. Katie, you go.

Katie: OK. What is the name given to the rebellion by a colonial group opposed to British taxation without representation in Boston in 1773?

Datshiane: That's easy. It was the Boston Tea Party.

Katie: Who was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and when was it written?

Datshiane: Thomas Jefferson in 1776.

Katie: What was the significance of the battles in Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and Saratoga in the 1770s?

Datshiane: Together, these battles were the turning point in the War of Independence, as they convinced France to support the American colonies.

Katie: Great job, everyone. Even though we can't see you, you obviously aced that. So final summary of the key facts from this episode. Off to you, Datshiane.

Datshiane: British colonies were established along the east coast of North America starting in the early 1600s.

Katie: They had their own local governments but were ultimately under British control.

Datshiane: Now, to pay off war debts, Britain imposed new taxes on the colonies without giving them representation in Parliament, which angered them.

Katie: The key events that led to war in 1775 were the Boston Tea Party and the Coercive Acts, which were also called the Intolerable Acts.

Datshiane: As well as ideas from the Enlightenment of natural rights, individual liberty, and government by consent.

Katie: Remember the 'no taxation without representation' slogan.

Datshiane: And the Declaration of Independence, largely drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, which stated that the colonies were free and sovereign states.

Katie: And a reminder that the movement of people and goods led to colonial expansion with the enforced work of enslaved African people, the displacement of indigenous people, and the settler colonialism of British people.

Datshiane: There's loads more on this and other history topics on the Bitesize website, as well as in other episodes in this series.

Katie: In the next episode, we'll be looking at the British Raj in India and the impact of the War of Independence in 1857. Thanks for listening.