

citizens—Patriot leaders encouraged them to take an active role in government. And as the common people exerted their influence, the character of politics changed. “From subjects to citizens the difference is immense,” remarked South Carolina Patriot David Ramsay. “Each citizen of a free state contains . . . as much of the common sovereignty as another.” By raising a democratic army and repudiating aristocratic and monarchical rule, the Patriots launched the age of republican revolution that would soon sweep the Americas and throw Europe into turmoil.

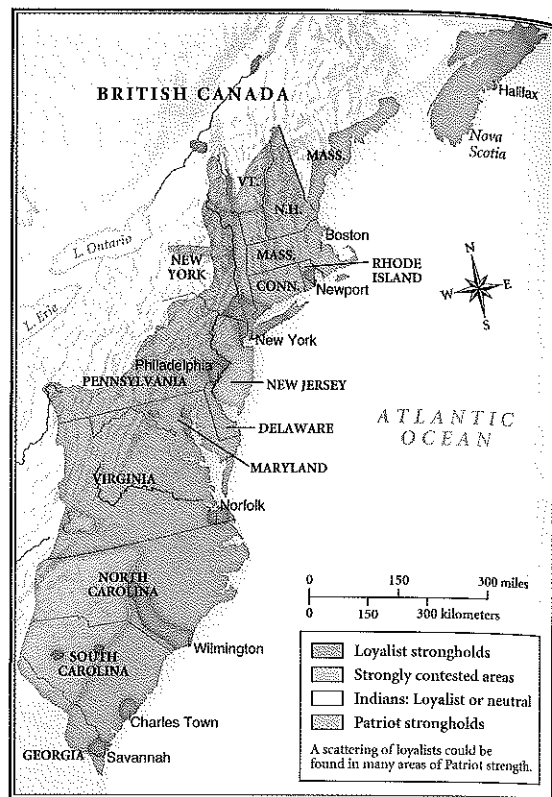
The Trials of War, 1776–1778

The Declaration of Independence coincided with a full-scale British military assault. For two years, British forces manhandled the Continental army. A few inspiring American victories kept the rebellion alive, but during the winters of 1776 and 1777, the Patriot cause hung in the balance.

War in the North

Once the British resorted to military force, few European observers gave the rebels a chance. Great Britain had a great demographic advantage: 11 million people compared to the colonies’ 2.5 million, 20 percent of whom were enslaved Africans. Britain also had access to the immense wealth generated by the South Atlantic System and the emerging Industrial Revolution. Its financial resources paid for the most powerful navy in the world, a standing army of 48,000 Britons, and thousands of German (Hessian) soldiers. In addition, Britain had an experienced officer corps and the support of thousands of American Loyalists and many Indian tribes (Map 6.1). The Cherokees in the Carolinas were firmly committed to the British, as were four of the six Iroquois Nations of New York—the Mohawks, Senecas, Cayugas, and Onondagas—who were led by the pro-British Mohawk chief Joseph Brant.

By contrast, the Americans were economically and militarily weak. They had no strong central government to raise revenues, and the new Continental army, commanded by General George Washington, consisted of about 18,000 poorly trained recruits hastily assembled in Virginia and New England. The Patriots could field thousands more militiamen but only near their own farms. Although many American officers had served in the military during the Great War for Empire, they had never commanded a large force or faced a disciplined European army.



MAP 6.1 Patriot and Loyalist Strongholds

Patriots were in the majority in most of the thirteen mainland colonies and used their control of local governments to funnel men, money, and supplies to the rebel cause. Although Loyalists could be found in every colony, their strongholds were limited to Nova Scotia, eastern New York, New Jersey, and certain areas in the South. However, most Native American peoples favored the British cause and bolstered the power of Loyalist militias in central New York (see Map 6.3) and in the Carolina backcountry.

To exploit this military advantage, Britain’s prime minister, Lord North, assembled a large invasion force under the command of General William Howe. North ordered Howe to capture New York City and seize control of the Hudson River, which would isolate the radical Patriots in New England from the colonies to the south. As the Second Continental Congress was declaring independence in Philadelphia in July 1776, Howe landed 32,000 troops—British regulars and German mercenaries—outside New York City, about 100 miles to the north.

British military superiority was immediately apparent. In August 1776, Howe defeated the Americans in the Battle of Long Island and forced their retreat to Manhattan Island. There, Howe outflanked Washington’s troops and nearly trapped them. Outgunned and outmaneuvered, the

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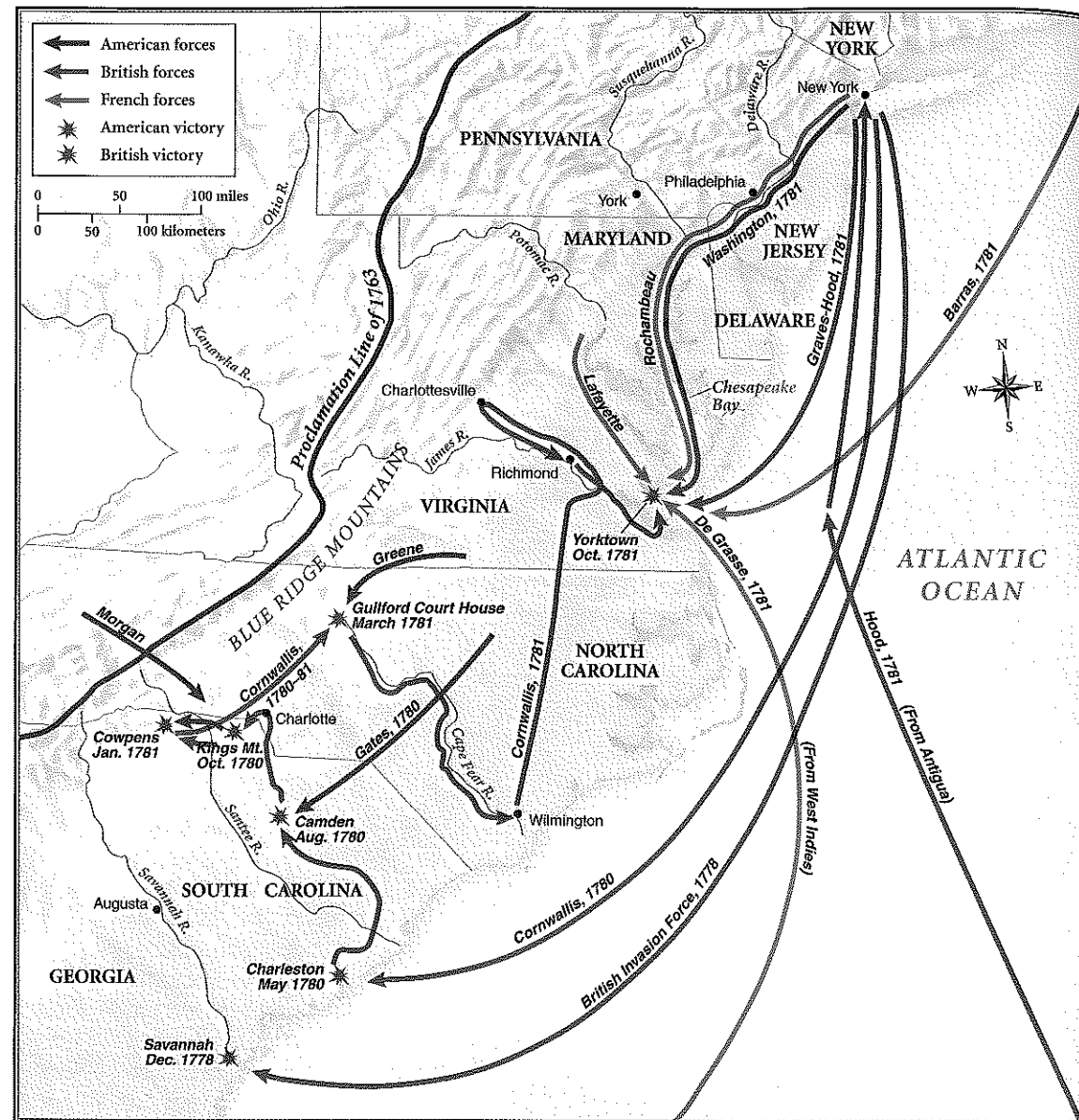
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MAP 6.4 The War in the South, 1778–1781

Britain's southern strategy started well. British forces captured Savannah in December 1778, took control of Georgia during 1779, and vanquished Charleston in May 1780. Over the next eighteen months, brutal warfare between British and Loyalist units and the American army and militia raged in the interior of the Carolinas and ended in a stalemate. Hoping to break the deadlock, British general Charles Cornwallis carried the battle into Virginia in 1781. A Franco-American army led by Washington and Lafayette, with the help of the French fleet under Admiral de Grasse, surrounded Cornwallis's forces on the Yorktown Peninsula and forced their surrender.

Facing ruin because of shady financial dealings, uncertain of future promotion because of his reputation for arrogance and avarice, and disgusted with congressional politics, Arnold promised to deliver West Point and its three thousand defenders to the British for £20,000 sterling (about \$1 million today). When

his plan was exposed, Arnold became a British brigadier general and served George III with the same skill and enthusiasm he had shown in the Patriot cause. Supporting Cornwallis, he led raiding parties along the James River and, in a daring attack on Richmond, destroyed large stocks of munitions and grain.

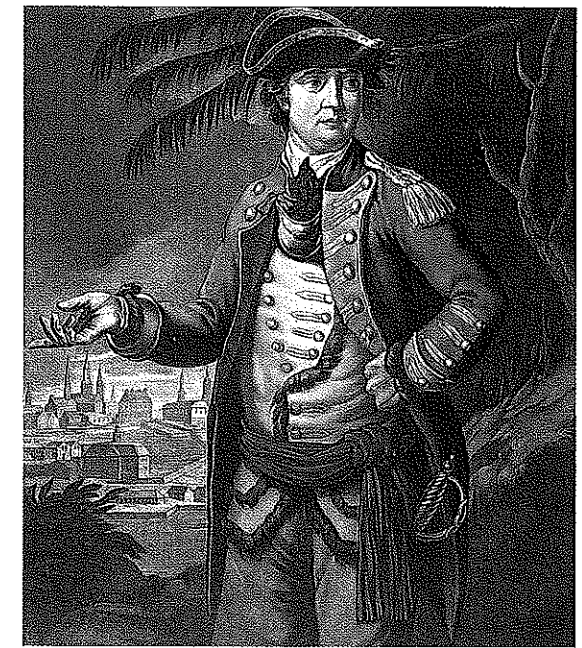
Britain Defeated. While troops led by Arnold and Cornwallis sparred near the York Peninsula with an American force commanded by Lafayette, France ordered its fleet from the West Indies to North America. Emboldened by the French naval forces, Washington launched a well-coordinated attack. Feinting an assault on New York City, he secretly marched General Rochambeau's army from Rhode Island to Virginia, where it joined his Continental forces. Simultaneously, the French fleet massed off the coast, taking control of Chesapeake Bay. By the time the British discovered Washington's audacious plan, Cornwallis was surrounded—his 9,500-man army outnumbered 2 to 1 on land and cut off from reinforcement or retreat by sea. In a hopeless position, Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in October 1781.

The Franco-American victory at Yorktown broke the resolve of the British government. "Oh God! It is all over!" Lord North exclaimed when he heard the news. Isolated diplomatically in Europe, stymied militarily in America, and lacking public support at home, the British ministry gave up active prosecution of the war.

The Patriot Advantage

Angry members of Parliament demanded an explanation. How could mighty Britain, victorious in the Great War for Empire, be defeated by a motley rebel army? The ministry blamed the military leadership, pointing with some justification to a series of blunders. Why had Howe not ruthlessly pursued Washington's army in 1776? Why had Howe and Burgoyne failed to coordinate the movement of their armies in 1777? Why had Cornwallis marched deep into the Patriot-dominated state of Virginia in 1781?

Although historians acknowledge British blunders, most agree that the decisive factor in the rebels' victory was the broad support in America for their cause. At least a third of the white colonists were zealous Patriots, and another third supported the war effort by paying taxes and joining the militia. Moreover, the Patriots were led by experienced politicians who commanded public support. And then there was George Washington. Washington emerged as an inspired military leader and an astute politician. By deferring to the civil authorities, he won the support of the Continental Congress and the state governments. Confident of his military leadership, he acted decisively. When unruly troops stationed at Morristown, New Jersey, mutinied because of low pay and sparse rations, Washington ordered the execution of several soldiers. At



Benedict Arnold, 1776

Arnold first captured British attention because of his daring assault on Quebec City, which is pictured in the background of this painting. But the portrait is imaginary, the creation of a London bookseller eager to capitalize on British interest in the American revolt. After Arnold defected to the crown in 1780, British engravers usually portrayed him in profile, a pose traditionally reserved for those of noble character. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University.

the same time, he urged Congress to pacify the troops with back pay and new clothing. Later in the war, the American general thwarted a dangerous challenge to Congress's authority by discontented officers at Newburgh, New York. Finally, Washington had a greater margin for error than the British generals did because the Patriots controlled local governments. At crucial moments, he was able to get those governments to mobilize rural militias to reinforce the Continental army. Alone, Patriot militias lacked the weapons and tactical knowledge needed to defeat the British army. However, in combination with Continental forces, they provided the margin of victory at Saratoga in 1777 and forced Cornwallis from the Carolinas in 1781. Once the rebels had French support, they could reasonably hope for a decisive triumph, as happened at Yorktown.

In the end, it was the American people who decided the outcome of the war. Preferring Patriot rule, they refused to support the British army or accept occupation by Loyalist forces. Most

smallest existing state. The Land Ordinance of 1785 promoted settlement by mandating a rectangular-grid system of surveying that could be completed quickly, and by encouraging large-scale land purchases. The ordinance specified a minimum price of \$1 an acre and required that half of the townships be sold in single blocks of 23,040 acres each, which only large-scale speculators could afford, and the rest in parcels of 640 acres each, which restricted their sale to well-to-do farmers (Map 6.7).

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 put the finishing touches on the settlement plans. It created the territories that would eventually become the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. And, in line with the Enlightenment beliefs of Jefferson and other Patriots, the ordinance prohibited slavery in those territories and earmarked funds from land sales for the support of schools. The ordinance also specified that Congress would appoint a governor and judges to administer each new territory until the population reached 5,000 free adult men; at that point, the citizens could elect a territorial legislature. When the population reached 60,000, the legislature could ratify a republican constitution and apply to join the Confederation.

The land ordinances of the 1780s were a great and enduring achievement of the Confederation Congress. They provided for the orderly settlement and the admission of new states on the basis of equality; there would be no dependent “colonies” in the West. But even as the ordinances helped to transform thirteen governments along the eastern seaboard into a national republic, they perpetuated the geographical division between slave and free territories that would haunt the nation in the coming decades.

Shays’s Rebellion

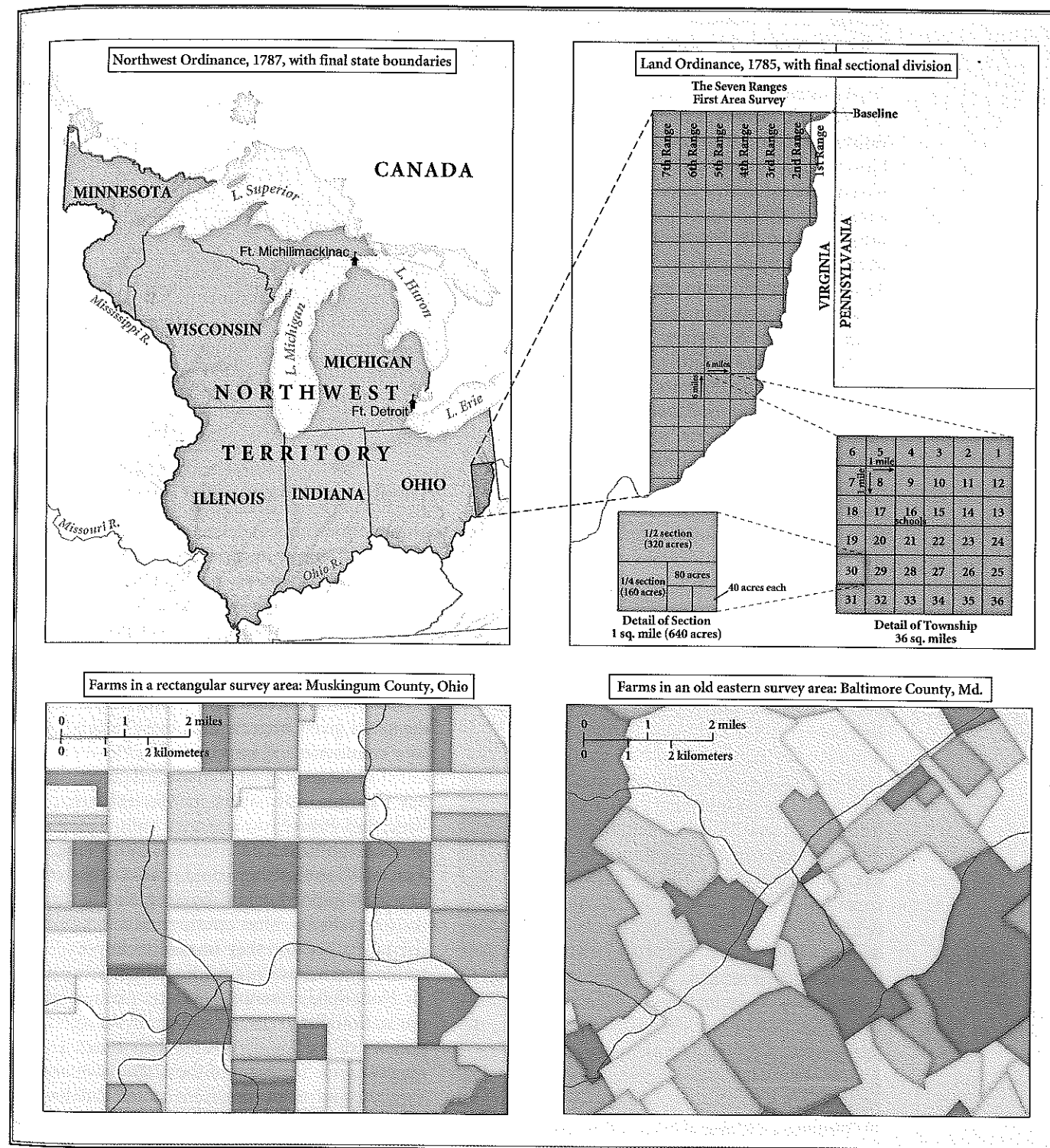
However bright the future of the West, postwar conditions in the East were grim. Peace brought economic recession, not a return to prosperity. The war had destroyed many American merchant ships and disrupted the export of tobacco, rice, and wheat. The British Navigation Acts, which had nurtured colonial commerce, now barred Americans from legal trade with the British West Indies. Moreover, low-priced British manufactures were flooding American markets, driving urban artisans and wartime textile firms out of business.

The economic condition of the state governments was equally fragile, a function of political conflicts over large war debts. On one side were speculators—mostly wealthy merchants and landowners—who had purchased huge quantities of state debt certificates from farmers and soldiers

for far less than their face value. They demanded that the state governments redeem the bonds quickly and at full value, a policy that would require high taxes. On the other side were the elected members of the state legislatures, now the dominant branch of government. Because the new state constitutions apportioned seats on the basis of population, they increased the number of representatives from rural and western communities, many of whom were men of “middling circumstances” who knew “the wants of the poor.”

Indeed, by the mid-1780s, middling farmers and urban artisans controlled the lower houses of the legislature in most northern states and formed a sizable minority in southern assemblies (see Figure 6.1 on p. 184). Their representatives opposed the collection of back taxes and other measures that tended “toward the oppression of the people.” Pressure from western farmers prompted some legislatures to move the state capital from merchant-dominated seaports like New York City, Philadelphia, and Charleston, to inland cities like Albany, Harrisburg, and Columbia. And when yeomen farmers and artisans demanded tax relief, most state legislatures reduced levies and refused to redeem the war bonds held by speculators. State legislatures also printed paper currency and enacted laws allowing debtors to pay their private creditors in installments. Although wealthy men deplored these measures, claiming they destroyed “the just rights of creditors,” the measures probably prevented a major social upheaval.

A case in point was Massachusetts, where lawmakers did not enact debtor-relief legislation. Instead, merchants and creditors persuaded the legislature to impose high taxes to pay off the state’s war debt, and to cut the supply of paper currency to deter inflation. When cash-strapped farmers could not pay their debts, creditors threatened them with lawsuits. Debtor Ephraim Wetmore heard that merchant Stephan Salisbury “would have my Body Dead or Alive in case I did not pay.” To protect their farms, residents of inland counties called extralegal conventions. The conventions protested the tax increases and property seizures and demanded the abolition of debtors’ prisons, property qualifications for office holding, and the elitist upper house of the state legislature. Then mobs of angry farmers—including men of status and substance—closed the courts by force. “[I] had no Intensions to Destroy the Publick Government,” declared Captain Adam Wheeler, a former town selectman; he had joined the mob to prevent “Valuable and Industrious members of Society [being] dragged from their families to prison [because of their debts], to the great damage . . . of the Community



MAP 6.7 Land Division in the Northwest Territory

Throughout the Northwest Territory, government surveyors imposed a rectangular grid on the landscape, regardless of the local topography, so that farmers bought neatly defined tracts of land. The right-angled property lines in Muskingum County, Ohio (lower left), contrasted sharply with those in Baltimore County, Maryland (lower right), where—as in most of the eastern and southern states—boundaries followed the contours of the land.