

# Fighting for Freedom

Highlighting the contributions of Black people  
during the Revolutionary War

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# Objectives

Students will explore why Black people may have chosen to support either the Patriot or Loyalist causes.

Students will learn about Black men and women who fought and supported Patriot and Loyalist causes.

Students will apply what they have learned by answering several questions to consider.



# Vocabulary

- **SLAVERY** – a condition in which one human being is owned by another. An enslaved person was considered property, and did not have the same rights that a free person had.
- **REGIMENT** – a group of soldiers in the military. Each regiment is different and unique, so many had their own flags, colors, and uniforms to show their individuality.
- **LOYALIST** – a person who remains loyal to a ruler or government, especially in the case of a political revolt. In the Revolutionary War, those who supported British rule.



# Vocabulary

- **PATRIOT** – those who rebelled against the British rule and fought for independence from the British empire to create the United States. A patriot also means a person who supports their country.
- **PRIMARY SOURCE** - these sources are first-hand accounts from people with direct connection to the topic or event. For example: newspapers, diaries, letters, and photographs. These differ from **SECONDARY SOURCES**, which are created by someone who did not experience the topic for themselves, but looked at primary sources. School textbooks are an example of secondary sources because they collect primary sources and interpret them.

# Slavery in the Thirteen Colonies

Slavery in the British colonies in North America began in 1619 when Africans taken captive by Europeans were brought to the colony of Virginia. By 1770, approximately one-fifth of the population (about 462,000 people) were enslaved. From southern plantations to northern households, each of the 13 colonies was dependent—either directly or indirectly—on the institution of slavery.

In the southern colonies, much of the enslaved population labored on plantations to produce cash crops, such as tobacco, rice, and cotton. In the northern colonies, the enslaved population was smaller than in the southern colonies. Their labor produced manufactured goods and other skilled works, like tailoring, shoemaking, and blacksmithing.

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# Slavery in New York

Slavery was an important institution in the economic development of New York City. As much as 20% of New York City's population was enslaved Africans. This was the second largest population of enslaved people in the colonies, only rivaling Charleston, South Carolina. By 1730, approximately 42% of New York City residents owned slaves. There were several slave market locations throughout New York City, including at the foot of Wall Street and near Dock Street, at the tip of Manhattan next to the shipping docks. Much of the enslaved population built the infrastructure of New York City, from the Dutch's Fort Amsterdam to the docks along the shorelines to the city prisons and hospitals.



*Does it surprise you that there were so many enslaved people in New York? Why?*

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# How did the American Revolution affect enslaved people?

The American Revolution had a profound effect on the institution of slavery. It gave enslaved Black people unprecedented opportunities to escape slavery by serving in the British or Continental armies. Others took advantage of the chaos to free themselves and forge new lives elsewhere. When the American Revolution began, approximately 450,000 people were enslaved in the thirteen colonies. Some estimates claim that as many as 80,000 to 100,000 enslaved people throughout the thirteen colonies escaped over the British lines.

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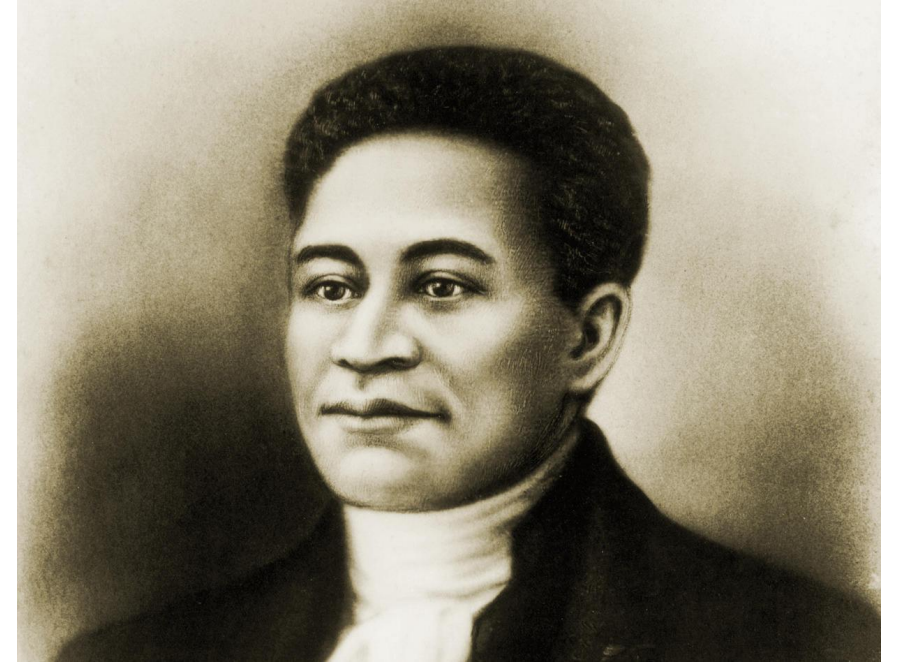
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# Crispus Attucks

Crispus Attucks' father was African, and his mother was a Nantucket Indian. He is believed to have freed himself from enslavement. Attucks worked as a sailor, on a whaling crew out of Boston. Attucks felt the heavy British presence in his port city. As a whaler, he had competition from British soldiers who often took part-time jobs at lower wages than other workers during their off-duty hours.

Crispus Attucks was one of the leaders of the crowd of patriots at the Boston Massacre. This confrontation between British soldiers and American colonists turned into a deadly riot. It is believed that a fight started between a British soldier looking for work and a group of angry sailors, including Attucks. Later that evening, about 30 men taunted the British guards in front of the custom-house with sticks, stones, snow, and ice. When the British opened fire, Attucks was the first person shot and killed with two bullets to the chest. He was one of five men who died. With his death, Attucks became a symbol of liberty. Despite laws regulating the burial of Black people, he was buried in the Park Street Cemetery with the other victims.



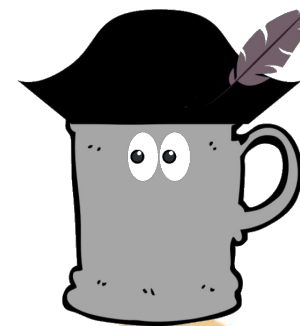
This portrait represents what Attucks may have looked like. There are no known portraits of him from his lifetime. Courtesy of the Crispus Attucks Museum.



# The Right to Fight: Black Patriot Soldiers

Free and enslaved people looked to the Declaration of Independence, which states “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed...with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Black population in the colonies found themselves as divided as the rest of the population leading up to the Revolutionary War. They faced difficult choices and sided with who they believed would bring an end to slavery.

When General George Washington took control of the Continental Army in 1775, he issued an order that barred most Black people from serving, but granted exceptions to those already serving. Remember that enslaved people were considered property, and their enslavers did not want to risk their property being killed. Others did not feel that enslaved men should fight for independence if they were not freed at the conclusion of the war. By 1776, the need for soldiers in the Continental Army forced General Washington to open enlistment. Any free Black man with prior military experience was encouraged to join the Patriots. Enslavers could provide the Army with enslaved men in exchange for \$1,000 per person, which is about \$24,000 today.



*Do you think the enslaved men sent to the Continental Army without their consent were as passionate about fighting as those who chose to enlist?*

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# The First Rhode Island Regiment

Historians believe around 5,000 Black men served as soldiers in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. In 1778, the Rhode Island Assembly raised a regiment of enslaved men named the First Rhode Island Regiment. While other regiments in the Continental Army were integrated, the Rhode Island Regiment was the Continental Army's only all-Black unit. Over 200 men enlisted in this regiment, and were promised their freedom after the war. The men fought in different battles during the war and were recognized for their bravery. In September 1781, the Rhode Island Regiment marched with General Washington to surround the British at the Battle of Yorktown, the last major battle of the Revolutionary War.



This painting illustrates different soldiers in the Continental Army. On the left is a soldier from the First Rhode Island Regiment.  
Courtesy of the Brown University Library.

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# James Armistead Lafayette: Patriot Spy

James Armistead was born in Virginia in 1760. In 1780, William Armistead, Armistead's enslaver, granted him permission to enlist in the Continental Army. He was stationed under the French commander the Marquis de Lafayette. At first, he carried communications between French units. The Marquis de Lafayette recognized how valuable Armistead was and made him a spy.

Being born and raised in Virginia, Armistead knew the land without a map or a guide. He posed as a runaway enslaved person who was loyal to the British, and gained the trust of British Generals Charles Cornwallis and Benedict Arnold. Armistead had access to the British headquarters and was often tasked by the British to lead troops through the local roads. He was such a skilled spy that General Cornwallis actually asked Armistead to spy on Lafayette. The British did not consider Armistead to be a threat, believing him to be loyal to the British—they openly discussed battle plans in front of him, unaware that he was documenting these plans in written reports and delivering them to the Patriots.

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# James Armistead Lafayette: Patriot Spy

In 1781, General George Washington specifically requested Armistead to spy on General Cornwallis. His detailed reports proved successful, being filled with information that allowed the Patriot forces to prevent the British from sending reinforcements to Yorktown, the last major battle of the Revolutionary War.

When the war was over, Armistead was sent back to his enslaver William Armistead. The Virginian Emancipation Act of 1783 freed only those who served as soldiers, not spies. The Marquis de Lafayette was unhappy when he found out about this in 1784. He wrote a testimonial on Armistead's behalf, and two years later, the Virginia General Assembly paid off William Armistead for James Armistead's freedom. In appreciation for the Marquis' help, Armistead added 'Lafayette' to his name.

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This is to certify that the Bearer by the Name of James  
Has done Essential Service to me While I had the Honour to  
Command in this State His Intelligence from the Enemy's  
Camp were industriously Collected and most faithfully Delivered  
He perfectly acquitted Himself with some important Commissions  
I gave Him and Appears to me Entitled to every Reward his  
Situation Can Admit of. Done under my Hand, Richmond  
November 21<sup>st</sup> 1784  
Lafayette

“This is to certify that the bearer by the name of James has done essential services to me while I had the honour to command in this state. His intelligences from the enemy’s camp were industriously collected and faithfully delivered. He perfectly acquitted himself with some important commissions I gave him and appears to me entitled to every reward his situation can admit of. Done under my hand, Richmond, November 21st, 1784. Lafayette.”

[READ THE ENTIRE DOCUMENT HERE.](#)

Image courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society.

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# British Soldiers: Dunmore's Proclamation

On November 7, 1775, the Earl of Dunmore issued a proclamation stating that any enslaved men who fought for the King would be given their freedom. With the promise of independence from enslavement, thousands would escape over British lines during the Revolutionary War. The enslaved population made up a quarter of the entire population, and the British believed that a larger fighting force could more quickly defeat the Patriots. Over 300 men enlisted in Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment. By fighting for the British, they fought for their freedom and freedom for all enslaved people in the colonies. Along with a musket and ammunition, each member received a uniform with the embroidered slogan "LIBERTY TO SLAVES." It is estimated that 20,000 Black men served in the British army during the Revolutionary War.

Those who joined the British army came with a wide skill set—many acted as cooks, blacksmiths, tailors, and carpenters. Although they could enlist, most were not allowed to serve as regular soldiers.

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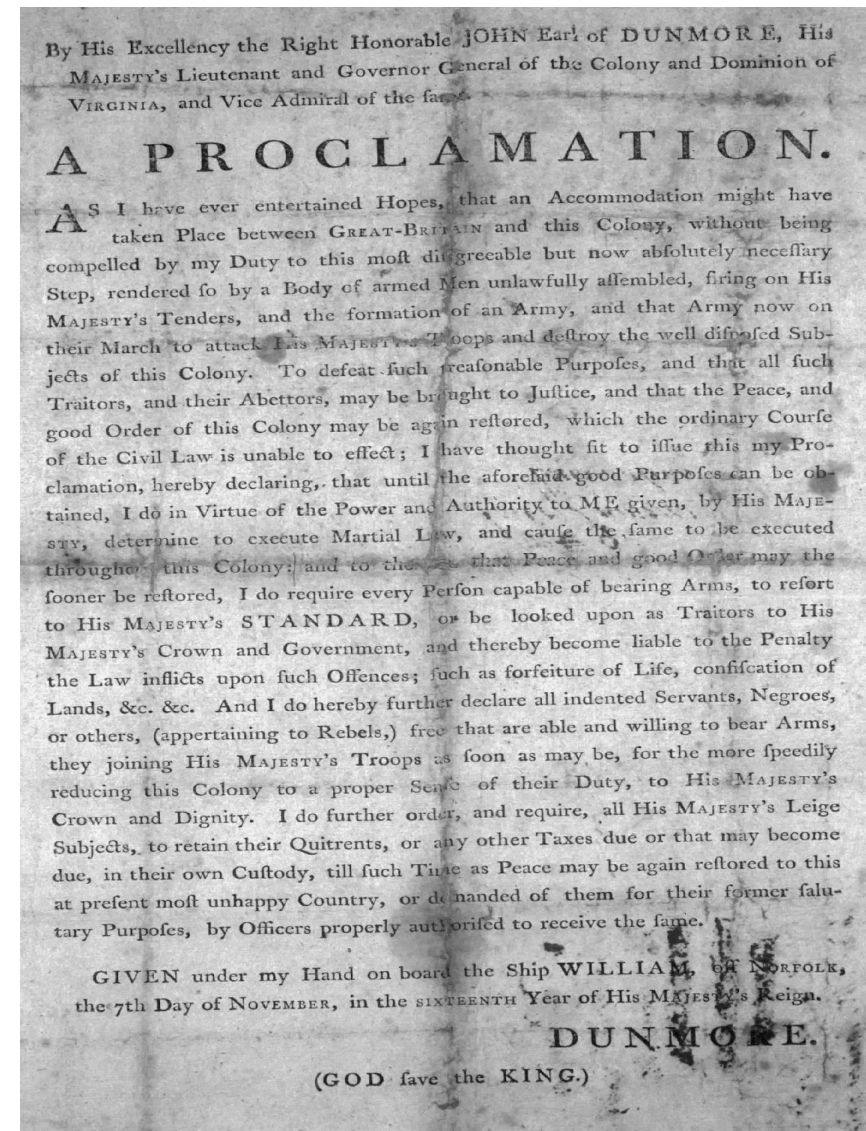


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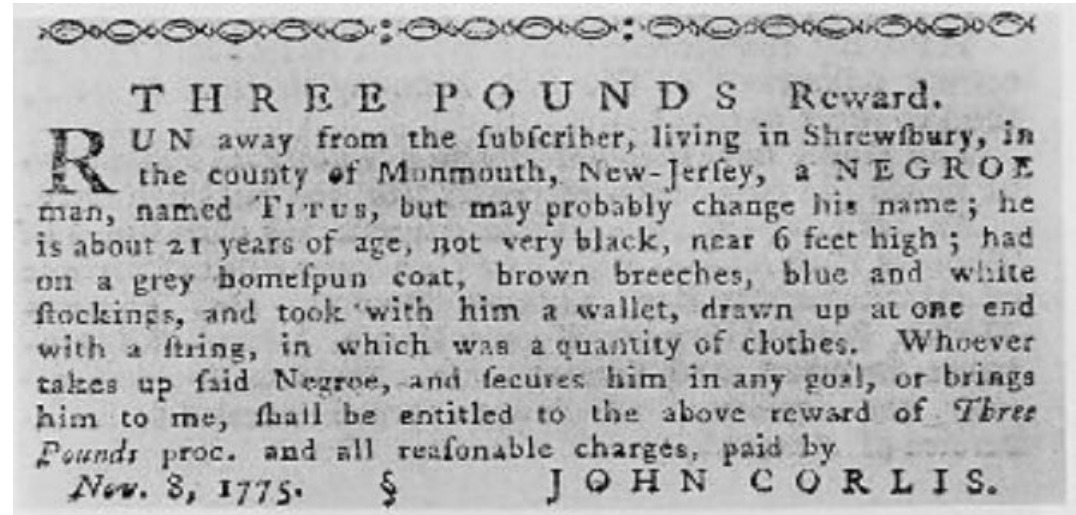
“....I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms to resort to his Majesty's STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to his Majesty's Crown and Government... And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to his Majesty's Crown and Dignity.”

[Read the Proclamation here.](#)



# Colonel Tye: British Soldier

When he was enslaved, he was called Titus. He was 22 when the American Revolution began in the spring of 1775. Titus ran away shortly after the announcement of Dunmore's Proclamation to free himself and join the British army, calling himself Colonel Tye. He was the commander of the Black Brigade, and was also part of the Ethiopian Regiment. Tye led his men on raids in New Jersey, where he had been enslaved. They captured Patriot soldiers and destroyed houses and barns. These raids terrified the local Patriots, but many enslaved people heard about Tye's attacks and felt encouraged, fleeing to join the British.



The advertisement for Tye's capture after he escaped.  
Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.



# Colonel Tye: British Soldier

In the winter of 1779, Colonel Tye's Black Brigade joined with the Queen's Rangers, a small unit of white soldiers, and together they raided the Patriot areas of New Jersey. They brought fuel, livestock, and other supplies back to New York City. They also guarded the ferry landings along the Hudson River. Colonel Tye continued fighting until September of 1780 when he was shot in the wrist during a surprise attack. The injury was not serious, but a fatal infection set in and he died. He was considered a brave soldier by the British, and even by some of his Patriot enemies.



# Caught in the Crossfire

How did the Revolutionary War affect those who didn't fight? While many Black people participated on both the Patriot and British sides, the effects of the American struggle for independence were experienced in different ways by different people. Women could not enlist in the military, yet the women you will look at next engaged in their own fight for freedom.



# Ona Judge

Judge was born into enslavement at George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation around 1773. She was taught the skills of a seamstress. At the age of 10, she was tasked as Martha Washington's personal maid. In 1789, Judge was one of seven enslaved people that traveled to New York City when George Washington was elected as the first President of the United States.

When the capital moved to Philadelphia in 1790, the Washingtons rotated their enslaved staff every six months to avoid a Pennsylvania emancipation law—Washington legally could not keep her in the state for longer than six months without her being freed. On May 20, 1796, Judge fled the presidential mansion in the middle of the night. She boarded a ship heading to Portsmouth, New Hampshire.



**There are no known paintings of Ona Judge. Why do you think this is? Why do we have many paintings of people like George Washington, but not Ona Judge?**

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## Advertisement.

**A**BSCONDED from the household of the President of the United States, ONEY JUDGE, a light mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes and bushy black hair, she is of middle stature, slender, and delicately formed, about 20 years of age.

She has many changes of good clothes, of all sorts, but they are not sufficiently recollected to be described—As there was no suspicion of her going off, nor no provocation to do so, it is not easy to conjecture whither she has gone, or fully, what her design is;—but as she may attempt to escape by water, all masters of vessels are cautioned against admitting her into them, although it is probable she will attempt to pass for a free woman, and has, it is said, whetea withal to pay her passage.

Ten dollars will be paid to any person who will bring her home, if taken in the city, or on board any vessel in the harbour;—and a reasonable additional sum if apprehended at, and brought from a greater distance, and in proportion to the distance.

FREDERICK KITT, Steward.

May 23

411

This advertisement offered a \$10 reward for Ona Judge's capture and return to Washington.

Many years after her escape, Judge recalled, "Whilst they were packing up to go to Virginia, I was packing to go, I didn't know where; for I knew that if I went back to Virginia, I should never get my liberty."

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# Ona Judge

The Washingtons were distressed by the news of Judge's escape. Martha Washington felt betrayed and could not understand why a young woman, who she believed was treated very well and affectionately, would leave such an honored position in the Washington household. Twice, Judge was confronted by aides of Washington ordering her to return to Mount Vernon, free of punishment. She refused because she would not return to being enslaved, with not even a promise of eventual freedom. Judge lived the rest of her life in New Hampshire. She taught herself to read and write and married a free Black man named John Staines. Together, they had three children. She died in 1848 at the age of 75. Judge was not mentioned in George Washington's will, and legally she (and her children) were still considered the property of the Martha Washington's estate.

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# Elizabeth Freeman

Elizabeth Freeman was one of the first enslaved people in Massachusetts to sue for and win her freedom. She was born into enslavement around 1742 in Claverack, New York. At six months old, she was purchased by John Ashley and was brought to Sheffield, Massachusetts, where she remained until she was 40 years old. She gained the nickname "Mumbet" (a shortened version of Elizabeth). In 1780, Freeman was struck by Mrs. Ashley with a heated shovel, severely burning and permanently wounding her arm. While her arm healed, she left it uncovered, to show her severe treatment.



Courtesy of the  
Massachusetts Historical  
Society

# Elizabeth Freeman

After the Revolutionary War ended, she attended a public reading of the Massachusetts Constitution, which stated: "All men are born free and equal and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights." She thought if everyone under the law is free and equal, that must mean those enslaved should be free.

She hired Theodore Sedgwick, an abolitionist lawyer, to plead her case in court—called *Brom and Bett v. Ashley*—in August 1781. The jury ruled in her favor, making her the first Black woman to win her freedom in court under the state's constitution. Her case served as a precedent for the state Supreme Court case that ended the institution of slavery in Massachusetts in 1783. As a free woman, Elizabeth took the last name, "Freeman." She moved into a house in Stockbridge, where she was revered for her midwifery and nursing skills.

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# Questions to Consider

- Do you think everyone living in the thirteen colonies was given the same opportunity to fight for freedom in the Revolutionary War? Why or why not?
- What were some contributions by Black men and women to the Revolutionary War? Give 2 specific examples.
- What are some reasons an enslaved person might have chosen to support the Patriots? To support the British?



# Go Beyond: research these questions and share what you find!

- What happened to the Black people who fought for the British after the war?
- What happened to the Black people who volunteered to fight for the Patriots after the war was over? What about the enslaved people?



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This program is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

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