

# Fighting for Whose Freedom? Black Soldiers in the Revolution

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**Grade Level:** Upper Elementary

**Duration of lesson:** 1-2 periods

**Overview:**

From the 1690s onward, African-Americans have fought in North American wars, including the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. History shows a pattern of exclusionary laws, designed to deny slaves access to arms, followed by volunteer opportunities and manumission when Britain or America required more recruits for their armies. Using a variety of primary sources, this lesson lets students explore the circumstances under which Black slaves and freedmen fought during the American Revolution. The selected sources show the opportunities for gaining freedom as soldiers for the Continental or British Army. Advertisements and images also show the propaganda campaign fought by White Southerners to prevent their slaves from joining those armies. Finally, students will come to understand that as soldiers, scouts, or spies, African-American men and women were active during the Revolutionary War and fought for the greater goal of freedom from slavery.

**Related [National History Standards](#):**

**Content Standards:**

## Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

- Standard 1:** The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory
- Standard 2:** The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society

**Historical Thinking Standards:**

## Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of historical passages
- C. Read historical narratives imaginatively

## Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- B. Students will compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Students will analyze primary sources about black soldiers in the American Revolution.
- Students will apply independent conclusions to create a piece of historical fiction.

## Topic Background

During the revolutionary period in America, the word “liberty” was everywhere: the liberty tree, the Sons and Daughters of Liberty, and slogans such as “give me liberty or give me death.” The concept of liberty was pervasive, but its reality was limited. Much of the American economy was based on the complete antithesis of liberty, slavery. Although slaves had begun using the rhetoric of the revolution to sue for freedom prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the war itself had a great impact on slaves and free blacks.<sup>i</sup>

Of course, Crispus Attucks is credited with being the first black patriot to fall during the revolution. Attucks, a large mixed-race black and Indian man who may or may not have been a runaway slave, was living in Boston in 1770. He was one of the colonists killed during what became known as the Boston Massacre.<sup>ii</sup> In 1888, a monument was erected on Boston Common to honor Attucks’ memory. But Attucks was not the only black man to participate in the early stages of the American Revolution.

The colonies had a long history of denying blacks, free or slave, entry into military service. The reason most often given for prohibiting slaves from combat was that they, once armed, would rebel against their masters. Similarly, free blacks were excluded from combat for fear that they would encourage slave rebellions.<sup>iii</sup> As early as 1639, Virginia passed legislation ensuring blacks would have no access to arms or ammunition.<sup>iv</sup> Northern colonies shared in these fears. In 1656 the Massachusetts legislature passed a law forbidding the mustering of black soldiers in the militia, and in 1660 Connecticut passed similar legislation.<sup>v</sup> The practice of excluding blacks from combat was common throughout the British colonies. Maryland, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Carolina all had similar exclusionary laws.<sup>vi</sup> In some places, including Virginia, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, blacks were allowed, or even required, to enlist in support positions which did not involve being armed.<sup>vii</sup>

Despite white colonists’ fears of slave rebellion, during times of war manpower shortages forced the colonists to allow slaves and free blacks to fight. In the early 1700s, both northern and southern colonies allowed blacks to serve in combat positions when the need arose. Legislation was passed in South Carolina during Queen Anne’s War that affirmed the need to arm slaves during times of invasion and required slave owners to present able bodied slaves for service in the militia. Three decades later, at odds with Spanish Saint Augustine, South Carolina’s legislature again authorized the militia to muster black soldiers. Virginia and North Carolina also allowed black enlistment during times of need.<sup>viii</sup> Black soldiers served the colonies in King William’s War, Queen Anne’s War, King George’s War, and the French and Indian War.<sup>ix</sup> The Revolutionary War would prove to be no exception.

Black soldiers fought with the patriots at Lexington and Concord, at Bunker Hill, and as far south as Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>x</sup> Despite their records of heroism in these early battles, however, black soldiers were soon officially excluded from the Continental Army. In June of 1775, the Continental Congress took control of the patriot forces in and around Boston, named these forces the

Continental Army, and gave command to George Washington. There was considerable discussion about allowing slaves and free blacks to enlist in order to fill the muster rolls. The idea was dismissed, however, for several reasons; the first, obviously, being that same fear that arming black men would lead to the overthrow of slaveholders. A further argument against accepting black men openly into the army was the idea that slaves might run away from their masters and join the army illegally. Finally, there was the economic argument that planters could not be expected to maintain their fields and crops if their slaves were drafted into military service<sup>xi</sup>. In the end, Washington issued an order excluding black men from the army, although those who had been fighting with the Patriot forces and were therefore already in the army were to be allowed to complete the terms of their enlistment. In November of 1775, Congress passed legislation reinforcing Washington's order.<sup>xii</sup> Similarly, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and all of the southern colonies passed laws prohibiting all blacks from serving in the militia. New Jersey and New York passed legislation restricting servants and slaves from military service.<sup>xiii</sup> As had happened in the British colonies before, however, personnel shortages would soon force the Americans to reconsider their position.

By the second year of the war, the Americans had difficulty maintaining the manpower needed to combat the British. Congress implemented the draft in January of 1777, but was unable to force the states to comply. Washington's army remained under manned. On January 2, 1777, Washington rescinded his previous order about excluding black soldiers and allowed free blacks to enlist in the Continental Army.<sup>xiv</sup> Although most state laws still prohibited black soldiers, those in charge of enlistment at the local and county levels routinely ignored these laws. Black soldiers were mustered and often sent them to fulfill manpower requests from the Continental Army.<sup>xv</sup> New England state legislatures followed the lead of local officials, and free blacks were openly recruited throughout New England beginning in 1778.<sup>xvi</sup>

Slaves began to fill the muster rolls from New England as well. A man who had been drafted could be released from service if he found another to take his place. Slaves were often offered manumission if they would join for three years, or for the duration of the war, in their master's place.<sup>xvii</sup> Between 1777 and 1781, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, and Maryland all passed laws encouraging slaves to serve as soldiers in exchange for freedom.<sup>xviii</sup> No matter the official policy at any given time, the fact remains that black soldiers fought alongside their white counterparts throughout the war.

While some slaves attempted to gain their freedom through military service in the Continental Army, many more thought the path to freedom would be through serving in the British military. A group of slaves in Massachusetts approached the Royal Governor in 1774, before hostilities even broke out. The slaves sent a petition promising to fight for the governor if he would arm them and promise their freedom if he won.<sup>xix</sup> The Americans may have debated the policy of arming black soldiers, but the British had a much more clearly defined policy concerning blacks in the military. Fighting between the British and the colonists began in earnest in spring of 1775. In November of the same year the

governor of Virginia, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, issued a proclamation concerning the rebels. Capitalizing on widespread slave unrest, Dunmore promised that all slaves belonging to rebels would be freed after serving in the British army. Of course, the slaves had to be able bodied and willing to fight, which meant this proclamation was meant to be limited to men of a certain age.<sup>xx</sup>

The colonists were outraged by Dunmore's proclamation, and immediately set out to combat it. Letters and broadsides were printed and distributed in a form of psychological warfare to discourage slaves from rallying to Dunmore's standard. These letters pointed out that freedom was only promised to young, healthy men and that the brunt of the plantation work would therefore fall to the families of these men if they escaped. The broadsides also served to remind blacks that the English had originally brought the slave trade to America, and that if the British lost the escaped slaves could expect to be sold to the sugar plantations in the West Indies. They also pointed out that Dunmore himself was a slaveholder, and claimed that he treated his slaves poorly, unlike the colonists. In addition to reason, the colonists used threats to keep slaves from escaping to join Dunmore. Newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves often mentioned that the slave was thought to be bound for the British Army. Virginia declared that any slave being found trying to reach the enemy or in the military service of the enemy would immediately be sold in the West Indies, with their masters being fully compensated for their loss.<sup>xxi</sup>

Despite the colonists' efforts, several hundred slaves joined Lord Dunmore's troops over the few weeks following the proclamation, and more continued to appear each day. In contrast to the pre-revolutionary pattern of young men making up the greatest percentage of runaway slaves, those who fled to Dunmore were often family groups.<sup>xxii</sup> From the able bodied, Dunmore created a separate "Ethiopian Regiment", and these men fought in uniforms that sported the slogan "Liberty to Slaves" on their chests.<sup>xxiii</sup> Unfortunately for Dunmore and his black soldiers, a smallpox epidemic struck among the runaways, and two thirds of them died. In the end, although estimates vary, somewhere between eight hundred and fifteen hundred slaves answered Dunmore's call, about half of them women and children. By the time Dunmore was routed from America in July of 1776, only 300 surviving ex-slaves went with him.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The British, however, continued the policy of harboring and arming escaped slaves throughout the war. This was an effective strategy as it divided white Americans' attention.<sup>xxv</sup> Not only did they have to face the enemy, they had to devise some way of ensuring their slaves did not escape and join the enemy. Groups of slaveholders from the same area hired guards to patrol in boats in an effort to catch slaves as they escaped. States took the precaution of ordering all able-bodied male slaves removed from areas where the British were located. This practice was also followed later in the Civil War and was referred to as "running the slaves".<sup>xxvi</sup> Following Dunmore's lead, the British commanders formulated an official policy towards the use of slaves in June, 1779. Loyalist slaves would be returned to their masters if said masters promised not to punish them for running away. Their master could also choose to hire the slave out to the British army and would receive compensation if the slave were killed in battle.

Slaves belonging to patriots, however, were considered to be “public property.” These slaves were claimed by the British and promised freedom if they served their new masters for the duration of the war.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Slaves and free blacks were employed in a variety of positions by both the British and the Continental armies. Obviously, many were armed and served as soldiers. Blacks with knowledge of the land also served as guides, scouts, and foragers.<sup>xxviii</sup> The British used escaped and confiscated slaves, both men and women, to perform routine maintenance duties in cities under siege, particularly in the south. Blacks served in many ways to support the war efforts, by digging ditches, draining lakes, dismantling bridges, etc.<sup>xxix</sup> Both sides used black men and women as spies.<sup>xxx</sup>

Once the Americans won the war, the question became what would happen to slaves who had fought on both sides. The task of returning runaway slaves to their owners was daunting. Some of the French who had fought with the Americans wanted to expand their property by claiming new slaves. There were also some American commanders who tried to claim escaped slaves for themselves. Washington ordered that the British turn over all blacks. Those who could prove they were free were released. Those who had proof of their masters were detained until their masters came to retrieve them. Advertisements were placed in the newspapers concerning the rest. Slaveholders could arrive and claim their property as long as they had proof concerning ownership.<sup>xxxi</sup> Despite Washington’s orders, and in direct violation of the Treaty of Paris, the British evacuated between eight and ten thousand escaped slaves when they withdrew, some of whom were re-enslaved in the West Indies. Most of those who had earned their freedom were emancipated and settled in Nova Scotia.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Those who joined the war on the American side because they were promised freedom generally received it. Most often, black soldiers in the Continental army were given their papers of manumission upon enlisting, so those who survived the war were free. However, there were those who took exception to this practice. In Virginia, for example, the law stated that only free men could join the military. Some slaveholders who had been drafted substituted a slave for themselves illegally. They passed the man off as free to the military and privately promised the man his freedom. In most cases, no legal record of such promises existed and some masters tried to re-enslave those who had served as their substitutes. The Virginia legislature was, thankfully, for the most part appalled at this behavior and decreed that all slaves who had served as substitutes would be granted freedom.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Although similar cases happened elsewhere in the south, most black soldiers who had served in the war were granted freedom.

Although hundreds of young men gained freedom as the result of their service in the Continental Army or the state militias during the Revolutionary War, this was not the war’s greatest contribution to the cause of freedom in the United States. Throughout the revolutionary period, the rhetoric of the times revolved around the concept of liberty. During and after the war, many began to reflect on the dichotomy in American society: on the one hand dedicated the concept of liberty and on the other maintaining an economy based on slave labor. Although

wholesale emancipation would not occur until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the abolition movement gained momentum from those who realized the fundamental injustice of having a nation born in liberty that condoned, and depended on, human bondage.

### **Bibliography:**

Countryman, Edward. *The American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.

Foner, Philip. *Blacks in the American Revolution*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975.

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United States. Office of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. *Black Americans in Defense of our Nation*. Washington: Bureau of Electronic Publishing, 1994.

## **Vocabulary**

**Traitors:** Those not loyal to the King of England.

**Equality Value of Declaration of Independence:** "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."

## **Teaching Procedures**

1. Have students read the story of the Boston Massacre from a classroom history text. Be sure to mention that, of the victims, only Crispus Attucks' name has become well known.

Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #1, "Crispus Attucks." Allow students to look at the image. Ask them if there is anything about the image that they find odd. Lead the conversation to the fact that Crispus Attucks, one of the first men to lose their lives in what becomes a fight for liberty, was black in a time when slavery existed in America.

Explain to students that Crispus Attucks was not the only black man to participate in the Revolutionary War, and that today they are going to look at what happened to these soldiers.

2. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #2, "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation: Image." Distribute a copy of Resource Sheet #3, "Document Analysis of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation," to each student. Have students use the image on the transparency to answer question 1.

Display transparency of Resource Sheet #3. Record student responses to the question one on the transparency.

3. Distribute a copy of Resource Sheet 4, "Transcription of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation," to each student. Model how to analyze an eighteenth century document using a think-aloud strategy. As a class, answer the remaining questions on Resource Sheet #3. Make sure that you point out that the document was written in 1775 and that we could have determined that by looking up the years of King George III's reign. Record class responses on the transparency. If you choose to have students work independently or with a partner to analyze this document, you may wish to provide students with a copy of Resource Sheet 5, "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in Modern English."

4. Discuss the fact that the document says that slaves of traitors (people not loyal to the King) can come fight for the British and they will be free. Ask students to discuss why they think Lord Dunmore made such a proclamation. Allow several students to share their ideas as to Dunmore's motives.

**Ask students how they think the Virginia colonists felt about Dunmore's proclamation.**

**Ask students to predict what they think the Virginia Congress' response might have been.**

Allow several students to share their predictions. Record these predictions on the board.

5. Have students work in pairs for the next activity. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #6, "The Virginia Declaration." Pass out a copy of Resource Sheet #7, "Transcription of the Virginia Declaration," and Resource Sheet #8, "Document Analysis of the Virginia Declaration," to each pair of students. Allow students several minutes to read the document and complete the document analysis on Resource Sheet #8.

Display a transparency of Resource Sheet 8, "Document Analysis of the Virginia Declaration." Discuss each of the questions with the students. Record student responses on the transparency.

**Ask students to read to determine if their predictions are confirmed or refuted by this document.**

**Ask students what they think happened after these two documents were published.** Some students may predict that slaves ran away to join the British army anyway. Some may predict that the Virginia Declaration discouraged slaves from running away.

**Ask students how they would find out.**

6. Pass out a copy Resource Sheet #9, "Escape Slave Advertisements," to each pair of students. Ask students to examine the advertisements and be ready to explain how they relate to the documents we have already studied today. Allow students several minutes for analysis. Have several students share their responses.

**Ask students to imagine they were living as a slave during the American Revolution. They have heard about Dunmore's Proclamation and the Virginia Declaration. What would they do?** Allow students time to discuss this and share responses.

7. To assess student understanding have students write a short work of historical fiction. The main character of this story should be a slave during the American Revolution who has heard about Dunmore's Proclamation and the Virginia Declaration. The story should explain the main character's thoughts about these documents as well as what he or she chooses to do. Students may wish to have the main character encounter Ned Barnes or Caesar. The story should reference documents examined in class today.

8. Potential extension activities include Having students research Crispus Attucks and create a monument to the Boston Massacre. Or Having the students discuss the differences between the beliefs expressed in the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...") and the reality for blacks during the Revolutionary war.

**In what ways were the ideas in the Declaration realized?**

**In what ways were the ideas unfulfilled?**

### **Primary Source Annotation:**

Mintz, S. (2003). Portrait of Crispus Attucks. *Digital History*. Retrieved (August 6, 2005) from  
[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/daybyday/images/crispus\\_attucks.jpg](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/daybyday/images/crispus_attucks.jpg).

This is a portrait of the black victim of the Boston Massacre. Students will view this portrait while reflecting on the fact that the colonies were fighting for liberty but had a thriving slave trade.

Mintz, S. (2003). Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. *Digital History*. Retrieved (August 6, 2005) from  
[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/revolution/dunsmore.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/revolution/dunsmore.cfm).

This proclamation issued in November 1775 by the Royal Governor of Virginia. It states that slaves of rebels who join Dunmore's troops will be given their freedom. Students will analyze this document to determine its author and meaning. They will then discuss the possible motives behind the document.

Mintz, S. (2003). Virginia Assembly's Response. *Digital History*. Retrieved (August 6, 2005) from  
[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/revolution/virginia\\_assembly.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/revolution/virginia_assembly.cfm).

This Declaration was issued in December 1775 in response to Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. It states that slaves found in the British army will be put to death and threatens harsh punishment to any who have escaped and been caught before reaching the army. It also promises leniency to any escaped slave who immediately returns to his owner. Students will analyze this document to confirm or refute predictions about American response to Dunmore's Proclamation.

*Maryland Gazette* on July 12, 1781. *Teaching American History in Maryland: Documents for the Classroom*. Retrieved (August 6, 2005) from  
<http://www.teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000101/html/t101.html>.

This is a runaway slave advertisement claims the missing slave is likely to be heading for the British army. Students will examine this advertisement to confirm or refute their predictions about slave actions after Dunmore's Proclamation and the Virginia Declaration.

*Maryland Gazette* on November 14, 1782. *Teaching American History in Maryland: Documents for the Classroom*. Retrieved (August 6, 2005) from  
<http://www.teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000101/html/t101.html>

This is a runaway slave advertisement published in the *Maryland Gazette* on November 14, 1782. It claims the missing slave is likely headed to either the British or American army to fight. Students will examine this advertisement to confirm or refute their predictions about slave actions after Dunmore's Proclamation and the Virginia Declaration.

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<sup>i</sup> Slaves in Massachusetts petitioned the governor and House of Representatives in that state for freedom in 1774. They claimed that they were being deprived of their “natural rights”, and that they had not agreed to forfeit these rights. The concepts of natural, or unalienable, rights and of consent of the governed are two of the foundations of the Declaration of Independence, signed two years after this petition was written. The petition can be viewed at <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch14s9.html> [accessed August 6, 2005].

<sup>ii</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 4-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Phillip Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 41.

<sup>iv</sup> Benjamin Quarles, “The Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (March 1959): 644.

<sup>v</sup> Benjamin Quarles, “The Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (March 1959): 645-647.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 646-647.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid., 649.

<sup>ix</sup> Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution*, 41.

<sup>x</sup> Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution*, 42-43.

Quarles, *The Negro in The American Revolution*, 9-12.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>xii</sup> Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution*, 44.

<sup>xiii</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 16-18.

<sup>xiv</sup> Foner, *Black Soldiers in the American Revolution*, 54-55.

<sup>xv</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 52.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>xvii</sup> Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 136.

<sup>xviii</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 53-57.

<sup>xix</sup> Abigail Adams refers to this “conspiracy” in a letter to John dated September 22, 1774. The letter may be viewed at <<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/>> [accessed August 6, 2005].

<sup>xx</sup> Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 156.

<sup>xxi</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 24-26. Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution*, 44-46.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cassandra Pybus, “Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* (April 2005)

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/62.2/pybus.html> [accessed August 6, 2005].

<sup>xxiii</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 26-31.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Cassandra Pybus, “Jefferson's Faulty Math,”

<sup>xxv</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 111-113.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid., 123-130.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Foner, *Blacks in the American Revolution*, 67-70.

<sup>xxix</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 135-140.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ibid., 94-97, 142-144.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid., 158-160.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Pybus, “Jefferson's Faulty Math,”

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 183-184.