



Big Idea 8

After the War

The last major battle of the Revolutionary War took place in 1781, but the war did not officially end until the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Yet even after American independence was won, questions of liberty and freedom remained, especially for people of African descent. What would independence from the British Empire mean for them?

Loyalist Evacuations

Thousands of enslaved people of African descent had thrown in their lot with the British over the course of the war. They had been encouraged by Dunmore's Proclamation in 1775, Sir Henry Clinton's Philipsburg Proclamation in 1779, and by hope that the chaos of war might allow them to claim their freedom. Many had lost their lives or been recaptured, but what was the fate of those who remained with the British?

Early in the war, it became clear to the British that they would be responsible for the freedom-seekers who sought their protection. As they **evacuated** cities of which they were no longer in control, they took thousands of freedom-seekers with them, sometimes hiding them away on ships to keep their owners from recapturing them. Most were taken to New York City. Others were taken elsewhere in the British Empire, including to East Florida, Jamaica, and St. Lucia, or directly to the British Isles. Some even left with **Hessian** soldiers, traveling to what we know of today as Germany.

For those who were taken to New York, like *Finding Freedom's* Deborah, life would have been full of uncertainty, vulnerability, and hope. Slaveowners from all sides, including George Washington, sent representatives or traveled themselves to the city to try to re-capture their former "property." And the terms of the Treaty of Paris, which officially marked the end of hostilities, stated that the British would be prohibited from "carrying away any Negroes or other property of the American Inhabitants." Could formerly enslaved people trust that the British would honor their promises of freedom?

Not all of the British did. Some sold the freedom-seekers who had acted as their servants during the war, in order to earn a profit, or returned them to their former owners. And many of the Loyalists were themselves slaveowners — neither Dunmore's Proclamation nor the Philipsburg Proclamation applied to those enslaved by them. When those Loyalists were evacuated, the people of African descent who traveled with them traveled as slaves.

But for a number of those who had run from Revolutionaries, the actions of British General Sir Guy Carleton, who had been placed in charge of settling affairs and evacuating Loyalists and the British military from their former colonies, were a blessing. Carleton chose an interpretation of the Treaty of Paris that treated those people of African descent who had already joined the British as no longer being American property, and thus not able to be returned. Three thousand of these men, women, and children in New York were issued passes by British Brigadier General Samuel Birch — now known as "Birch passes" — that allowed them passage on

British ships to Nova Scotia and elsewhere in the British Empire, to live lives where they were not someone else's property. Their names, descriptions, and other identifying information — including the names of their former owners — were recorded in two copies of a register known as the "Book of Negroes." One copy was kept by the United States and one by the British.

Overall, upwards of 9,000 people of African descent were evacuated with the British military and Loyalists, from New York and other ports. But evacuation did not necessarily mean an easy life, as they tried to rebuild in new and unfamiliar places, or one free from racial strife. In Canada, the evacuees of African descent were given worse land than their white counterparts and often did not receive necessary supplies. Conditions became so bad that they **petitioned** for assistance and sent a representative to London to ask directly for help. Others traveled to London rather than waiting for assistance, but found that despite growing anti-slavery ideals in the British capital, equality was nowhere near a reality. Eventually, many were persuaded to leave both Canada and London for a new settlement in Africa, known as Sierra Leone. But there, again, they met with poor conditions, racism, and restrictive and **paternalistic** behavior even by those who were meant to help them. In a fascinating twist of the Revolutionary Era, when frustrated emigrants of African descent pushed back against British rule in Sierra Leone, one of the key leaders was Harry Washington, who, like *Finding Freedom's* Deborah, had been owned by Revolutionary leader George Washington.

Great Britain ultimately abolished the buying and selling of enslaved people in 1807 and gradually abolished the ownership of enslaved people between 1833 and 1843. As in many places, people of African descent have continued to push for political, economic, and social equality into the present day.

American Promise / American Peril

Freedom and self-determination motivated people of African descent on both sides of the conflict. Even as the Revolutionary War raged on, they began to get glimpses of — and continued to push their own view of — what the American Revolution could mean to them. In 1776, free people of African descent in New Jersey who owned sufficient property were allowed the right to vote. In 1780, Pennsylvania became the first state to enact a gradual abolition law, stating that while people born before the law was passed would remain enslaved their entire lives, people born after the law's passing would gain their freedom once they had reached the age of 28. And in Massachusetts, a court case in 1780 brought by two enslaved people, Brom and "Mum Bett" (who later took the name Elizabeth Freeman), and another series of cases brought by an enslaved man named Quok Walker between 1780 and 1783 led to the effective end of slavery in that state by 1790.

It seemed that, in the North at least, progress towards the end of slavery was being made. It should be noted however, that Pennsylvania and the other states who enacted abolition laws by 1800 had legalized a *gradual* rather than an *immediate* end to slavery. In New Jersey, the right of free people of African descent to vote was revoked, or taken away, just 31 years after it was granted, not to return until 1870. And in Massachusetts, many historians believe that slavery ended not because the court cases proved that slavery was morally wrong, but because it could not be defended in court. Rather than free their

Did you know?

In 1777, three years before Pennsylvania's *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery*, Vermont wrote into its state constitution that no man or woman born in or brought from outside of the country could be held as a slave beyond the age of 21 or 18, respectively. Vermont is often not considered the first state to have abolished slavery or enacted gradual abolition, however, because Vermont was not accepted into the United States until 1791.

enslaved people, many Massachusetts owners sold them south. Furthermore, soldiers and supporters of the American Revolution who were of African descent would have witnessed Revolutionary slaveowners working to get their freedom-seekers back from the British, sometimes punishing them harshly when they were returned.

Still, there were clearly reasons to hope. Virginia, for example, legalized **manumissions** in 1782, which allowed individual or small numbers of enslaved people to be set free. And not only were there changes being made in the laws of the former colonies, but at a very personal level, thousands of the soldiers who had been promised their freedom in exchange for their military service received it. And many who had been promised land and/or **pensions** for their service received them as well. *Finding Freedom's* Andrew was among them.

Lasting Legacies

Nobody knew for certain what the 13 colonies would become after their success in the eight-year war, and the 10 years of protest that came before it. Since 1777, they had been operating as individual states within a loose confederacy, under an agreement known as the Articles of Confederation. The calling of a convention in 1787 to discuss the future of their confederacy — if there would be one — became a very important moment for the young nation.

Ultimately, the United States Constitution that came out of that convention preserved slavery in the nation. Concerns about ensuring the unity of the states outweighed some states' dislike of the institution of slavery, and the Constitution initially left decisions about slavery and the rights of people of African descent up to the individual state governments. The Constitution prohibited the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade until 1808, at which point the slave trade was made illegal through legislation introduced in 1807. Trade continued illegally, however, until 1860, and the internal trade continued legally until the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865. Millions of people of African descent were forced to live as slaves in the United States during this time.

While the Constitution can be seen as being friendly to slavery, it did not explicitly limit access to rights based on race. For free people of African descent, this meant — and continues to mean — the ability to demand equal access to rights based on its promises. As African Americans built their own institutions and community organizations in the decades and centuries after the American Revolution — often because of and in resistance to prejudice in American society — the Constitution served as the bedrock for pushes for political, social, and economic equality, and continues to do so to this day.