In colonial and revolutionary America, what you bought – and who you bought it from – told people a lot about you. American subjects, who did not have Parliamentary representation in the 1760s, voted instead with their pocketbooks. They boycotted British goods and wore clothing made from locally-produced “homespun” fabrics. Would you buy a teapot emblazoned with “No Stamp Act” and introduce politics to your tea party? Those same politics might mean you could not purchase tea at all, lest your neighbors view you as un-American. Throughout the war and in the years that followed, money and the marketplace were everyone’s concern: buying things became part of what it meant to be American.

Look for artifacts related to the “consumer revolution,” new shopping habits, and wish lists!

Taking Care of Business
This document box held the papers a colonial American needed to do business. “GR” is embossed on its leather cover, announcing its owner’s loyalty to Georgius Rex, King George.
Rule Britannia! 1760-1765

Stamping Out Royal Taxes
In 1765, the Stamp Act mandated that paper sold in America first had to be marked by this stamp emblem. It infuriated Americans. They believed the tax would do great harm to their commerce.

The Price of Victory

See reverse for more!
What’s in Stock?
Angry Americans used their purchasing power to voice their opinions in “non-importation” movements that rejected British goods. These store shelves show how many goods were banned during non-importation movements (right) compared to those available during periods of open trade (left).

Boston’s Liberty Tree

The Empire’s New Clothes
When protests failed, some Americans chose war. Benjamin Holden fought for the revolutionary cause at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. The coat he wore as a revolutionary, like most good clothing of the day, was made from imported materials – British wool and British buttons.

Join or Die

The marketplace of wartime clothing also included American-made hunting shirts like this original and the replicas worn by the figures in the central tableau. These garments may have been inspired by the fringed clothing worn by Native Americans.

Join or Die

Pocket Power
A revolutionary soldier might have kept deflated Continental currency in this leather pocketbook, stamped with “Success to Washington 1775.”

The Darkest Hour

Or he might have chosen one worked with an embroidered pattern, like this wallet that belonged to Pennsylvanian John Pawlings.

Valley Forge

Designer Takeover
Revolutionary women lived under the legal rule of “coverture.” When they married, their property transferred to their husbands. Some of Elizabeth Drinker’s furniture and tableware, for example, were confiscated to cover the wartime taxes her husband refused to pay due his pacifism and Quaker faith.

The War at Home

Stealing Yourself
Enslaved people, viewed as property by both sides of the conflict, sometimes stole themselves. The “Finding Freedom” touchscreens highlights the stories of five Virginia African Americans who followed different paths during the war.

Finding Freedom

Retail Therapy
Almost as soon as the war ended, Americans got back to business with Great Britain. This jug and plate feature patriotic motifs of the new United States, but they were made by British potters for sale to Americans.

A New Nation

Not Worth a Continental
Peace did not bring prosperity for the entire American marketplace. Many citizens struggled to make ends meet, and the value of paper money fluctuated enormously. Veteran James Davenport could afford to keep this 1779 currency as a relic because it was next to worthless.

Revolution Generation