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The War in the South

Scott Stephenson: When you walked into this Gallery and were suddenly confronted by two mounted Loyalist dragoons, these were Americans willing to fight and kill for the King. This Gallery takes you south, where the fighting intensified after 1778. Now, at this point in the Revolutionary War, a stalemate of sorts had developed in the north while the British continued to occupy New York City. They couldn't control much of the countryside, but neither the Continental Army nor the British Army could actually knock one another out. So in 1778, British commanders turned their attention to the American South for two reasons. First, they believe that they might be able to mobilize large populations of enslaved people of African descent with offers of freedom. They also believe that this was a region that was home to more Loyalists, loyal American British colonists who would fight for the King.

Look for a large brightly-colored wall that says, "Liberty and Slavery in Occupied Charleston." You'll see a small rectangular case with objects in it. Now, on either end of this case, there are small crescent-shaped badges with the words "Liberty" on them. These are emblems worn on the caps of American soldiers fighting for the Revolutionary cause. In the center is a replica of an original brand used by the Drayton family of South Carolina to mark the enslaved people whom they owned. These objects reflect the central paradox of the American Revolution. Could American slavery and American freedom exist side-by-side? The Revolutionary War did not solve the contradiction of a country founded on the proposition that "all men are created equal," in which some people were held in bondage.

But the Revolutionary War did offer opportunities for enslaved people to free themselves and prompted many Americans to reconsider the very institution of slavery. As you move through this Gallery, you can explore this through a tableau called "Sometimes Freedom Wear a Red Coat." There, you'll learn about five real people of African descent and the ways in which they tried to secure their freedom and independence during the Revolutionary War in Virginia in 1781. You may notice the glass doors that lead out to the atrium, but you're not done yet. Make a hard right before those glass doors and view our second object theater, which takes you from the siege of Yorktown through the end of the Revolutionary War and its aftermath. Beyond that theater, the story continues.