

## African American Freedom and Community, 1780-1813

This unit explores the various ways that people of African descent pushed to end slavery and demand equal rights in the years following the Revolutionary War. Focusing on the story of James Forten in Philadelphia, students will be able to understand the challenges facing people of African descent and their efforts to enact change.

### MATERIALS

**Big Idea 3:** African American Freedom and Community, 1780-1813

**Object:** Shackles, Museum of the American Revolution (Navigate to the section *Becoming Revolutionaries* and then the *Declaration of Independence*. The shackles can be found in the section *The Promise of Equality: African Americans*) <https://museumvirtualltour.org/>

**Worksheet:** In the Words of Forten

**Worksheet:** Interview Elizabeth Freeman

**Worksheet:** Take Action!

**Primary Source:** An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780 [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/pennst01.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp)

**Primary Source:** George Washington to Tobias Lear, 1791 <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-08-02-0062>

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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

- Explore the various ways that people of African descent challenged the promises of the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”
- Consider the impact of the Revolutionary War on the lives and opportunities of people of African descent.
- Discover how James Forten confronted the inequalities faced by people of African descent.
- Consider how they can enact changes within their own communities today.

### PROCEDURES

#### Engagement, Option 1 (5-10 minutes)

##### PETITION

Ask students what it means to petition. Why would anyone want to petition someone or something? Discuss with students if there is anything in their school rules that they would petition?

**EXTEND:** Pick 4 issues that students came up with and assign a corner of the room for each issue. Have students move to the corner of the room based on which issue they would consider petitioning. In their corners, have students justify their choice and explain their position, presenting their argument to the class afterward.

#### Engagement, Option 2 (10-15 minutes)

##### OBJECT OBSERVATION: SHACKLES

**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.

**Teacher preparation:** Prepare to project or display the object Shackles.

Ask students to describe the object (shape, size, color) and then guess what the object is (many students might think the object is a pair of glasses).

Engage students in a conversation around the following questions:

- What might this object have meant to those opposing slavery after the Revolutionary War?
- How can we use objects, like this one, to better understand history?

#### Development, Option 1 (30-40 minutes)

##### IN THE WORDS OF FORTEN

**Teacher Preparation:** Review Big Idea 3: African American Freedom

and Community, 1780-1813 and print enough copies for students or ensure they have working internet access and devices to read Big Idea 3. Prepare copies of the In the Words of Forten worksheet.

Start by engaging students in a conversation around the following questions:

- Why was it easier for James Forten to make his voice heard than it was for many other Black Philadelphians?
- Is this true of business leaders today?

Then, give students time to complete the worksheet In the Words of Forten, individually or in small groups. Afterwards, have students reflect on what issues were most important to James Forten. Have students use the excerpts to justify their answers.

**EXTEND:** Have students create a word cloud on the actual words of James Forten using the quotes provided.

## Development, Option 2 (35-40 minutes)

### INTERVIEW ELIZABETH FREEMAN

**Teacher preparation:** Review Big Idea 3: African American Freedom and Community, 1780-1813 and print enough copies for each student or ensure that they have internet access and devices to read Big Idea 3. Prepare copies of the Interview Elizabeth Freeman worksheet.

Engage students in a conversation around the following question:

- How do you think hearing the words in the Massachusetts State Constitution impacted Elizabeth Freeman's desire to take charge of her life?

## EXTENSIONS/ ADAPTATIONS

### ANONYMOUSLY

Ask students why they believe that James Forten wrote as "A Man of Colour" rather than James Forten? How would being a successful businessman have influenced his decision? What are some reasons you might consider writing something anonymously?

### BEING FREE IN 1790

What did being a free person of African descent mean in each of the original 13 states in the year 1790? Have students pick one state (or have them pair up with another student). Have students research what it meant to be a free person of African descent in their specific state. What rights did they have? Were they able to vote? Have students present their findings to the class.

Then, individually or in groups, allow students to complete the worksheet. Have them present their observations to the class.

**EXTEND:** Play the first-person theatrical performance on Elizabeth Freeman found on the Museum of the American Revolution's website. Afterwards, ask students how watching the performance enhanced their understanding of the life of Elizabeth Freeman.

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/meet-elizabeth-freeman-performance>

## Culmination

### TAKE ACTION!

**Teacher preparation:** Prepare copies of the Take Action worksheet. Have students pick or assign them one of the following people to research. Have students focus on the actions their person took to solve the issues or challenges they were up against. After they have completed the worksheet, have them present their findings to the class. Hang up the Take Action worksheet around the room or have students create illustrated posters for this purpose using the information from the worksheet.

- Prince Hall
- James Armistead Lafayette
- Belinda
- Elizabeth Freeman
- Brom
- Benjamin Banneker
- Prince Whipple
- Quock Walker
- Reverend Peter Williams
- Henry Highland Garnet
- Paul Cuffe
- John Brown Russwurm
- Anthony Benezet
- Richard Allen

### GRADUAL ABOLITION LAWS

Ask students why they think states chose to gradually eliminate slavery rather than immediately eliminate it. Then assign students one of the original 13 states to research how these laws differed in each state. In addition, have students consider how free and enslaved people of African descent might have viewed these laws.

### GRADUAL ABOLITION IN PENNSYLVANIA

After reading Big Idea 3: African American Freedom and Community, 1780-1813 assign students to research how the "Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery" was received in Pennsylvania and the new nation. How did enslavers, even George Washington, get around the law using the text from section 10 of the document? What did the letter from George Washington to his Executive Secretary Tobias Lear reveal about Washington's intentions?

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-08-02-0062>

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