



Big Idea 6

Choosing Sides

Regardless of their race or place of origin, the residents of British North America had many reasons to either support or work against the cause of the American Revolutionaries, or to try to stay out of the conflict altogether. For some, *ideas* were very motivating, as they asked themselves who offered the better chance at liberty and fair government, or the chance to be treated better and have more opportunities in life. For others, *financial security* was most important. They asked, “Who will allow me to earn, or keep earning, money for myself and my family so that we can do well or do better in the world?” For still others, *peer pressure* — and sometimes *fear* — played a role. Could they be respected and could they and their families be safe if they chose to go against their neighbors, extended family, friends, and/or the local government? And for many, it was a mix of all of these factors that shaped their involvement in the American Revolution — and sometimes changed it over the course of the years of the early resistance movement and the Revolutionary War.

For people of African descent — the majority enslaved, but some free — there was another question layered on top of these: Which side offers the better chance at freedom, for myself and my family, and the best chance at removing slavery as a threat to me overall?

Dunmore’s Proclamation

In early November of 1775, the first year of the Revolutionary War, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, made a dramatic announcement. He declared,

“all indented servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty’s troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this colony to a proper sense of their duty, to his Majesty’s crown and dignity.”

Lord Dunmore had been appointed governor of the colony in 1771, and had been in a difficult relationship with its residents — and especially with members of its **colonial assembly** in Williamsburg — for years. Many of the assemblymen were upset by British actions to assert authority over the colonies after the French and Indian War and did not approve of Dunmore’s attempts to rule over them. As the situation grew more and more tense, Dunmore had begun to use threats of violence and destruction, including threatening to free and arm enslaved Virginians, to put the colonists back in their place. Given that there were thousands of enslaved people across the colony, and many slaveowners among the colonial assembly, these threats were both scary and angering for those colonists. Dunmore was threatening their safety, their livelihood, and their social order.

For the enslaved men and women who heard about Dunmore’s **Proclamation**, it had a different effect: it provided hope of a chance at freedom.

Dunmore's Fleet — Worth the Risk?

Dunmore's Proclamation was not made because he believed slavery was morally wrong. It was made because, if successful, he would be able to increase the number of people willing to fight for him. He would also reduce the number of people producing goods, performing labor, creating wealth, and fighting for the rising Revolutionary cause. Dunmore did not offer to free all enslaved people, only those who were owned by "rebels." And not even all of those who were enslaved by American "rebels" were welcome, only those who were "willing and able to bear arms." People of African descent who learned of Dunmore's offer, like *Finding Freedom's Eve*, needed to consider whether they would be welcomed under these criteria if they ran to him. In fact, they needed to consider whether they would be welcomed at all. When word first spread in early 1775 that Dunmore was considering freeing enslaved people, a number had run to his location at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg with hopes of freedom, only to be turned away. With his official proclamation, would Dunmore change his mind?

People of African descent who ran away from slavery also needed to consider whether they could make it to Dunmore's location at all, and what would happen if they couldn't. As his conflict with the American "rebels" grew in 1775, Dunmore moved from the Governor's Palace to a fleet of ships on the James River, close to the colony's Atlantic coast. To get to him, enslaved people would have to travel roads that were being closely watched, perhaps steal boats, horses, or other transportation, and somehow make it off the coast to his ships. Running to Lord Dunmore might mean leaving behind family with no guarantee of ever seeing them again, being captured and resold into an even worse situation than they'd previously been in, or being killed or seriously injured. Slaveowners worked to increase these fears, sharing stories — some true and some false — of terrible treatment and horrible sickness with Lord Dunmore. They also suggested they would be lenient to those who had run but decided to return to their owners. Which of these stories could be trusted? And for those, like *Finding Freedom's Jack*, who were far from Virginia's coast, was it worth all the risks to attempt to run to Dunmore's fleet?

The Lure of Loyalism

In 1779, British Army Commander in Chief Sir Henry Clinton expanded upon Lord Dunmore's proclamation with one of his own. He wrote, from Philipsburg Manor north of New York City,

"I do most strictly forbid any person to sell, or claim right over, any Negro the property of a Rebel, who may take refuge with any part of this army: And I do promise to every Negro who shall desert the Rebel Standard, full security to follow within these lines any occupation which he may think proper."

Like Dunmore's, the Philipsburg Proclamation only applied to those who had been owned by "rebels." But it reinforced the idea that the British were an ally for enslaved people of African descent and it did not require them to be able to bear arms for King George III.

Choosing to side with the British could offer many rewards for people of African descent. For free and enslaved skilled workers and craftsmen — blacksmiths, carpenters, seamstresses, and more — traveling with the British could mean steady pay and a chance to earn a living. More generally, for the enslaved, it offered the chance to gain, or fight for, their freedom. And some believed that a British victory might even bring about the complete end of slavery in the American colonies. While many Revolutionaries seemed to be committed slaveowners,

news had traveled several years earlier of a court case in England in which an enslaved man had been able to secure his freedom. For enslaved people, the war might be a chance to claim vengeance against their owners while standing up for themselves.

An American Alternative

The British were not the only ones to provide hope to free and enslaved men and women of African descent. The very ideals of the American Revolution suggested a better future might be possible. If the Revolutionaries truly believed that all men were born free and equal, and that governments drew their power from the consent of the governed, then perhaps those ideas would be applied to people of African descent, both enslaved and free, as well. But one question loomed large: Did the Revolutionaries want them?

Men of African descent had long participated in **militias** for the defense of towns and colonies, particularly in the North. When the Revolutionary War first broke out in Massachusetts in 1775, men like Peter Salem, Salem Poor, and Prince Estabrook fought for the Revolutionaries. But in 1775, the Continental Congress decreed that people of African descent were unwelcome in the newly formed Continental Army. Men of African descent who were already in service began **petitioning** General George Washington to change this recruitment policy. It's likely that their pleas, and evidence of their good service, as well as news of Dunmore's Proclamation in Virginia and a shortage of men, caused the change in policy that followed: beginning in January 1776, free men of African descent who had already been serving were allowed to continue in the Continental Army. Many of the army's regiments from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states were integrated throughout the eight years of the Revolutionary War with men of African descent serving alongside Native American and white men. However, soldiers of color were not allowed to be officers.

People of African descent also had to grapple with the fact that many Revolutionaries, including primary author of the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson, first President of the Continental Congress Peyton Randolph, and Commander in Chief of the Continental Army General George Washington, were slaveowners. But beyond the contradiction in ideals versus practices, there were incentives for enslaved and free people to fight. Many — though not all — enslaved men were offered their freedom in exchange for their service, either substituting for their owners or — in the case of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment in 1778 — getting their freedom outright. Soldiers of African descent who fought on the side of the American Revolutionaries, like *Finding Freedom's* Andrew, were also offered pay, military **pensions**, and even land grants for their service.

Ultimately, some 5,000 – 8,000 men of African descent served with the Continental Army and additional numbers in militias and on the sea, while still others, including women and children, served as camp followers. Supporting the British and their Loyalist allies were approximately 15,000 – 20,000 men of African descent as soldiers and laborers, with — like the American Revolutionaries — others serving in other support duties and as camp followers. In perhaps one of the great ironies of the Revolutionary War, though people of African descent faced each other on opposite sides of the battlefield, many of them were fighting for the same goals of freedom and equality. They just had faith in different allies to get them there.