



Unit 2 Activities

## Eighteenth Century African American Identities

People of African descent in 18th century British North America were a very diverse group of people with a variety of lived experiences. Under challenging circumstances, they formed communities and created or revised traditions to support themselves and one another. The purpose of this unit is for students to explore the diversity of these men, women, and children and to examine the different experiences influencing the formation of African American identities in the Colonial and Revolutionary Eras.

### Aims /Objective

The modular activities and extensions in this unit provide opportunities for students to:

- Recognize Africa and Africans as diverse, with a breadth of cultures and traditions
- Identify and describe elements of culture Africans brought with them to North America
- Investigate the creation, nature and strengths of African American communities in the Colonial Era

### Materials

Big Idea 2: Eighteenth Century African American Identities

*Finding Freedom* Sources:

- Interactive: Eve's Story
- Interactive: Deborah's Story
- Primary Source: Runaway Ad for *Finding Freedom's* Eve (Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary)

Primary Sources:

- Image: *William Ansah Sessarakoo*, by John Faber Jr., after Gabriel Mathias <https://tinyurl.com/Sessarakoo> (National Portrait Gallery, London)
- Image: *Head of a West African Woman in Left Profile*, by Gabriel Bray <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/200982.html> (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)

Other Resources:

- Website: The Geography of Slavery <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/>
- Website: SlaveVoyages.org <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>
- Website: George Washington's Mount Vernon: <https://www.mountvernon.org/>
- Website: Colonial Williamsburg: <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/>
- Worksheet: Community Life at... Graphic Panel Template (Included)
- Worksheet: The Things They Carried (Included)

# Procedures

**Note:** Please be aware of the environment you and your students create when discussing the experiences of people of African descent, particularly enslaved people. This can be an emotional topic with the power to create lasting memories for students of all backgrounds, particularly those who continue to experience racism in the present.

## Engagement 10-15 minutes

### EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

Project or display the images of William Ansah Sessarakoo and Gabriel Bray's *Head of a West African Woman in Left Profile*. Discuss with students the following questions:

- How would you describe the clothing and adornments of each of these individuals? What might they tell us about their identities?
- Both of these images are of real people, though the latter is unidentified. How do they match your expectations for people of African descent in the 1700s?
- How are they different from your expectations?
- What might these images tell us about people of African descent in the 1700s?

### ARRIVING IN AMERICA

*Teacher Preparation:* Review Big Idea 2: Eighteenth Century African American Identities and the *SlaveVoyages.org Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Timelapse Map*, noting the key, timeline, and other features.

Project or display the Timelapse Map so that all students can view it. Before playing the timelapse, explain to students that a timelapse shows change over time and that the one they are about to view shows the movement of people on ships from Africa to the Americas from the 1600s to the 1800s. Note what the colors and the relative sizes of the dots mean.

As you play the timelapse, ask students to silently write their observations. Encourage students to note the relative size of Africa compared to the other continents shown, where the ships are coming from, where they land in North America, and when and how frequently ships leave and arrive. Discuss with class as a whole what their answers suggest about the diversity of Africans arriving in the 13 colonies in North America and about black communities in the 17th and 18th centuries.

**EXTEND:** Ask students what they think enslaved Africans would have brought with them, noting that while they

may not have been able to pack bags, there may have been other types of things — knowledge, skills, etc. — that would not have required storage.

## Development

### THE THINGS THEY CARRIED 30 minutes

*Teacher Preparation:* Review Big Idea 2: Eighteenth Century African American Identities and print enough copies to distribute to individuals or small groups. Likewise, print copies of the *The Things They Carried Worksheet*.

When Africans came to the Americas, they did not arrive with nothing — they brought knowledge, traditions, beliefs and skills with them. Distribute Big Idea 2 to the class and give enough time for the class to read. Engage in a comprehension check with students, asking them to summarize big ideas and exploring questions.

Next, distribute the accompanying worksheet. Ask students to use what they read to complete the chart. Once students have had sufficient time, review as a group and discuss the following questions:

- Has anyone you know come to the United States from another place? What skills, traditions, or cultural practices did they bring with them? Why were those things important?
- What happens when we discuss black history as though it began with slavery? What do we miss?
- How did the continuous arrival of men, women, and children from Africa shape African American culture in the 18th century? Colonial culture? In what ways do contemporary African immigrants impact American culture today?

### EXPLORE DEBORAH AND EVE'S COMMUNITIES

45 minutes

*Teacher Preparation:* Review the stories of Deborah and Eve in the *Finding Freedom interactive*. Ensure students have access to computers with working internet connections.

The places where both Deborah and Eve were enslaved now exist today as historic sites: George Washington's Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg. Have students explore the websites for one or both of these locations, looking for stories and information specifically about both the enslaved and possibly free people of African descent who lived there before the start of the Revolutionary War. Using the *Community Life At...* graphic panel template, ask students to create an informational comic illustrating 5 aspects of community life for either Deborah or Eve before the Revolutionary War. Display and discuss students' work.

**EXTEND:** Have students research pre-war African and African American communities in other locations — related to local 18th century historic sites, for example, or cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newport, or Charleston, or the Historic Hudson Valley. Again, have students create an informational comic illustrating aspects of community life. Compile into a class book.

## Culmination

### AFRICAN ORIGINS, AFRICANS TODAY

Research Project

Have students select, or assign to them, one of the African peoples listed in the Places of Origin section of *Big Idea 2* (Akan, Mande, Igbo, etc.). Then have them research the history of that group at some point in the 1600s or 1700s. Questions might include:

- What languages did they speak?
- What foods did they eat?
- How did they acquire food?

- What did their homes look like and why?
- What were their spiritual and religious practices?
- What kinds of tools did they use?
- What kinds of things did they wear?
- What were their relationships like with neighboring groups?

Ask students to pay attention to where their information is coming from and how those sources got that information. Also ask students to identify a famous person from the past 50 years who is a member of that group and briefly describe who they are, and what they did or do that is significant in their community or the world. Have students present — as a paper, video, display board, or other project — a report on the people they chose, including what they would have brought with them to the American colonies.

### WRITING AND/OR DISCUSSION PROMPTS

What does your name mean and why was it chosen?

What would you do if someone tried to change your name, or refused to call you by it? Why? Would it depend on the circumstances?

Pick a cultural practice that is meaningful to you: celebrating a holiday, attending a family event, wearing clothing or accessories that represent your heritage. What are the origins of this practice and what does it mean? Why is it important to you? If you left your home culture, would you take this practice with you? Why or why not?

For free people of Africa descent, or enslaved people who did not live on large farms or plantations, what would be the benefits of creating a community with other people of African descent?

## Extensions and Adaptations

### READING RUNAWAY ADS

*Teacher Preparation:* Explore the website *The Geography of Slavery*, created by the University of Virginia, noting in particular the *Glossary of Terms* (<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/gloss.html>) and the *Browse Ads* feature ([http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse\\_main.php](http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse_main.php)). If desired, choose ads to study in advance.

Have students read the runaway ad for Eve placed by Harrison Randolph in the *Virginia Gazette* or *American Advertiser* on February 2, 1782, noting what information it provides.

Explain to students that runaway ads generally contained several pieces of information: the freedom-seeker's name, a physical description including any identifying

scars or marks, a list of clothing the person wore or took with them, the name of the person looking for them (the “subscriber”), and the offer of a reward for capturing them. Some, however, provided even more detail about the freedom-seeker’s skills, life experiences, or even place of birth.

Have students visit the University of Virginia’s The Geography of Slavery website and search for three runaway ads that provide more detailed information about the freedom-seeker. What does each ad share about the person being sought, and what do the ads together say about the diversity of people of African descent living in Virginia in the Revolutionary Era?

### INTERVIEW A COMMUNITY MEMBER

Many communities across the United States include people who have recently immigrated from Africa. Invite one or more guest speakers — perhaps a member of your school’s extended family — into your classroom to share information about their community or communities of origin, sharing photos, music, even food (if your school or district allows this). Ask students to prepare a list of questions in advance. Afterwards, ask students to write Thank You cards sharing what they learned or found most interesting. (For schools without a local African immigrant community, reach out to an organization in the nearest local or regional big city.)

### READING 18TH CENTURY BLACK AUTHORS

Several people of African descent wrote or dictated memoirs to be shared with the public in the 18th century. Others published books or pamphlets of creative work. Assign the narrative or writings of one of following individuals as a class reading project, researching for context, and discussing along the way: Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (also known as Job Ben Solomon), William Ansah Sessarakoo, Phillis Wheatley, Ottobah Cugoano, Ignatius Sancho, Jupiter Hammon.

(Note: Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, can also be included in this list. It should be noted, however, that some historians question whether he was actually born free in Africa or was actually born enslaved in South Carolina and based his stories of life in an Igbo community on other people’s memories.)

### RECLAIMING ROOTS

Over the centuries, African Americans have felt both internal and external pressure to erase or limit expressions of their African ancestry. Yet, especially since the 1960s, there has increased pushback to this pressure. Engage students in exploration of some of the ways in which African Americans have worked to reclaim their heritage and culture, exploring, for example, music, food, clothing, language, storytelling, dance, travel, education, and genealogical research. How are these similar to or different from the ways in which other American cultures have worked to maintain or reclaim their roots?