

Topic Page: [Knox, Henry, 1750–1806](#)

Definition: **Knox, Henry** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1750-1806

US soldier

Born in Boston, he ran his own bookshop there until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. He commanded the Continental Army artillery and was a close friend and adviser to General George Washington throughout the war, wintering at Valley Forge and serving in almost all the important engagements of the war. He became a major-general, followed Washington as commander of the army (1783-84), and was named US Secretary of War (1785-94).



Image from: [Portrait of Henry Knox \(1759-1806\) \(litho\) in Bridgeman Images: Ken Welsh History Collection](#)

Summary Article: **Knox, Henry**

From *Encyclopedia of United States Indian Policy and Law*

As the first secretary of war for the United States, Henry Knox (1750–1806) helped establish a national Indian policy that treated Native American tribes as sovereign nations. The lawmakers who formed this policy rejected conquest as the means for acquiring Indian lands and instead advocated that the United States purchase such lands through treaties. They were also proponents of “civilizing” Indians as a first step in eventually assimilating the Natives into the mainstream American population.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Knox served as colonel of the Continental Regiment of Artillery in the Continental Army. During the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), Knox’s December 1775 raid on Fort

Ticonderoga in New York provided artillery and captured cannons for the American army in Boston. Knox further distinguished himself throughout the war, and his victory at the 1781 Battle of Yorktown earned him a promotion to general. At war’s end, Knox replaced George Washington as the head of the Continental Army until it disbanded a few months later.

Knox returned to public life in March 1785 when he was appointed secretary of war for the new U.S. government. Knox retained the post after the Constitutional Convention and election of Washington as president, holding it until 1794. Much of Knox’s work as secretary related to Indian affairs. After the Revolutionary War, the United States told Native American tribes that they had forfeited their rights to tribal lands due to their alliances with Great Britain, and that the U.S. victory over Britain had endowed the new country with title to Indian lands by the right of conquest. This attitude produced tension and conflict between Indians and Americans all along the United States’ western frontiers. Without the financial or military means to force large numbers of Indians from their territories, Knox pursued a different strategy to appease a land-greedy public, to instill order on the frontier, and to treat fairly the Indians who held lands in the West.

Knox’s more benign Indian policy was most evident in the Northwest Ordinance (1787). The ordinance declared that Americans could not settle the backcountry before the federal government obtained it through treaties and paid for it with annual payments. The ordinance also established a system to license traders to deter fraud and standardized punishments for crimes committed on or by Indians in

the Ohio Territory. Additionally, it declared that non-Indians needed a passport to travel on Indian lands. These provisions were extended in 1796, after Knox left office, with the establishment of the factory system that standardized and regulated the nation's Indian trade.

In letters to George Washington, Knox stated that he believed the United States could not claim tribal lands unless it obtained the consent of the Indians or acquired the land by conquest in a just war. This was a generally accepted principle of the law of nations at that time. He determined that Indian tribes were separate and distinct nations and therefore concluded that all land cessions had to be arranged through formal treaties. As a result, Knox tried to obtain Indian lands cheaply, peacefully, and honorably. At the same time, he also called for a plan to help Indians assimilate into what Knox called American "civilization." Knox believed that once Indians adopted an Anglo-American farming lifestyle, they would no longer need much of the land that they used for hunting and would ultimately cede their excess lands. The United States could then sell those lands to white Americans, thus providing for an orderly expansion to the West. Washington, Knox, and their allies in Congress were able to implement aspects of this policy in the Trade and Intercourse Act of 1790.

Knox's ideas about "civilizing" the Indians shaped American policy through Thomas Jefferson's administration and beyond. In many of the treaties signed under Knox, the United States provided tools and other materials that assisted Natives to become herders, farmers, and spinners or weavers of cotton. These treaties also often included provisions that declared the United States would recognize a tribe's borders, respect its internal autonomy, and protect it from trespassing, squatting, and other criminal behavior.

Knox's plan largely failed for several reasons. First, he did not anticipate how quickly the U.S. population would grow and how many Americans would want to move West. Second, most Americans refused to accept the idea that Natives held title to their lands. Third, Knox failed to appreciate the value of Native culture or understand that most Native Americans were not interested in acculturation to Anglo-American ways. Moreover, although many Natives did incorporate elements of American society into their lives, this did not necessarily mean that they were interested in relinquishing the rights to their land.

Although Knox's policy was grounded on these flawed presumptions, more than one scholar has pointed out that his vision for American expansion was more honorable than the policy of conquest that preceded it and the forced removal of the tribes that followed it. Knox believed that if the United States did not treat Indians humanely and fairly, the rest of the world would find the American ideals of equality and property rights hypocritical.

Knox returned to private life in 1795, although he continued to advise the government and helped to establish the Indian agent system. He worked as a cattle herder, ship builder, and brick maker until his death in 1806.

See also *Assimilation and Acculturation; American Revolutionary War (1775–1783); Civilization Program; Indian Agents; Indian Policy of the Continental Congress; Northwest Ordinance; Trade and Intercourse Acts; Washington, George.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Prucha, Francis Paul. *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

- Puls, Mark. *Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Andrew K. Frank

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Frank, A. K. (2008). Knox, Henry. In P. Finkelman, & T. A. Garrison (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of United States Indian policy and law*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/knox_henry_1750_1806

 © 2008 CQ Press, A Division of SAGE

 © 2008 CQ Press, A Division of SAGE

APA

Frank, A. K. (2008). Knox, Henry. In P. Finkelman, & T. A. Garrison (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of United States Indian policy and law*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/knox_henry_1750_1806

Chicago

Frank, Andrew K. "Knox, Henry." In *Encyclopedia of United States Indian Policy and Law*, edited by Paul Finkelman, and Tim Alan Garrison. CQ Press, 2008. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/knox_henry_1750_1806

Harvard

Frank, A.K. (2008). Knox, Henry. In P. Finkelman & T.A. Garrison (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of United States Indian policy and law*. [Online]. Washington: CQ Press. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/knox_henry_1750_1806 [Accessed 16 September 2019].

MLA

Frank, Andrew K. "Knox, Henry." *Encyclopedia of United States Indian Policy and Law*, edited by Paul Finkelman, and Tim Alan Garrison, CQ Press, 1st edition, 2008. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/knox_henry_1750_1806. Accessed 16 Sep. 2019.