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Join or Die

Scott Stephenson: What probably first caught your attention as you stepped into this space is the group of lifelike figures in the center of the room. They're frozen as if they're in the midst of a fight. We call these kinds of scenes in the Museum "tableaux" and they're composed of figures that have been carefully built to try to show you the gritty reality of life during the Revolutionary War. Take a moment before we dig deeper and look at the large murals on either end of this Gallery, and contrast those paintings, done by John Trumbull, who was an eyewitness to the Revolutionary War, with this scene. As curators, we're trying to show the kind of gritty reality of life in the 18th century.

You're probably used to seeing this through the lens of these later commemorative works by artists like Trumbull. Turn your attention now to the scene in front of you. This is not a fight between British and American soldiers. It's a fight among American soldiers from different regions that took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the grounds of what's now Harvard University, in the winter of 1775-76. It's based on the memories of Israel Trask, who in 1775 was that young boy in a red coat. In the center, you'll recognize George Washington, who's in the middle of holding soldiers from Virginia and Massachusetts apart. We chose this scene to remind you that nation-building is a very hard task and that the people who came together in the Continental Army in 1775 had a long way to go in order to think of themselves as Americans. In 1775, colonial Americans were deeply divided by ethnicity, by religion, by regional cultures, and whether in Congress, at home, or in the army, these divisions lead to conflicts like the one you see here.

Take a few minutes to explore this scene and make sure you look at the objects in the cases around the periphery of this room. These reflect the characters in this scene. On the left side, New Englanders; on the right side, the Mid-Atlantic and the Southern colonies, and in the third case behind you, George Washington himself. No one was more concerned about this divisiveness among colonial Americans than George Washington and this is one of the few instances when Washington, who was so famously calm and self-controlled, lost his temper. And that's always an interesting moment for historians to look closely. How would Americans manage to pull themselves together to defend what Washington called "the glorious cause?" When you're done exploring this Gallery, move into the next one to discover the answer.