



## Lesson 3: The Treaty of Paris and State Sovereignty in Early America

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### Introduction to State Sovereignty

When the American colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, they asserted that each of the 13 colonies was not just breaking away from British rule, but each was becoming a free, sovereign, and independent state. This idea of state sovereignty means that each state has full control over its own government, free from external control. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, which officially ended the Revolutionary War, provides clear evidence that the Founders understood and affirmed this concept of state sovereignty.

### The Treaty of Paris and Recognition of Sovereignty

The Treaty of Paris begins by listing each of the 13 states — New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia — as “free, sovereign, and independent states.” This specific wording is crucial because it shows that King George III of Great Britain was not acknowledging a single, united nation but recognizing 13 separate states, each with its own sovereignty.

Later in the treaty, George III not only acknowledges their sovereignty but commits to treating them as such from that day forward. This means that in the eyes of the British Crown, each state was its own independent entity, capable of making its own decisions and governing itself without interference.

### The Role of Congress vs. State Legislatures

The treaty also highlights the relationship between the newly formed Congress and the state governments. In one clause, it is stated that “Congress shall earnestly recommend” to the state legislatures that they restore property taken from British subjects during the war. Notice that Congress is not given the power to order the states to return the property; it can only recommend this course of action. This detail reveals that the Founders saw the states as having more authority over their own affairs than Congress. If Congress had been superior, it would have issued commands rather than recommendations.

### States’ Role in International Relations

Another part of the treaty explicitly declares peace between “his Britannic Majesty and the said states.” This language confirms that each state, not Congress or a unified national government, was recognized as having its own standing in international relations. When the British army agreed to return confiscated documents and properties, these were to be restored directly to the states or the individuals they belonged to, not to Congress or a federal entity.

### Citizens vs. Subjects

The treaty also distinguishes between “subjects” of Great Britain and “citizens” of the American states. This distinction is significant because it underscores the change in status for the people of the American states. Historian David Ramsay explained that subjects look up to a ruler, while citizens are equal and possess sovereignty themselves. This change from subject to citizen was a fundamental shift in how people in the American states viewed themselves and their rights. As citizens of sovereign states, they had a say in their own governance, free from the dictates of a monarch.

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## Connection to the Declaration of Independence

The Treaty of Paris echoes the language of the Declaration of Independence, which declared that the “United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” The Declaration goes on to state that these states have the power to make war, establish peace, form alliances, and conduct trade—essentially, to do anything that any independent state has the right to do. This language, later reflected in the Treaty of Paris, reinforces the idea that the states were seen as fully functioning, sovereign entities.

## Conclusion: The Importance of State Sovereignty Today

Understanding the Treaty of Paris and its recognition of state sovereignty is crucial because it reflects the Founders’ vision for the United States. They saw the states as independent republics, each with its own government, rights, and responsibilities. This vision is the foundation of American federalism, where the states and the federal government share power, but the states retain a significant degree of autonomy.

Over time, the balance between state and federal power has shifted, and today, many people are less familiar with the concept of state sovereignty. However, learning about the Treaty of Paris and the Founders’ intent helps us understand the original structure of the United States and the importance of preserving the rights and powers of the states within the Union.