



FOUNDATION
AGAINST
INTOLERANCE
& RACISM

Lesson Title: Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Revolutionary America

Recommended Grade Level: 8-11

Recommended Pacing: 90 minutes

FAIR Standards and Objectives:

HM.9-12.2, US.9-12.11, US.9-12.12, US.9-12.13, FR.9-12.20

Theme: Key Debates in American History; We Hold These Truths

Era: Revolutionary

Areas of Focus: Abolition, African American Experience, American Founding

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students will increase their understanding of how the American Revolution influenced slavery and attitudes about slavery in America.
2. Students will increase proficiency in debating alternative interpretations of historical events.

Teacher Instructions:

1. Give students time (in class or as homework) to read the Background Essay and the six sources for the lesson. If the reading is done in class, this may extend the time needed in class to complete the lesson.
2. Hand out copies of the Student Worksheet Assignment.
3. Ask students to read the two conflicting “Point of View” paragraphs and take brief notes on them in the spaces provided.
4. Have students use these notes in a guided discussion in which they are encouraged to defend their own views while listening carefully to and considering the views of others.

Slavery and Antislavery in Revolutionary America

Between 1775 and 1783, thirteen British colonies in North America fought a war for their independence. As a result, they formed a new nation, the United States of America. It seemed to many that, as one ballad put it, “the world turned upside down.”

Some Americans look back on the American Revolution as a shining moment without flaws. They see in it a glorious victory for liberty and equality. They point to the words of the Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal.” They tell stories of heroic clashes – the Battle of Lexington and Concord; Washington crossing the Delaware; the suffering soldiers at Valley Forge; the final victory at Yorktown. They believe that the high ideals of the Revolution won out completely then and for all time.

Others view the Revolution in a far harsher way. They see it as a dishonest time during which great injustices were ignored. Above all, they condemn the Revolution’s leaders for paying lip service to the ideal of liberty even while owning human beings as slaves. Most of those slaves were Africans whose darker skin made them easy to identify and control. Skin color and cultural differences also made Africans and their American-born children easy targets for racist contempt. According to this harsher view, the Revolution did nothing to overcome these terrible failings. It may have made them worse.

Both of these views share something in common. They both find it easy to pass sweeping moral judgements about the past. Clearly, slavery was evil. It is easy to see that now. However, it was a much more commonly accepted practice in past societies. Moreover, those who did think it evil could not see an easy way to end or limit it. The past is complicated and hard to understand. And our judgments should be based on understanding. Most historians will tell us we should be cautious about passing judgment too quickly.

As to slavery at the time of the Revolution, it surely did clash with the lofty values of the Declaration. In fact, slavery in America in the early decades of the 1700s was only getting worse. As large-scale plantation agriculture grew, so did the numbers of slaves put to work growing rice, tobacco, cotton and other staples. The work imposed on those slaves grew longer, harsher, more disciplined. As the numbers of the enslaved rose, so also did concerns about how best to control them. Fears about slave uprisings grew. Laws in some colonies sought to limit what little freedom slaves had earlier enjoyed. Fewer were freed by their owners. Racist disdain and contempt were directed also against freed people of color. New laws limited their ability to form families, control property, do various kinds of work or take part in political life.

Once fighting with the British broke out, a few British military commanders offered freedom to American slaves who would join British forces. Several thousand did just that. However, Great Britain was itself a major player in the Atlantic slave trading system. It controlled many slave-holding islands in the Caribbean. It feared the effect on its own slaves were it to provoke slave uprisings in the rebellious colonies. All too often

slaves freed by the British were left to fend for themselves after the war. The British even sold many of them back into slavery in the Caribbean.

Other enslaved African Americans joined the American rebels. Many responded to promises by some town or state military units of freedom for slaves who would fight. Moreover, enslaved African Americans knew that talk of freedom was in the air before and during the Revolution. Enlightenment ideas about reason, individual liberty, equality, and representative government were shaping the thinking of the colonists. In addition, there had been an upsurge of a new spirit of religious revivalism. This promised divine grace for everyone. Its stress was more firmly on the free will of each individual. African Americans, both slave and free, were intensely aware of all this. A number of them spoke out in pamphlets and petitions calling attention to the contradiction between the colonists' rhetoric and the reality of slavery.

Many colonists, including many of the Revolution's leaders, recognized this contradiction as well. In both America and Great Britain, the first stages of a movement to abolish slavery had begun. It started with a few Quakers and other evangelical Christians. No such organized effort to abolish slavery had existed in the world before the 1700s. America's first abolitionist society was formed in Pennsylvania in 1775.

But anti-slavery sentiment showed up in more ways than in these small abolitionist beginnings. In the North, most of the newly formed states began to take steps to end slavery. Vermont partially banned it in 1777. In Massachusetts, a new constitution became the basis for a judicial decision banning slavery outright in 1783. Pennsylvania adopted "gradual emancipation" in 1780. Most Northern states soon did the same – New York and New Jersey lagging until 1799 and 1804 respectively. Meanwhile, in 1787, the U.S. Continental Congress, banned slavery in the Northwest Territory. That was the territory north of the Ohio River that would one day form the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin. Earlier, in 1784, Congress came within one vote of banning slavery entirely from all U.S. territories west of the Appalachians.

Among the Revolution's leaders, expressions of regret about slavery were common. This was true even among many slave owners. They recognized the painful contradiction; they did not hide from it or deny it. Of course, the two key slave states of South Carolina and Georgia forcefully resisted all this, as did many in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and elsewhere. Slavery persisted and even deepened throughout the revolutionary era. In fact, it soon started spreading to the Southwest. And yet, anti-slavery sentiment was already building in the North and in Congress. It was a sentiment that one day would put an end to the American slave system.

So, did the American Revolution shamefully ignore slavery? Or did it put slavery, as some have said, "on the road to extinction"? The materials for this lesson will help you think about, discuss, and debate this question.

Sources for this Lesson

Source 1 A Virginia Governor on Depriving Freed Slaves of Their Rights

In 1735, the British Board of Trade questioned a 1723 Virginia law that denied free Blacks the right to vote. Virginia's governor William Gooch replied to the letter the Board of Trade had sent. This passage is from that reply. Governor Gooch's reply can be found in Emory G. Evans, "A Question of Complexion: Documents concerning the Negro and the Franchise in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 71:4 (Oct. 1963), 412. It is available online from the website "Encyclopedia Virginia" at: <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/denying-free-blacks-the-right-to-vote-1724-1735/>

I lately had the favor of yours of the 18th of December last, signifying the pleasure of my Lords Commissioners for Trade, that I should inform them of the reasons which induced the Assembly to pass the Law in 1723 Chapter 4th depriving free Negroes & Mulattos of the privilege of voting at any election of Burgesses to serve in the General Assembly, or at any other elections.

In answer thereto it is to be noted, as I am well informed, that just the meeting of that Assembly, there had been a conspiracy discovered amongst the Negroes to cut off the English, wherein the free-Negroes & Mulattos were much suspected to have been concerned, (which will forever be the case) and tho' there could be no legal proof, so as to convict them, yet such was the insolence of the free-Negroes at that time, that the next Assembly thought it necessary, not only to make the meetings of slaves very penal, but to fix a perpetual brand upon free-Negroes & Mulattos by excluding them from that great privilege of a freeman, well knowing they always did, and ever will, adhere to and favor the slaves. And 'tis likewise said to have been done with design, which I must think a good one, to make the free-Negroes sensible that a distinction ought to be made between their offspring and the descendants of an Englishman, with whom they never were to be accounted equal.

Source 2. Arthur Lee, A Slaveholder Opposes Slavery

Arthur Lee (1740–1792) was a member of one of the wealthiest plantation families in Virginia. He supported the American Revolution, serving as a diplomat and a member of the Continental Congress. He was a slaveholder himself. Yet he came to oppose slavery on moral and Christian grounds. This passage is from a 1767 letter he sent to the printer of the *Virginia Gazette*. His letter was intended to be seen by members of Virginia's Assembly. The letter is reproduced in full in James G. Basker, editor, *American Antislavery Writings: Colonial Beginnings to Emancipation*. Library of America, 2012. Kindle Edition.

Long and serious reflection upon the nature & consequences of slavery, has convinced me, that it is a violation both of justice and religion; that it is dangerous to the safety of the community in which it prevails; that it is destructive to the growth of arts & sciences; and lastly, that it produces a numerous & very fatal train of vices, both in the slave, and in his master. . . .

Now, as freedom is unquestionably the birth-right of all mankind, of Africans as well as Europeans, to keep the former in a state of slavery is a constant violation of that right, and therefore of justice. . . .

There cannot be in nature, there is not in all history, an instance in which every right of men is more flagrantly violated. . . . Reader—remember that the corner stone of your religion is to do unto others as you would they should do unto you; ask then your own heart, whether it would not abhor anyone, as the most outrageous violator of this & every other principle of right, justice & humanity, who should make a slave of you and your Posterity forever. Remember that God knoweth the heart. Lay not this flattering unction to your Soul, that it is the custom of the country, that you found it so, that not your will, but your necessity consents; Ah think, how little such an excuse will avail you in that awful day, when your Savior shall pronounce judgment upon you for breaking a law too plain to be misunderstood, too sacred to be violated.

Source 3. Benjamin Rush on Slavery

Physician Benjamin Rush was one of those who signed the Declaration of Independence. He began to oppose slavery in the years leading up to the Revolution. He believed blacks had the same natural intelligence as whites and only needed education and freedom to thrive. The passage here is from a letter he wrote to a French correspondent in 1769. *Rush to Jacques Barbeu Dubourg, in Ephémérides du citoyen 9 (1769): 172–74*, as quoted in David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 145.

“It would be useless for us to denounce the servitude to which the Parliament of Great Britain wishes to reduce us, while we continue to keep our fellow creatures in slavery just because their color is different from ours.”

Source 4. A Slave Petition

Slaves and free Blacks sent several petitions to colonial leaders in revolt against the British. These passages are part of a slave petition signed by four slaves and submitted “In behalf of our fellow slaves of this province, and by order of their Committee” to the Massachusetts General Assembly, April 20, 1773. The petition was signed by Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie. It is available online from the Library of Congress at: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03701600/?st=text>

The efforts made by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery, gave us, who are in that deplorable state, a high degree of satisfaction. We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your next session. The divine spirit of freedom, seems to fire every humane breast on this continent. . . .

WE are very sensible that it would be highly detrimental to our present masters, if we were allowed to demand all that of right belongs to us for past services; this we

disclaim. . . We do not pretend to dictate to you Sir, or to the honorable Assembly, of which you are a member: We acknowledge our obligations to you for what you have already done, but as the people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into serious consideration, and give us that ample relief which, as men, we have a natural right to.

BUT since the wise and righteous governor of the universe, has permitted our fellow men to make us slaves, we bow in submission to him, and determine to behave in such a manner, as that we may have reason to expect the divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom.

WE are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be made relative to us, until we leave the province, which we determine to do as soon as we can from our joint labors procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the coast of Africa, where we propose a settlement.

SOURCE 5. Hamilton on Arming Slaves.

At first, General George Washington and other leaders opposed using slave soldiers. However, many Northern towns and some states soon included Blacks in local units. In 1779, Henry Laurens of South Carolina proposed freeing and arming a 3000-man force of slave soldiers. Alexander Hamilton favored this idea, and so did the Continental Congress. But state leaders in the Southern colonies kept it from happening. Alexander Hamilton wrote about the idea to John Jay. These passages are from that letter, dated March 14, 1779, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, New York and London, 1961, vol. 2, pp. 17–19. Available online from Founders Online at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0051>

*“Dear Sir,
Col Laurens, who will have the honor of delivering you this letter, is on his way to South Carolina, on a project, which I think, in the present situation of affairs there, is a very good one and deserves every kind of support and encouragement. This is to raise two three or four battalions of negroes; with the assistance of the government of that state, by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess. If you should think proper to enter upon the subject with him, he will give you a detail of his plan. He wishes to have it recommended by Congress to the state; and, as an inducement, that they would engage to take those battalions into Continental pay. . .*

I foresee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest. The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability or pernicious tendency of a scheme which requires such a sacrifice. But it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their

muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation. This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men.

Source 6. Jefferson's Proposal of 1784

In 1787, the newly independent U.S. Congress banned slavery from the Northwest Territory out of which would be formed the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin. Even earlier, in 1784, Thomas Jefferson drafted a bill that would have excluded slavery from all the U.S. territory west of the Appalachian range. This might have prevented the South from expanding slavery as it later did into Alabama, Mississippi and Kentucky. However, by one vote Congress removed the provision excluding slavery from Jefferson's proposed ordinance. The first passage below is from Jefferson's proposal with its anti-slavery provision. It can be accessed from the website "Envisioning the West" at:

http://jeffersonswest.unl.edu/archive/view_doc.php?id=jef.00155

The second passage is from a letter Jefferson wrote to James Madison, April 25, 1784, explaining how that anti-slavery provision failed by one vote. The letter can be accessed from "Founders Online" at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0009>

Provisions of Jefferson's Proposed Ordinance of 1784

1. [That states newly formed out of the Western territories] shall forever remain a part of the United States of America. 2. That in their persons, property and territory they shall be subject to the government of the United States in Congress assembled, and to the Articles of Confederation in all those cases in which the original States shall be so subject. 3. That they shall be subject to pay a part of the federal debts contracted or to be contracted to be apportioned on them by Congress according to the same common rule and measure, by which apportionments thereof shall be made on the other States. 4. That their respective governments shall be in republican forms, and shall admit no person to be a citizen who holds any hereditary title. 5. That after the year 1800 of the Christian era, there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said States, otherwise than in punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted to have been personally guilty.

Jefferson's Letter

The [Slavery clause, No. 5] was lost by an individual vote only. Ten states were present. The 4. Eastern states, N. York, [&] Pennsva. were for the clause. [Je]rsey would have been for it, but there were but two members, one of whom was sick in his chambers. South Carolina Maryland, & ! Virginia ! voted against it. N. Carolina was divided as would have been Virginia had not one of its delegates been sick in bed.

Student Assignment

Student Instructions

Please read the Background Essay for this lesson. Also read the entire set of six primary source documents provided. Finally, read the two “Point of View” paragraphs below. Then write out brief answers to the questions asked about these paragraphs. Use your answers to help you take part in a class discussion about slavery and anti-slavery during the American Revolution. In the discussion, share varying responses to the following question.

Essential Question: Did the American Revolution ultimately help put an end to slavery?

Point of View I: “No. Despite the nice-sounding words, the Revolution did little to weaken slavery and may even have strengthened it.

Slavery was in fact growing stronger and harsher in the decades before the American Revolution. Many key leaders of the Revolution were themselves slaveholders, especially those from Virginia. Some of them made nice-sounding statements of regret about slavery. Nevertheless, these leaders of the Revolution were hypocrites. Most of them did little or nothing to end slavery or even to free their own slaves. Petitions from African Americans went unheeded. It is true that many of the Revolution’s leaders did want to end the slave trade. Partly that was because they feared uprisings by the growing numbers of the enslaved. In any case, the slaves were reproducing rapidly. There were enough of them to keep the plantation owners supplied without importing more from Africa. The slaveholders did not need the slave trade all that much. It is true that several Northern states did end slavery. But they did so only very gradually in most cases. Some African Americans in the North remained enslaved well into the 1800s. Racist disdain for them did not end. It led Northern communities to discriminate against African Americans in many ways even after they were freed. Meanwhile, North and South grew ever further apart over slavery as a deeper divide set in. Only a massively destructive civil war would put an end to slavery in the new nation.

Point of View II: Yes. Although the Revolution did not abolish slavery, its ideas moved many to view slavery as the new republic’s evil flaw that must someday be removed.

Some people claim that those who wrote the Declaration of Independence never meant its ideals to apply to enslaved Africans. This is not true. Five men worked together in the committee that wrote the Declaration. One of them, Thomas Jefferson, proposed laws to prevent the expansion of slavery into the western territories. John Adams helped draft a constitution for Massachusetts that provided grounds for ending slavery in that state. Benjamin Franklin became president of Pennsylvania’s abolitionist society. Roger Sherman was personally opposed to slavery, though he was willing to compromise over it to keep the colonies united. It is true the Revolution did not end slavery everywhere in the United States. Yet most Northern states soon did end it. The growing anti-slavery feeling in the North may well have strengthened support for slavery in the South. This sharp divide then led to bitter conflict over slavery for decades to come. Yet the Revolution set down the basic ideals that in the end made slavery intolerable to the nation. It was in that way a true turning

point in American history and the history of the world.

In-Class Discussion: Clarify Your Views and Discuss Them with Others

Take a few brief notes in response to each of the following questions. Use your notes to help you take part in an all-class discussion about slavery and anti-slavery during the American Revolution.

1. Of the six sources provided, list one that best supports “Point of View I.”
2. Why did you choose that source?
3. Of the six sources provided, list one that best supports “Point of View II.”
4. Why did you choose that source?
5. For Homework: Write a paragraph stating which of the two points of view you agree with most and why. Make specific references to the two sources you chose here. As a class, share some of these paragraphs and discuss them.

Extension Activity:

Petitions from Enslaved and Free African Americans

Source 4 for this lesson is a petition submitted by four African Americans to the Massachusetts General Assembly in 1773. Here are web links to two collections of other petitions by enslaved and free African Americans from around this time in U.S. history. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text4/text4read.htm>
<https://www.masshist.org/endofslavery/index.php?id=55>

Recommended Activity: Form several small groups and ask each group to read and discuss one of the petitions from the above web links. Make sure the groups choose different petitions. Encourage them to do more research into the petition they have chosen. Ask each group to prepare a brief presentation summarizing and explaining what they have found. As a part of the presentation, have them explain how the document or documents they have read help them to answer the Essential Question for this lesson.