



Big Idea 7

Wartime Experiences

For eight long years, the Revolutionary War touched every aspect of American lives. Men and boys were sent off to fight, for weeks, months, or years at a time. Women and children followed the armies as vital support staff, or stayed home — despite the dangers of doing so — to take care of farms and businesses. Farmers and **artisans** used their labor and skills to produce supplies and foragers might take what was not freely given. Battles and raids touched towns along the coast and the western frontier, as well as on the open sea. Spies collected and delivered information along complex networks, sometimes slipping in and out of cities **occupied** by enemy armies at great risk to their lives. And people of African descent participated in it all.

Soldiers and Sailors

Men of African descent served on both sides of the war. On the British side, freedom-seeking enslaved people from Virginia and surrounding areas joined Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment, where they wore shirts that read “Liberty to Slaves” as they fought against Revolutionaries. One of these soldiers was a man named Titus who had run away from his owner in New Jersey. Within a few years, he was in charge of his own group of Black Loyalists, called the Black Brigade. Led by “Colonel Tye,” as he was now called, the Black Brigade fought at the Battle of Monmouth and was known to conduct raids and attacks against Revolutionaries in and around New Jersey — including against his former owner.

On the American side, armed soldiers of African descent were generally integrated into local militias and the state regiments of the Continental Army. In Massachusetts, for example, an integrated group of white, black, and Native American sailors from the fishing village of Marblehead formed the town’s **militia** and ultimately became the 14th Continental Regiment. On the night of December 25, 1776, they ferried Washington’s troops across the Delaware River to fight in the Battle of Trenton. The 6th Connecticut Regiment was another integrated unit within the Continental Army. Interestingly, the names of ten of the men of African descent in the unit — including Pomp Liberty, Cuff Freedom, and Jube Freeman — suggest why they may have decided to join.

Enslaved men were generally still unwelcome in the Continental Army, though exceptions were certainly made, especially for men serving as substitutes for their owners. But freemen were welcomed, even in places like Virginia, where armed men of African descent might pose a threat to slave-owning Revolutionaries. *Finding Freedom’s* Andrew said he was free when he joined, but it is unclear if this was actually true. The need for more soldiers was a great motivation, though, for bending or changing the rules. From the encampment at Valley Forge, outside of Philadelphia, George Washington tacitly agreed to a plan to free enslaved men in Rhode Island who joined the Continental Army. The state’s units were reorganized, most white men were moved from the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, and it became an almost entirely black and Native American unit, led by white commissioned officers but perhaps with non-commissioned officers of African descent.

On the water, men of African descent served as sailors on British and American military vessels. But they also served on privateer ships, merchant ships that had been retrofitted for basic combat and licensed by either government to harass enemy ships. Privateer ships like the *Royal Louis* worked to capture enemy ships and then bring the ships and their goods to harbor for prize money. James Forten, who was likely a third or fourth generation North American, and whose father had been free and mother had probably been freed before his birth, sailed on the *Royal Louis* as a teenager out of Philadelphia.

Support Staff and Spies

Men of African descent also served as support staff on both sides of the war. The British Army, for example, organized a group called the Black Pioneers. These men were noncombatants — their responsibility was to perform the crucial work of digging trenches, constructing earthworks, building huts, and similar tasks. On both sides, men of African descent served as guides, showing the way through enemy terrain, and teamsters, driving horse-led wagons and moving supplies from place to place. And boys and teens might serve as military musicians — fifers, drummers, and trumpeters, like *Finding Freedom's* London — sending important messages across camp or in battle.

Military intelligence — information about the enemy, their strengths and weaknesses and their plans — was crucial to winning the war. In taverns and private homes, businesses and military encampments, men and women of all backgrounds and ages watched and listened for important information, then passed it along to those who needed to know. People of African descent were some of the most invisible visible people around — their presence was not unusual as servants and laborers even in spaces restricted to high-ranking officials. Benjamin Whitecuff gathered intelligence from Americans in New Jersey and carried it back to New York, which served as the British Army headquarters. On the other side, an enslaved man named James served as a double agent for the Revolutionaries, pretending to serve as a British spy, but in reality delivering information to a French ally, the Marquis de Lafayette. James's information was critical in the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781. He would later take Lafayette as his last name, honoring the man who supported his request for freedom when it was at first denied by the United States because he had been a spy and not a soldier.

Camp Followers and Refugees

Enslaved men and women began running to the British Army even before Lord Dunmore had officially made his **proclamation** in Virginia in 1775. But once his offer for freedom to enslaved men was announced, the numbers grew rapidly. And while the proclamation specifically called for those men who could bear arms for the King, many others — women and children included — arrived as well. On both sides of the war, women and children of all backgrounds traveled with the armies. Some were following their husbands, fathers, brothers, or other family members, hoping to find safety that they might not find at home. Others followed hoping that the money their family members might earn would be more likely to reach them if they stayed close by. Still others followed the army because they had important skills to offer and could perform necessary labor that could help keep the army moving and the soldiers alive. Many followed the army for all of these reasons.

Children might help to gather wood, clean, or run errands for soldiers and officers around the camp. Women were crucial as laundresses because clean clothes increased health and boosted the soldiers' morale. They also served as nurses, though the limits of medicine at that time meant their role was mostly to keep the men and hospitals clean and comfortable when the worst of diseases and wounds struck. Women helped mend clothes, sometimes cooked, and carried water to soldiers and artillery on the battlefield. Formerly enslaved

women might labor as servants for British officers, performing the same tasks they had at the places they had left. These women, and their children, were often described as dirty and unruly but they were generally paid — with their freedom, with money, or both — and received **rations** for their work.

The Challenges of Soldiering and Spycraft

Many soldiers complained of boredom — most of the war was not spent in battles, but in marching, training, foraging, and waiting for things to happen. And lack of supplies, poor food or no food, late pay or no pay, were real problems. Death and injury were clear risks for soldiers, even if one was wielding a shovel rather than a gun. But the most life-threatening challenge of soldiering was actually disease and infection. Germ theory did not exist in the 18th century. Doctors didn't know that germs caused deadly infections and acts we now consider common, like washing hands between patients or cleaning used instruments before using them on the next patient, were not common. A non-fatal wound from a musket ball or a cut from a blade could quickly lead to infection and death; Colonel Tye died from gangrene after being shot in the wrist.

Likewise, most doctors in the 18th century believed that diseases were caused by miasma, or dangerous air. This meant they were ill-equipped to stop the viruses that caused yellow fever and **smallpox**, and diseases swept through armies on both sides. Despite attempts to **inoculate** the escaped slaves who joined him, Lord Dunmore lost hundreds of men, women, and children to smallpox, and left many more dying when he evacuated Virginia. It was a similar situation for the formerly enslaved people at **Yorktown** years later.

People of African descent, whether soldiers, sailors, or camp followers, also faced a risk that others didn't: the possibility that capture by the enemy would lead back to slavery. One might be returned to their former owner and physically punished, or sold away from their family and community. They might even be sold to labor in the Caribbean, where quick death was near-certain. For those who had been born free, this threat was even greater — it wasn't a *return* to slavery, but an entrance into it.

The Homefront

Most people of African descent did not serve in the army, sail as privateers, or work as camp followers. Whether free or enslaved, they stayed where they were, moved or were moved, tried to help from home, or tried to stay out of things completely. Either way, the homefront did not guarantee safety, peace or an absence of hard work. As men and women left as soldiers and camp followers, others needed to pick up the slack to provide for their families and communities. Violence was possible, whether the routine violence of slavery or the violence of neighbors at war with one another. And tension, fear of the unknown, and fear for the safety of loved ones were common.

Still, in many ways, life away from the battles of the war went on as usual. And the war created new homefronts, especially for people of African descent who had been taken in by the British. The chaos of war itself provided opportunities for enslaved people to seek their freedom and many of those who did were transported to New York City by the end of the war, which the British had occupied since 1776. There, they built a vibrant community of thousands of people. Some, like *Finding Freedom's* Deborah, were able to build new relationships there, even though they had left other family and friends behind.

The war was full of challenges for people of African descent, but it was also full of opportunities. As it ground on, the question became, what happens next?