Events of October 1776

October 1776 was a **critical and difficult month for the American Revolution**. The United States had declared independence only three months earlier, but there was still no permanent national government, the Continental Army was struggling to survive, and British forces were gaining control of New York.

Here is what was happening in **October 1776**, divided into the four areas.

1. The Revolutionary War

The central military story of October was the **New York Campaign**. British General William Howe was trying to destroy George Washington's army and end the rebellion.

October 11–13 — Battle of Valcour Island

Far to the north, on Lake Champlain, **Benedict Arnold** commanded a small American fleet against a much larger British naval force.

The Americans were defeated tactically, but Arnold accomplished something important: he delayed the British advance southward from Canada. The British campaign season was nearly over by the time they could move forward, so they did not invade New York from Canada that year.

October 12 — British landing at Throgs Neck

General Howe began moving British and German troops around Washington's position in Manhattan. His objective was to get behind the American army and cut off its escape and supply routes.

Washington realized that remaining on Manhattan could result in his entire army being surrounded.

October 18 — Battle of Pell's Point

About 4,000 British and Hessian troops came ashore at Pell's Point in Westchester County.

Colonel **John Glover's Massachusetts troops** fought a delaying action using stone walls and the local terrain. They slowed the British advance sufficiently for much of Washington's army to withdraw toward White Plains.

October 18 onward — Washington abandons Manhattan

Washington began withdrawing the Continental Army from Manhattan and moved north toward **White Plains**.

This was a major strategic problem: New York City was effectively lost to the Americans, and Washington's army was in danger of being destroyed.

October 28 — Battle of White Plains

The major battle of the month occurred at **White Plains, New York**.

British and Hessian forces attacked American positions, particularly on Chatterton Hill. The Americans were eventually forced to retreat.

This continued the disastrous pattern of the New York Campaign:

Brooklyn → Manhattan → White Plains → eventual retreat toward New Jersey

Yet Washington's most important achievement was that he **kept his army from being surrounded and destroyed**.

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2. What was happening to civilians?

The war wasn't simply armies fighting each other. **Ordinary civilians were increasingly caught in the middle.**

New York was particularly affected.

Once the British occupied New York City, civilians had to decide how to live under British military authority. The population was divided among:

- **Patriots**, who supported independence
- **Loyalists/Tories**, who supported the British Crown
- people who were trying to remain neutral
- enslaved people, whose circumstances were dramatically affected by the war
- merchants and farmers whose livelihoods were disrupted by military operations

The British occupation also created refugees and displaced families. The earlier British evacuation of Boston had demonstrated what could happen to Loyalists: many had left with the British army, abandoning homes and possessions.

For civilians around White Plains and Westchester, the arrival of thousands of soldiers meant:

- homes and barns could be used by armies
- food and livestock could be requisitioned
- roads became military routes
- civilians could be caught between Patriot and British authorities
- property could be damaged or confiscated
- families could be separated

An important point is that **Americans were not united politically in 1776**. Independence had been declared, but substantial numbers of people still opposed the Revolution.

The war therefore became, in many communities, partly a **civil conflict between neighbors**.

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3. What was happening with the new American government?

This is one of the most interesting things about October 1776:

The United States existed—but its government was still being invented.

The Declaration of Independence had announced that the thirteen colonies were now independent states. But the country did **not yet have the U.S. Constitution** or the government that Americans have today.

The **Continental Congress** was functioning as the national government, but its authority was limited and somewhat improvised. The State Department describes Congress as having become the **de facto national government** during the Revolution.

At the same time, individual states were creating their own governments.

For example:

- **New Jersey** adopted a constitution in July 1776.
- **Virginia** adopted its constitution in June.
- **Maryland** adopted one in August.
- **Delaware** adopted one in September.
- **Pennsylvania** adopted its constitution on September 28.

So by October, the new country was essentially operating on **two levels**:

State governments
↓
Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, etc.

Continental Congress
↓
The loose national government coordinating the war and foreign affairs.

But there was still no permanent framework defining exactly how the states and Congress should relate to one another.

The Articles of Confederation had not yet been completed.

Congress was discussing the future structure of the union, but the debates were difficult. Major questions included:

- How much power should Congress have?
- Should each state have one vote?
- Should representation depend on population?
- How should taxes be distributed?
- Who would control western lands?
- How could the national government pay for the war?

The Articles of Confederation would not be completed until **1777** and would not take effect until **1781**.

So in October 1776, the new United States was essentially **building a government while simultaneously fighting for its survival**.

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4. What was happening inside the military?

This was arguably Washington's biggest problem.

The Continental Army was **not yet the professional American army that would eventually emerge**.

Washington had:

- Continental soldiers
- short-term militia
- men whose enlistments were about to expire
- soldiers from different colonies
- inexperienced recruits

- inadequate supplies
- shortages of clothing, weapons, ammunition and food

Washington had already warned Congress in September that the problems with short-term enlistments and militia were threatening the army's ability to fight the British.

Morale was becoming a serious issue.

The Americans had suffered major defeats at:

Long Island — August 27
Kip's Bay/Manhattan — September
White Plains — October 28

Desertions were occurring, and soldiers were living in difficult and often unsanitary conditions.

Washington therefore faced a terrible dilemma:

If he stayed and fought, the British might destroy his army.
If he retreated, Americans might conclude that the Revolution was failing.

His solution throughout October was essentially to **preserve the army at almost any cost**.

That decision would become extremely important in December.

October 1776 — the bigger picture

You can think of the month this way:

Area	What was happening
War	Britain was driving Washington's army out of New York
Military	Washington was desperately trying to preserve the Continental Army
Civilians	Communities were being divided between Patriots, Loyalists and neutrals; civilians faced displacement and property losses
Government	The new United States was trying to construct governments while fighting a war
Congress	Continental Congress was functioning as the national government, but had limited powers
States	Individual states were writing constitutions and establishing governments
Future government	Congress was beginning the difficult process that would eventually produce the Articles of Confederation

Area	What was happening
Morale	The American military situation looked increasingly bleak
British objective	Destroy Washington's army and force the Americans back under British rule

The really important historical point

October 1776 was not a month when the American Revolution looked like it was succeeding.

Three months after declaring independence, the new nation was in serious danger. Britain had a vastly larger professional military and controlled New York City. Washington's army had been repeatedly defeated and was retreating.

But Washington had managed to accomplish something absolutely essential:

He still had an army.

That became crucial over the next two months. The army would retreat through New Jersey in November and December, cross the Delaware River, and then Washington would launch the surprise attack at **Trenton on December 26, 1776**. That victory dramatically changed the military and political situation.

So, in retrospect, **October 1776 was the month when the Revolution came very close to a military disaster—but did not collapse.**

Below is a **day-by-day calendar for October 1776**, with the emphasis: the **Revolutionary War, Continental Army, civilians, Congress and the emerging governments, and important events in the colonies/states**.

One important caution: **October 1776 was not a month in which something famous happened every single day.** On many days the most significant events were decisions made in Congress, military movements, correspondence, recruiting, supply problems, or what civilians were experiencing. The calendar therefore includes both major events and the less dramatic developments that show what daily life during the Revolution was actually like.

October 1776 — Day-by-Day

Sunday, October 1

Philadelphia — Continental Congress

- Congress appointed **Thomas Mifflin as Quartermaster General**, replacing Stephen Moylan.
- Congress also began work on a plan for a **military academy** and a continental military laboratory.
- These decisions reflected a growing realization that the Continental Army needed to become a more permanent, organized military force rather than a collection of short-term militia units.
- Meanwhile, Washington's army remained concentrated around **Manhattan and Harlem Heights**, facing the much larger British army. (John Hancock)

Why it mattered:
The Revolution was beginning to transition from an improvised rebellion into a prolonged war requiring professional logistics, training, supplies, and administration.

Monday, October 2

Philadelphia / Northern Department

- Congress refused to accept **General Philip Schuyler's resignation** as commander of the Northern Department.
- Schuyler had faced considerable criticism following the failed American invasion of Canada.
- Congress nevertheless wanted him to continue directing the northern military effort. (John Hancock)

Military situation:
The northern army was still trying to defend **Lake Champlain and Fort Ticonderoga** against a British advance from Canada.

Tuesday, October 3

Philadelphia — Financing the Revolution

Congress made a major financial decision:

- It authorized a **$5 million continental loan**.
- Loan offices were to be established in the states so that individuals could lend money to the revolutionary government.
- The certificates issued to lenders represented debt owed by the United States. (United States Capitals)

Civilian impact:
The Revolution increasingly depended upon civilians lending money, providing supplies, producing weapons, and accepting Continental currency.

Bigger picture:
There was still no Constitution or federal government in the modern sense. The **Continental Congress was functioning as the de facto national government**, while individual states were simultaneously establishing their own governments. (Office of the Historian)

Wednesday, October 4

Continental Army / Congress

Congress continued dealing with the enormous administrative problems created by the war:

- paying soldiers,
- obtaining weapons,
- handling prisoners,
- supplying the army,
- and managing military accounts.

This was an important but relatively quiet day compared with the battles that were approaching.

On the ground:
Washington's army was still in the New York area, increasingly vulnerable to a British flanking movement.

Thursday, October 5

Philadelphia — Congress

Congress received correspondence from:

- James Bowdoin of Massachusetts,
- Governor William Livingston of New Jersey,
- the New Hampshire Committee of Safety,
- and military authorities.

Congress also dealt with prisoners captured during the Canadian campaign and authorized **back pay for officers and soldiers who had been captured and subsequently returned**. (Scroll down to the bottom for October reports: Library of Congress Tile)

Civilian/government connection:
This illustrates how state governments, Congress, the army, and individual civilians were becoming intertwined in the war effort.

Friday, October 6

New York / Continental Army

Washington's army remained in a precarious position around Manhattan.

British General **William Howe** was looking for a way to get around Washington's defenses rather than simply attacking the strongest American positions.

Washington was receiving intelligence about British movements and attempting to determine where Howe would strike next.

For civilians:
Westchester County and communities north of New York City were increasingly becoming the next potential battlefield.

Saturday, October 7

Philadelphia

Congress received a report from **General Charles Lee** concerning the military situation in the southern colonies.

Congress also dealt with Lee's financial claims and advanced him money. (John Hancock)

Meanwhile in New York:
The British were preparing the next stage of their campaign against Washington.

Sunday, October 8

Northern New England / Naval preparations

American naval preparations continued.

John Langdon, involved with fitting out the Continental frigate **Raleigh**, was seeking cannon, muskets, shot, and other supplies. (Naval Documents of the Revolution)

This illustrates something easy to overlook: **the Revolution was also a naval war.** American privateers and Continental warships were trying to disrupt British commerce and obtain supplies.

WEEK TWO — THE BRITISH MOVE

Monday, October 9

New York — Washington's army

Washington reported that British warships had moved through the American obstacles in the Hudson River.

Two British 44-gun ships and another frigate passed through the American defenses, heading upriver. Washington was concerned that the British might interfere with supplies and threaten American positions farther north. (Scroll down to the bottom for October reports -> Library of Congress Tile)

Philadelphia — Army medical system

Congress created a more organized military hospital system:

- **John Morgan** was assigned hospitals for the army east of the Hudson.
- **William Shippen Jr.** was assigned hospitals in New Jersey.
- Congress ordered regular reports on sick and deceased soldiers.
- It also addressed supplies of medicine, bedding, clothing, blankets, salt, food, gunpowder and artillery. (Library of Congress Tile)

This is a particularly revealing day: Congress wasn't merely talking about independence. It was trying to run an actual country at war.

Tuesday, October 10

Philadelphia — Building a permanent army

Congress continued reorganizing the military.

Among its actions:

- establishing ranks for Continental Navy captains,
- addressing military pay,
- directing General Schuyler to prepare naval forces on the lakes for the following campaign,
- dealing with the exchange of prisoners,
- authorizing Washington to appoint a deputy commissary of stores,
- and attempting to regulate the use of civilian horses and wagons. (Library of Congress Tile)

Civilian impact:
The Continental Army desperately needed horses, wagons and food. Congress specifically instructed officers to avoid unnecessary seizure of civilian property and to compensate or release civilian resources as soon as possible.

Wednesday, October 11

⚓ Battle of Valcour Island

One of the month's most important battles took place on **Lake Champlain**.

American Brigadier General **Benedict Arnold** commanded a small American fleet against a substantially stronger British naval force under Guy Carleton.

The British won the battle, destroying or capturing much of Arnold's fleet. But the American fleet had delayed the British advance. (American Battlefield Trust)

Why this was important:
The British hoped to advance south from Canada through Lake Champlain toward the Hudson Valley. Arnold's resistance delayed them until the campaigning season was nearly over.

So although Valcour Island was a **British tactical victory**, it helped prevent a major British invasion from Canada in 1776.

Thursday, October 12

British land at Throgs Neck

The British began a major flanking operation.

Approximately **4,000 British and German troops** landed at **Throgs Neck**, at the eastern edge of the Bronx.

Howe's objective was to get around Washington's army and threaten its supply and escape routes. (National Park Service)

Washington's problem:
If he remained on Manhattan, the British could potentially surround him.

Friday, October 13

Lake Champlain / Northern Army

The fighting associated with Valcour Island continued as Arnold's surviving vessels attempted to escape northward.

British forces also occupied **Crown Point**, further securing their control of Lake Champlain. (Wikisource)

Strategic consequence:
The British had won the lake, but the lateness of the season meant that the northern invasion was effectively running out of time.

Saturday, October 14

Philadelphia — Congress

Congress continued dealing with the legal and financial consequences of the war.

It also dealt with **prize cases**, involving ships and cargoes captured by American naval vessels or privateers.

Congress was effectively acting as a national government, including in matters involving:

- courts,
- property,
- captured ships,
- military finance,
- and international commerce. (GovInfo)

This is an important feature of October 1776:
The United States was trying to create a functioning government **while simultaneously fighting for its survival**.

Sunday, October 15

New York — American and British forces

British troops continued maneuvering through Staten Island and the New York area.

American forces were increasingly concentrating around positions in **Westchester County**.

The situation was becoming dangerous enough that Washington was preparing to abandon Manhattan.

Monday, October 16

Washington decides to withdraw from Manhattan

This was one of the pivotal days of the month.

Washington ordered the American army to withdraw from Manhattan.

The British had already occupied New York City, but Washington still had substantial forces on northern Manhattan. The British flanking operation threatened to trap them. (Library of Congress)

Washington's dilemma:

Fight and risk losing the army
or
retreat and preserve the army.

He chose preservation.

That decision would ultimately prove extremely important because **the survival of the Continental Army was more important to the Revolution than holding Manhattan at that moment.**

Tuesday, October 17

Westchester / New York

American forces continued moving away from their vulnerable positions.

British troops were advancing through Westchester.

The countryside was increasingly being transformed into a military zone.

For civilians:
This meant soldiers moving through farms and villages, demands for food and transportation, property damage, refugees, and uncertainty about which side would control a particular community.

Wednesday, October 18

Battle of Pell's Point

This was one of the month's most important engagements.

British troops moved into Westchester while American forces attempted to slow them.

Colonel John Glover's Massachusetts troops fought a delaying action at Pell's Point.

They used the area's stone walls and terrain to slow the British advance. (National Park Service)

Why Pell's Point mattered

Glover's men did not defeat Howe's army.

Their purpose was to **buy time**.

That time helped Washington move his main army toward **White Plains**.

Same day — Congress

Congress appointed **Thaddeus Kosciuszko**, a Polish military engineer, as an engineer in American service with the rank of colonel. (National Park Service)

Kosciuszko would later become one of the important military engineers of the Revolution.

Thursday, October 19

Westchester / Civilian population

The British continued moving through Westchester.

For local civilians, the war was becoming immediate rather than something happening somewhere else.

Homes, farms, roads, food supplies, horses and barns were now strategically important.

Virginia:
George Mason wrote to John Hancock on behalf of Alexandria residents seeking cannon. The civilians wanted to fortify Alexandria because of concerns about protecting regional commerce. (ConSource)

This is a good example of civilians actively participating in the Revolution rather than simply watching the army.

Friday, October 20

White Plains area

Washington's army continued consolidating around **White Plains**.

The Americans were attempting to establish defensive positions while avoiding encirclement.

The British were moving toward them.

The next major confrontation was approaching.

Saturday, October 21

Philadelphia — Congress

Congress dealt with a very practical military problem:

A shipment of **flints** had arrived in New Hampshire.

Congress ordered:

- 30,000 flints sent to General Schuyler's northern army,
- the remainder sent to Washington's army.

Congress also finalized an oath for Continental officers. (Ibiblio)

Why flints mattered:
A musket was useless if its flint could not reliably produce a spark. Something as small as a supply of flints could therefore affect whether thousands of soldiers could fight.

Sunday, October 22

Diplomacy / France

Congress made an important diplomatic decision.

Thomas Jefferson declined to serve as an American commissioner to France, and **Arthur Lee** was appointed in his place.

Congress also instructed the commissioners to attempt to obtain **eight large ships of the line from France**.

This demonstrates that Congress understood that the war could not necessarily be won by the Continental Army alone.

The Americans needed:

- weapons,
- money,

- ships,
- trade,
- and potentially a European alliance.

Monday, October 23

White Plains

Washington's army continued strengthening its defensive position around White Plains.

British troops were closing in.

American soldiers were exhausted from weeks of movement and uncertainty.

Meanwhile, Congress continued attempting to obtain supplies and money for the army.

Tuesday, October 24

Philadelphia / Massachusetts

John Hancock wrote to Massachusetts officials concerning naval operations and the fitting out of American frigates.

He complained that his responsibilities concerning Washington's army and the northern army were consuming enormous amounts of his time. (Naval Documents of the Revolution)

A letter from James Warren also illustrates the civilian-commercial side of the war: American privateers were capturing prizes, while merchants and shipowners were sometimes attempting to disguise ownership of vessels trading with British possessions. (Naval Documents of the Revolution)

The Revolution was becoming an enormous economic conflict as well as a military one.

Wednesday, October 25

New York / White Plains

The British continued positioning their army for an attack on the American defenses.

Washington's army remained concentrated around White Plains.

American commanders were increasingly concerned about protecting their flanks and preventing the British from getting behind them.

Thursday, October 26

Benjamin Franklin sails for France

One of the most important diplomatic events of the month occurred.

Benjamin Franklin departed Philadelphia for France.

He was going to help negotiate French assistance for the American cause. (HISTORY TV Nederland)

Franklin's mission would eventually contribute to the diplomatic relationship that produced the **French-American alliance of 1778**.

Meanwhile — White Plains

Washington's army was preparing for the expected British attack.

The coming battle would be the largest land engagement of the month.

Friday, October 27

White Plains — Final preparations

British and American forces maneuvered around the American defensive positions.

The Americans had established defenses on high ground, including **Chatterton Hill**.

Washington had to decide whether to fight the British directly or retreat farther.

Saturday, October 28

⚔️ Battle of White Plains

This was the major land battle of October.

British and German troops attacked American positions around **White Plains**, particularly **Chatterton Hill**.

The Americans eventually withdrew from the exposed position.

The battle was a British success, but the British did **not destroy Washington's army**. (Wikisource)

Why White Plains mattered

The result was another American setback.

But Washington's army remained intact enough to continue the fight.

This distinction is extremely important.

The British were winning battles.
Washington was trying to win the war by keeping his army alive.

Sunday, October 29

After White Plains

The American army began reorganizing after the battle.

British forces had gained ground, but Washington still had an army capable of retreating and continuing the campaign.

American commanders were now considering where to establish the next defensive positions.

Congress meanwhile faced an enormous problem: keeping soldiers supplied and enlisted while the army was being pushed south.

Monday, October 30

Philadelphia — Military manpower and naval policy

Congress continued dealing with military compensation and naval prize money.

It considered the question of **soldier bounties**, including a Maryland proposal concerning compensation for soldiers.

Congress also established rules for distributing prize money captured by Continental naval forces. (US Continental Congress)

Why this mattered:
Congress needed incentives to persuade men to enlist and sailors to serve.

The Continental Army's greatest long-term problem was not simply weapons—it was **manpower and enlistment**.

Tuesday, October 31

End of the month — New York / Philadelphia

October ended with the strategic situation looking grim for the Americans.

Washington's army had been:

New York City → Manhattan → Westchester → White Plains

The British had:

- captured New York City,
- defeated or driven back American forces repeatedly,
- pushed Washington north and east of the city,
- and maintained a large professional army.

Yet Washington's army had **not been destroyed**.

Congress continued:

- raising money,
- obtaining weapons,
- organizing hospitals,
- arranging military supplies,
- recruiting soldiers,

- building a navy,
- and seeking French assistance.

And individual states continued developing their own governments.

October 1776 at a glance

Date	Major development	Area
Oct. 1	Thomas Mifflin becomes Quartermaster General	Army/Government
Oct. 2	Schuyler retained as northern commander	Military
Oct. 3	Congress authorizes $5 million loan	Government/Finance
Oct. 5	Congress deals with prisoners and military pay	Army
Oct. 9	Army hospital system reorganized	Military/Medical
Oct. 10	Congress addresses supplies, horses, wagons and Navy	Army/Civilians
Oct. 11	**Battle of Valcour Island begins**	Northern Army/Navy
Oct. 12	British land at Throgs Neck	New York
Oct. 13	British secure Crown Point	Northern Campaign
Oct. 16	**Washington orders withdrawal from Manhattan**	Continental Army
Oct. 18	**Battle of Pell's Point**; Kosciuszko appointed	Military
Oct. 19	Alexandria civilians seek cannon for defense	Civilians
Oct. 21	Congress sends flints to Schuyler and Washington	Army/Supplies
Oct. 22	Arthur Lee replaces Jefferson for France mission	Diplomacy
Oct. 24	Hancock deals with naval preparations	Navy
Oct. 26	**Franklin sails for France**	Diplomacy
Oct. 28	**Battle of White Plains**	Continental Army
Oct. 30	Congress addresses soldier bounties and naval prizes	Government/Military
Oct. 31	Washington's army survives but retreats	Military

What did October 1776 feel like to an ordinary person?

This is perhaps the most interesting way to understand the month.

Imagine you were living in **Westchester County, New York**, in October 1776.

At the beginning of the month, you were a farmer living in a community north of New York City.

Then:

British ships appear.

Then:

British troops land.

Then:

American soldiers arrive.

Then:

Your horses may be needed for wagons.

Then:

Your roads become military roads.

Then:

Battles occur near your farm.

Then:

You don't know which army will control your community tomorrow.

And you might also have neighbors who were **Loyalists**, while you supported independence—or vice versa.

That is why the Revolution was also a **civil conflict within American communities**.

The four stories of October 1776

If you're trying to understand the month as a whole, there are really **four simultaneous stories**.

US 1. The military story

The Americans were being pushed out of New York.

Valcour Island → Throgs Neck → Pell's Point → White Plains

🏛️ 2. The government story

The new United States was trying to build a functioning government while fighting a war.

Congress was dealing with:

money + courts + diplomacy + hospitals + supplies + the Navy + the Army

The Continental Congress was effectively functioning as the national government, even though the later Constitution did not yet exist. (Office of the Historian)

🤦 3. The civilian story

Ordinary people were providing:

food + horses + wagons + money + weapons + labor

while also suffering:

displacement + property loss + military requisitions + divided communities + uncertainty.

🌎 4. The international story

The Americans were realizing that defeating Britain would probably require more than American manpower.

Franklin sailed for France on October 26.

That diplomatic effort would eventually help bring **France directly into the war**.

And the most important fact about October

At the end of October 1776, **the American Revolution looked much more endangered than it had only a few months earlier.**

The Declaration of Independence was signed in July.

By the end of October:

- New York City was in British hands.
- Washington had lost a series of positions.

- The Continental Army was retreating.
- Enlistments were expiring.
- Supplies were inadequate.
- Congress was struggling to finance the war.
- Britain still possessed overwhelming military resources.

But there was one thing the British had **not** accomplished:

They had not destroyed Washington's army.

That would become crucial in **November and December 1776**, when Washington's army retreated through New Jersey, crossed the Delaware River, and eventually fought at **Trenton and Princeton**.

The Library of Congress's Washington chronology captures the significance of this period: Washington's central problem was creating a permanent, trained army capable of fighting Britain's regular forces, rather than relying on short-term militia. (Library of Congress)

Primary-source foundation

For a deeper day-by-day study, the most useful source is the **Library of Congress's complete *Journals of the Continental Congress***. The October 1776 entries record Congress's actual daily decisions on military affairs, finance, prisoners, supplies, diplomacy, and government. (Library of Congress)

Library of Congress — Journals of the Continental Congress

If you're interested in **what ordinary people actually experienced**, the next useful step would be a companion calendar showing **October 1776 through the eyes of civilians—what they ate, how much things cost, what soldiers requisitioned from them, slavery, Loyalists vs. Patriots, newspapers, weather, travel, and what a typical day in an American town looked like.**