



Unit 5 Activities

Slavery and Revolutionary Ideals

It can be difficult for students — and even adults — to understand how slavery could coexist with the ideals of the American Revolution. Some Revolutionaries struggled with this as well. The purpose of this unit is to help students understand that slavery encompassed both a political and philosophical ideology and a social and physical reality for American colonists. Many colonists hoped to keep these separate, but many others worked hard to show the relationships between them.

Aims /Objective

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

- Consider the role of culture in shaping what societies think is and is not normal
- Differentiate between the various meanings of slavery and liberty in Revolutionary America
- Think critically about the importance of and relationship between perspective and context when considering the application of Enlightenment ideals in Revolutionary America

Materials

Big Idea 5: Slavery and Revolutionary Ideals

Finding Freedom Sources:

- Interactive: Deborah’s Story
- Interactive: Eve’s Story

Primary Source:

- Object: “Success to the City of Boston” Mug (Museum of the American Revolution) <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/success-boston-mug>

Other Resources:

- Worksheet: Differing Definitions (Included)
- Handout: British Liberties Under Attack (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

A FISH IN WATER 5-10 minutes

Ask students to copy the following adage into their notebooks: “Culture is to humans as water is to fish.” Have students spend a few moments writing down what they believe this saying means, then ask for volunteers to share their interpretations. Build a conversation around the following questions:

- Do you think it’s true that fish don’t notice water? If so, what do you think it would take for a fish to notice water?
- What is culture?
- When and how did you learn the rules of your culture?
- Have you ever been reminded that not everyone shares your cultural assumptions? If so, what was that like?

Finish the discussion by asking students what the conversation you've just had may have to do with slavery and the American Revolution.

SUCCESS TO THE CITY OF BOSTON 10 minutes

Project or display the "Success to the City of Boston" mug so that it is visible for all students. Ask students to examine the image and describe what they see. Inform students that this mug was likely made in the early-mid 1770s. Ask students what was happening in Boston during this time, guiding them to the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, and the Coercive or "Intolerable" Acts, including the closing of Boston Harbor and the revoking of Massachusetts's charter. Ask students what the words on this mug might mean in this context. What is the "success" the mug's creator or purchasers might have wanted to see? What might "liberty" have meant in this context?

DEEPEN: Inform students that the mug was actually made in England. Why might an English person have made it?

Development

FACING BRITISH FEARS 30 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review Big Idea 5: Slavery and Revolutionary Ideals and prepare enough copies to distribute to all students. Likewise, print copies of British Liberties Under Attack handout for distribution.

Distribute copies of Big Idea 5 to class and have students read, or take turns reading aloud, the section "Slavery, Liberty and Natural Rights." Explain to students that you are going to look at some examples of the words of colonists writing in defense of their liberties, then distribute the British Liberties Under Attack handout.

Ask students to silently take a few moments to read the quotes, then ask for a few to read them aloud, with passion! Allow several volunteers to read. In between readings, ask students what each quote means, defining terms or historical context as necessary. Remind students that these are only examples of a much larger body of works using the words "slavery" and "liberty" in similar ways as they appear in these documents.

Discuss: What do these materials tell us about the hopes and fears of American colonists? How do these help us to understand the political and ideological meanings

of slavery for British colonists in the 18th century? What questions do you wish you could ask the authors of these, or similar documents? (Note: Encourage students to be aware of the assumptions they may be making about the specific authors listed here, as Thomas Paine wrote against slavery and John Dickinson manumitted his enslaved people between 1777 and 1786 for religious and financial reasons.)

EXTEND: For homework, assign the remainder of Big Idea 5 for reading and reflection.

DIFFERING DEFINITIONS 30-45 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review Big Idea 5: Slavery and Revolutionary Ideals and the stories of Deborah and Eve in the Finding Freedom interactive. Make copies of and prepare to distribute "Different Definitions" worksheet to individual or groups of students.

Individually or in groups, have students explore the stories of Deborah and Eve in the *Finding Freedom* interactive. Review stories with students to establish collective understanding of their stories. Be sure that students are aware that Eve's owner, before his death, was Peyton Randolph, first President of the Continental Congress. Next, distribute "Different Definitions" worksheet and allow time for students to complete. Once all students are finished, or sufficient time has passed, pull students together to review their responses, exploring what "liberty" and "slavery" meant for Deborah, Eve, George Washington, and Peyton Randolph. Explore the following questions with students:

- Based on their actions, in what ways might their definitions have been similar?
- In what ways might their definitions have been different?
- Is it possible that their definitions changed over time?
- What questions does this activity leave you with about Revolutionaries who supported slavery?

Culmination

WRITING AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

15 minutes or homework

Some people argue that Revolutionaries who were slave owners were "people of their time," meaning that they were only doing what was common and normal for the

era in which they lived. These people also argue that Revolutionaries who were slaveowners or profited from slavery should not be held up to our standards today. What are the arguments for and against supporting this perspective? Whose experiences in the 1700s does this argument prioritize? Do you agree or disagree with this argument?

Can we respect or admire people for one aspect of who they were while strongly disagreeing with other parts of them? What if they did both very good and very bad things? If these people were important for a city, state, or nation for the good work they did, should they be celebrated? Who should get to make that decision? How should the voices of the people who experienced the bad things be taken into account?

Extensions and Adaptations

PROPOSE A PLAN FOR FREEDOM

One rationale Revolutionary supporters of slavery used for not supporting emancipation was that they didn't know what to do or what would happen with the newly-freed men, women, and children. Abolitionists, however, proposed a number of plans. Ask students to imagine they are living during the Revolutionary Era and are engaged in discussions about emancipation. Ask them to devise a plan for the freedom, equality, and safety of people of African descent in the colonies/new states. They should keep in mind laws regarding free and enslaved people of African descent, beliefs about racial superiority and inferiority, and fears around the fragility of the rebellion and unity between the states. In addition, they should consider the strengths, skills, and abilities of, and the fierce desire for freedom and self-determination that people of African descent possessed. Ask students to present their plans, discussing the pros and cons of each one, and ultimately voting on which they think would have had the best chance at succeeding.

EXTEND: Students can then research what plans were actually proposed, and what successes or failures each saw, then conclude with a group discussion on what that meant for people of African descent and for the nation, in the Revolutionary Era and today.

SEEING THE UNSEEN

It's likely that 100-200 years from now, our descendants will look at our words and actions and find examples of contradictions between them. Ask students to spend several days paying attention to cultural norms. Ask them to create a list of things that seem widespread or commonly-accepted that might be unacceptable in the future. Have them prepare a creative presentation — Prezi, PowerPoint, poster, etc. — describing the practice, why people engage in it, why it might be seen as problematic in the future, whether people in the present have already begun to challenge it, and what it might take for the action to become less commonly-accepted. Ultimately, do they think the practice should end? Why or why not? And if so, what do they imagine is the path for ending it?

PRIMARY SOURCE INVESTIGATION

Anti-slavery writings penned by both people of African descent and white supporters appeared as letters, poems, and pamphlets throughout the Revolutionary Era, both in Great Britain and in the American colonies. With students, select and read one or more such documents, discussing the author, audience, format, method of distribution, tone, and argument. Authors include: Caesar Sarter, Benjamin Rush, St. George Tucker, Phillis Wheatley, John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, Olaudah Equiano (aka Gustavus Vassa), William Cowper, and Ignatius Sancho. (See also the unpublished work of Lemuel Haynes.)