



African Americans' Quest for Freedom during the Revolutionary War

Central issue, problem, or question: This lesson explores the question posed by abolitionist leader and former slave Frederick Douglass in his 1852 speech: "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Although Douglass argued that slaves had little to celebrate, this lesson will show that many enslaved African Americans liberated themselves or earned their freedom by participating in the Revolutionary War.

Significance: This lesson focuses on the experiences of two New Jersey slaves, Samuel Sutphen and Titus, who would later call himself Col. Tye. Like many slaves throughout the colonies, Titus escaped his master and fought for the cause of liberty by joining British and loyalist troops. Sutphen, by contrast, sought to earn his freedom by serving as a substitute for his master in the New Jersey militia.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies:
Standard 6.4 (United States and New Jersey History). **Middle School: E-1** (Discuss the background and major issues of the American Revolution); **E-4** (Explain New Jersey's critical role in the Revolution). **High School: E-2** (Analyze the social and economic impact of the Revolutionary War); **E-6** (Analyze New Jersey's role in the American Revolution).

Objectives: After reading primary source documents and learning about the wartime experiences of Samuel Sutphen and Col. Tye, students will be able to:

- Identify the reasons why these two men made very different decisions in pursuit of their freedom.
- Explain how the American Revolution affected the lives of slaves.
- Explore how revolutionary ideals and African American participation in the revolution affected the institution of slavery in the early national period.

Duration: Two or three 45-minute class periods plus a homework assignment.

Abstract: This lesson requires students to evaluate the choices made by (and available to) slaves during the American Revolution. Middle school students will read primary source documents, and based on those and other sources, will create a fictional journal entry from the perspective of an African American soldier. High school students will debate whether African Americans should have

fought for the revolutionaries or for the British. Then they will write an essay on whether (and how) the American Revolution helped liberate the nation's slaves.

Sources

Secondary Sources

Graham Russell Hodges online lecture: "The Black American Revolution," July 2003; available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "African Americans" section.

Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison, 1997).

Frances D. Pingeon, *Blacks in the Revolutionary Era*, New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience 14 (Trenton, 1975).
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/secondarySources/Blacks.pdf>

Clement Alexander Price, ed. *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey* (Newark, 1980).

William Schleicher and Susan Winter, "Patriot and Slave: The Samuel Sutphen Story", *New Jersey Heritage* 1 (Winter 2002), 31-43.

The Republican Rebellion, program 4, *New Jersey Legacy* television series, co-produced by the New Jersey Historical Commission and New Jersey Network, 1997, videocassette.

Primary Sources

John Corlies' Ad for Runaway Slave Titus, a.k.a. Col. Tye, 12 November 1775.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc1.pdf>

Samuel Sutphen's Pension Application, 26 May 1834.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc2.pdf>

David Forman to William Livingston, 9 June 1780.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc3.pdf>

Newspaper Reports on Col. Tye, June 1780.
[http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/
documents/africanAmericansDoc4.pdf](http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc4.pdf)

Negro Prime's Petition to the New Jersey Legislature, 1786.
[http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/
documents/africanAmericansDoc5.pdf](http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc5.pdf)

An Act to Prevent the Importation of Slaves into the State of New-Jersey, and to Authorize the Manumission of Them Under Certain Restrictions, and to Prevent the Abuse of Slaves, 2 March 1786.
[http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/
documents/africanAmericansDoc6.pdf](http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc6.pdf)

Materials: Teachers will require copies of primary source documents listed above.

Background: The contradiction between the institution of slavery and the ideal of liberty troubled many leading revolutionaries, including New Jersey's governor William Livingston, but most were unwilling to dismantle the institution. The confusion of war, nevertheless, provided many slaves with the opportunity to free themselves. Some, like Titus, ran away to the British lines. As Col. Tye, he would later terrorize New Jersey revolutionaries by leading a series of raids in Monmouth County. The British encouraged this behavior; in November 1775 Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation urging slaves and indentured servants to escape rebel masters and join the Crown forces. Other fugitives joined Indian tribes to fight their former masters or founded separate communities in unsettled areas. Historians estimate that tens of thousands of slaves escaped bondage during the American Revolution. In states like New Jersey that saw significant fighting, the proportion of runaways was higher than in others.

Despite George Washington's initial reluctance to enlist African Americans, roughly 5,000 free and enslaved black soldiers served in the Continental Army or local militias. Like those who fought alongside the British, the slaves who fought with the revolutionaries sought to gain their freedom. Samuel Sutphen, for example, served as his master, Casper Berger's, substitute in the New Jersey militia, because Berger promised to free him in return for this service. Sutphen fulfilled his obligation, but Berger reneged on his promise. Sutphen would not gain his freedom until twenty years later.

After the fighting stopped, thousands of black loyalists left the new nation, emigrating to Nova Scotia or to other British colonies far away from their former masters. African Americans who remained in the United States, particularly those who lived north of Delaware, found their lives changed dramatically. After the war, reformers organized manumission and anti-slavery societies in every

state from Massachusetts to Virginia. Even before the war's end, politicians began considering legislation to prohibit the importation of slaves and to abolish the institution of slavery. Vermont abolished slavery in its 1777 constitution, and in 1780, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a gradual emancipation law. Even southern states like Virginia and North Carolina passed laws designed to facilitate manumissions. New Jersey's road to abolition began with a 1786 law that banned the foreign slave trade. That same year, two prominent politicians, Joseph Bloomfield and Elias Boudinot, founded the New Jersey Society for the Abolition of Slavery. More important, perhaps, the end of the war witnessed the creation of substantial free black communities that would continue to press for equal rights and the emancipation of African Americans who remained enslaved.

Key Words:

Bondage

Indentured Servants

Manumission

Emancipation

Lord Dunmore's Proclamation

Continental Army

Militia

Middle School Procedures

The teacher should begin the lesson by asking students a series of questions about African Americans and the Revolutionary War:

- Why did American revolutionaries fight a war for independence from Britain? What were their goals? What were their ideals? (Liberty should be prominent among these ideals.)
- What did liberty mean to the revolutionaries? Did it mean that they believed that slaves should be freed?
- Did the institution of slavery contradict the sentiments professed in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

The teacher should then introduce the students to Col. Tye and Samuel Sutphen in a lecture based on Graham Hodges' online lecture. Dr. Hodges' lecture is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "African Americans" section.

Then the teacher should show the segment from the video "The Republican Rebellion" that features Sutphen. This video segment is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "African Americans" section.

Afterwards, the teacher should assign the students to groups of 3 or 4. Each group will be given copies of primary sources about Colonel Tye or Samuel Sutphen:

- John Corlies' Ad for Runaway Slave Titus, a.k.a. Col. Tye.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc1.pdf>
- Samuel Sutphen's Pension Application.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc2.pdf>
- David Forman to William Livingston.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc3.pdf>
- Newspaper Reports on Col. Tye.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc4.pdf>

These groups will answer a series of guided reading questions and record their answers. Some questions the teacher might ask are:

- Which side of the conflict did Tye/Sutphen decide to support during the Revolutionary War?
- What were the reasons for his choice?
- What did Tye/Sutphen do during the war?
- Did Tye/Sutphen gain his freedom due to the Revolutionary War?

The teacher should then pair one student who studied the Tye documents with another student who studied Sutphen document. These students will tell each other about their soldier's life and his participation in the American Revolution. Afterwards the teacher should ask the larger class to discuss the question: If you were a slave during the American Revolution, which side of the conflict would you have supported?

The teacher should then ask students to create a fictional diary entry from the standpoint of an African American soldier during the American Revolution. This assignment requires students to choose sides in the conflict and to explain their reasons for fighting. Before handing in this assignment, students should have the opportunity to share their journal entries with the rest of the class.

High School Procedures

The teacher should begin this lesson with a short lecture (based on Graham Hodges' online lecture) on the topic of African Americans' participation in the American Revolution. Dr. Hodges' lecture is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "African Americans" section.

The lecture should focus on the options available to slaves (the status of the vast majority African Americans at the time) and introduce students to Samuel Sutphen and Col. Tye. The teacher should show the segment from the video "The Republican Rebellion" that features Sutphen. The video clip is available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "African Americans" section.

Afterwards, the teacher should assign the students to two groups to read and analyze:

- John Corlies' Ad for Runaway Slave Titus, a.k.a. Col. Tye.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc1.pdf>
- Samuel Sutphen's Pension Application.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc2.pdf>
- David Forman to William Livingston.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc3.pdf>
- Newspaper Reports on Col. Tye.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc4.pdf>

After the students have read and discussed the primary source documents, the teacher should assign each group to one side of a debate on the question:

- Should African Americans have fought with the British or with the revolutionaries during the War for Independence? Why?

The groups (or the teacher) should select one student or several students to present the arguments for each group.

Afterwards, the teacher should ask students to evaluate the debate:

"In your opinion, which side made the strongest case? What were the limits on the options available to slaves during the American Revolution?"

The teacher should then assign students to read two more documents:

- Negro Prime's Petition to the New Jersey Legislature.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc5.pdf>
- An Act to Prevent the Importation of Slaves into the State of New-Jersey, and to Authorize the Manumission of Them Under Certain Restrictions, and to Prevent the Abuse of Slaves.
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/africanAmericans/documents/africanAmericansDoc6.pdf>

Based on these documents and their in-class work, students will write an essay on the question: Did the American Revolution liberate enslaved African

Americans? Explain the reasons behind your answer. Use assigned primary source documents as evidence for your argument.

Connections: Along with the lesson on Quakers, this lesson could be part of a larger unit on the origins of the anti-slavery movement in the United States. Alternately, teachers might use the material in this lesson to talk about the aftermath of the Revolutionary War.

Instructional Technology: Teachers might wish to show part 2 of the WGBH video series, *Africans in America*, which focuses on the period of the American Revolution. Students might also conduct further research on the topic of African American participation in the American Revolution using their school or local library or online resources (see secondary sources listed above). Some students might use an overhead or LCD projector for their presentations.