

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Enslaved Americans: Seeking Freedom

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in a Grade 4-8. The ConSource lesson “**Black Refugees: David George**” is a possible follow-up to this lesson.

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students imagine that they are enslaved to George Washington at his Mount Vernon plantation in the spring of 1781. British vessels have sailed up the Potomac River, and a British army is getting closer and closer. After assuming the persona of a specific person, each student considers whether to hazard an escape to the British, hoping to be set free. Aware that one member in the class has been designated a slave informant, students deliberate secretly in small groups. To make calculated decisions, they consider information that did in fact circulate in slave quarters: the 1772 Somerset decision outlawing slavery in England; Lord Dunmore’s 1775 promise of freedom to slaves who joined the British; General Clinton’s 1779 proclamation that those who fled from patriot masters would find work with the British Army, although this time freedom was not actually promised. They weigh their options and consider the risks. Students learn that those who were enslaved, like generals in the army, made strategic choices during the Revolutionary War.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

*Students will be able to explain the meaning and importance of the Somerset decision, Dunmore's Proclamation, and Clinton's Proclamation.

*Students will be able to explain why the military circumstances in 1781 presented a special opportunity for enslaved people at Mount Vernon.

*Students will be able to cite the risks of hazarding an escape at that time.

*Students will be able to cite the possible rewards of fleeing to the British.

*Students will be able to cite risks of *not* fleeing at that time.

*Students will be able to explain how the Revolutionary War presented both dangers and opportunities for the enslaved population.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: British Offers of Freedom?

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 10-15 minutes
2. Preparation for the simulation: 10-15 minutes
3. Students, as enslaved people at Mount Vernon, debate their options: 15-20 minutes
4. Presentation of historical outcome: 5-10 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

A: British Offers of Freedom?

Classroom Handouts (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

B: Should I Flee to the British?

C. Historical Outcome: Those Who Fled

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: British Offers of Freedom?** Go over instructions on that sheet. Sometime before the class lesson, teacher secretly recruits one student to act as an informer.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 10-15 minutes

Go over the Somerset decision, Dunmore's Proclamation, and Clinton's Proclamation.

Note the wording on Clinton's. Ask the class: *Did he actually promise "freedom"? What did he promise? Do you think enslaved people might interpret that as meaning that they would be free if they joined the British?*

Possibly discuss how such news, so relevant to enslaved people, might have spread. Possibilities:

*"House slaves" heard masters talk about it, and then told others.

*Slaves accompanied masters when traveling. When they did, they stayed in slave quarters at those plantations. When they returned home, they would spread whatever news they had heard there.

*Slaves sometimes carried messages to nearby plantations, where they might hear the news. A slave might even work for a short time on a neighboring plantation, and then carry news back home.

Finally, to prepare for the simulation, students share their simulated character sketches.

2. PREPERATION FOR THE SIMULATION: 10-15 minutes

Teacher introduces the simulation: *You will now discuss your options. If you decide you will try to escape, make a plan: how and when will you flee? Often, when we do simulations, all discussions are out in the open, but not this time. I have chosen one student in the class to be a slave informer. (Explain: slave informers hope to gain approval and special privileges by passing information to their overseers.) If my informer hears your plans, she or he will tell me – and you will be punished! So this time, you will meet only in small groups. For the purposes of this lesson, members of each group will be related to each other or close and trustworthy friends. Discuss your plans quietly within your group, with people whom you trust.*

Distribute **Handout B: Should I Flee to the British?** Go over the "things to consider" on that sheet.

3. STUDENTS, AS ENSLAVED PEOPLE AT MOUNT VERNON, DEBATE THEIR OPTIONS: 15-20 minutes

Break into small groups and let them at it! With a few minutes left, bring the class back together. Then spring it on them: *"Okay, informer, what can your report to me?"* The informer announces what she/he has heard. If potential escapees are revealed, announce the punishment they might have received if the simulation were real.

Other groups then announce their decisions.

4. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 5-10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C. Historical Outcome: Those Who Fled.** If students will be following this up with the ConSource lesson **"Black Refugees: David George,"** introduce that lesson now.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Research and report on Harry Washington, a slave who escaped from George Washington in 1776, in response to Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. (This is not the "Harry" who fled in 1781.)
2. Enslaved men who escaped and joined the British were formed into a group called the "Ethiopian Regiment." That company was soon disbanded, but the British then organized former slaves who fought on their side into the "Company of Black Pioneers," sometimes called simply the "Black Pioneers." Research and report on these black British soldiers.
3. Some slaves in Northern states found freedom by serving as soldiers in the Continental Army. (Although there weren't as many slaves in the North as in the South, slavery was still legal there.) During the Revolutionary War, when a man was drafted into the army, he didn't necessarily have to serve. Instead, he could just find somebody to take his place—and that person could be one of his slaves. Typically, he promised that whoever took his place would be free at the end of the war. In Rhode Island's First Regiment, all privates were African-American, although the officers were white. This unit fought bravely and was highly respected. Research and report on Rhode Island's First Regiment.
4. After the war, escaped slaves who had fought with the British didn't dare stay in the United States, where they would be forced back into slavery. They went to other places, such as Canada or Great Britain. Some eventually wound up in a British colony in Africa that was created specifically for people who had once been enslaved: Sierra Leone. Research and report on that colony. (This is discussed briefly in the ConSource lesson "**Black Refugees: David George.**")
5. George Washington freed his slaves when he died, but Thomas Jefferson did not. Like Washington, Jefferson knew that slavery was wrong—so why didn't he free the people he enslaved? Hint: Remember that in Washington's will, he actually provided money to help his slaves once they were free. Did Jefferson have the money to do that?

Vocabulary for Enslaved Americans: Seeking Freedom

draft — ordered by the government to serve in the army

dysentery — an intestinal infection that causes terrible and bloody diarrhea. Dysentery is spread by poor sanitation, where human waste mixes with drinking water.

enslaved — forced to become a slave

foreman — a worker who is in charge of other workers

fortnight — two weeks

heir — When someone dies, the person who receives that person's money or property is their heir.

intelligence — news, something that is true. (A related meaning: someone who knows what is true is said to be intelligent or have intelligence.)

"likely" — In the list of the 17 people who fled from Mount Vernon, this probably meant that the person was likely to be a good worker.

occupation — what kind of work a person does

prevalent — common, happening often

proclamation — an official announcement about something that is really important

smallpox — a infection that brings on a high fever and blisters that appear all over the body, often leaving scars on the skin, and sometimes causing death

typhoid fever — a serious disease caused by contaminated food or water

typhus — a serious infection carried to humans by infected pests, like lice, fleas, or mice

Handout A: British Offers of Freedom?

Before the Revolutionary War, rebellious colonists complained that they were “slaves” to Great Britain. True, they were being taxed against their will, but that didn’t make them “slaves.” Meanwhile, almost half-a-million African-Americans really *were* enslaved to white masters. For these men and women, the call for “liberty” had a special ring.

In 1772, a court in London decided that slavery was illegal in England. James Somerset, an American slave, had been taken by his master to England. Once there, Somerset escaped. His master eventually caught him, but Somerset had made friends in England, and they took his case to court. Somerset’s lawyers argued that slavery might be legal in the colonies, but there was no law in England that made slavery legal there. The judge, Lord Mansfield, agreed and set Somerset free. After that, any slave from America who came to England would be set free.

News of the Somerset case made its way to America. Enslaved people heard about it, and quickly the word spread from plantation to plantation: If you can somehow reach the shores of England, you will be free! Some slaves tried to do this. Angry masters then placed advertisements in newspapers about slaves who had escaped. One said that a number of slaves might be on their way to England “where they imagine they will be free (a notion now too prevalent among the Negroes).” Another said that a runaway named Bacchus would probably try “to board a vessel for Great Britain . . . from the knowledge he has of the late determination of Sommerset’s Case.”

Three years later, in 1775, men and women who were enslaved learned that they didn’t have to go all the way to England to find freedom. War had broken out by then, and the British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to any slave who agreed to “join his Majesty’s Troops” in the fight against the Americans. Again, word spread quickly. “The Negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence [news] among themselves. It will run several hundreds of miles in a week or fortnight,” two masters from Georgia told to John Adams. One newspaper reported:

“Since Lord Dunmore’s proclamation made its appearance here, it is said he has recruited his army, in the counties of Princess Anne and Norfolk, to the amount of about 2000 men, including his black regiment, which is thought to be a considerable part, with this inscription on their uniforms: *Liberty to slaves.*”

“Liberty to slaves”—it must have sounded so wonderful. Unfortunately, many who escaped became ill with diseases common among Eighteenth Century soldiers and sailors who lived in crowded, unhealthy conditions: dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox. Although free, many soon died.

Years later, in 1779, the British General Henry Clinton issued another proclamation. “Every Negro who shall desert the rebels will have full security to follow within these lines, any occupation which he shall think proper.” Once again, news spread quickly from the slave quarters and fields of one plantation to the next.

In this lesson, you will imagine that you are one of over 300 people enslaved to George Washington at his Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia in 1781. British ships have just sailed up the nearby Potomac River, and some 5,000 British soldiers, under General Cornwallis, are only about 100 miles away and headed toward Mount Vernon. You learn about all this through word of mouth, just as

you have learned before about the Somerset decision, Dunmore's Proclamation, and Clinton's Proclamation. Hoping to become free, you are wondering if you should try to escape and run towards the British ships or the British Army.

In preparation, create a character who is enslaved at Mount Vernon. Give yourself a name. How old are you? Are you male or female? Are you married or not, with or without children, with or without living parents, etc.

Then state briefly why you think you MIGHT have a chance to become free by escaping to the British. In class, you will learn more about the dangers you could face.

Handout B: Should I Flee to the British?

Things to consider:

*Stories are told about slaves from nearby plantations who tried to escape. Some have been captured. Others were never seen again, and nobody knows if they are dead, free, or enslaved somewhere else. There are rumors that some died of smallpox on board crowded British ships.

*Clinton never actually used the word “freedom,” but he did promise that those who escaped could choose their occupation. If you escape to the British, might you become free, or at least better off?

*The master of Mount Vernon, George Washington, is Commander-in-Chief of the Continental (American) Army.

*There are stiff penalties for trying to escape. Sometimes slaves are punished not only by whipping—they are sold to another master, and might never see their families again. Worse yet, they might wind up in the hands of a slave trader who will take them to the West Indies, where owners are said to work their slaves to death.

*British forces were driven from the South in 1776, but now they are winning many battles and coming closer to Mount Vernon. Some patriot masters in the path of the British Army have fled their own homes, leaving slaves on those plantations to fend for themselves.

*If the British take over Mount Vernon, nobody knows whether they will free the slaves they find there or sell them to the West Indies.

As you weigh your options, you might consider: for each possible course of action, what is the best possible outcome? The worst? How likely is each one?

Each student will decide upon his or her own course of action. Even within your group, individuals can decide differently. Those who wish to run can try to team up with students from other groups who hope to do the same, but *beware of that one informer, whom the teacher has secretly selected. If this person learns you are planning to escape, he or she will tell the master and you will likely be whipped or sold away.*

The character you have created might become free — or you could be whipped or sold and separated from your family. Enslaved people faced a life-and-death decision. Imagine that *your* life is now at stake! You could

Handout C. Historical Outcome: Those Who Fled

We have no way of knowing the exact numbers, but historians think that around 15,000 slaves escaped at one time or another during the Revolutionary War. We do know that at least seventeen Mount Vernon slaves did flee to the British in 1781. Here is [the list of runaways](#) that Lund Washington, the Mount Vernon forman, sent to George Washington on April 30, 1781:

Peter, an old man.

Lewis, an old man.

Frank, an old man.

Frederick, a man about 45 years old; an overseer and valuable.

Gunner, a man about 45 years old; valuable, a brick maker.

Harry, a man about 40 years old, valuable, a horseler.

Tom, a man about 20 years old, stout and Healthy.

Sambo, a man about 20 years old, stout and healthy.

Thomas, a lad about 17 years old, house servant.

Peter, a lad about 15 years old, very likely.

Stephen, a man about 20 years old, a cooper by trade.

James, a man about 25 years old, stout and healthy.

Watty, a man about 20 years old, by trade a weaver.

Daniel, a man about 19 years old, very likely.

Lucy, a woman about 20 years old.

Esther, a woman about 18 years old.

Deborah, a woman about 16 years old.

We don't know what happened to all of these slaves, but we do know about some. Frederick, Frank, Gunner, Sambo, and Thomas were soon captured in Philadelphia, while Lucy and Esther were captured after the surrender at Yorktown.

Some of the others were probably among the 3,000 escaped slaves who sailed with the British from New York to Canada at the close of the war. We suspect this because on April 28, 1783, shortly before those ships sailed, Washington wrote to a friend: "Some of my own slaves may probably be in New York but I am unable to give you their descriptions. Their names, being so easily changed, will be fruitless to give you. If by chance you should come at the knowledge of any of them, I will be much obliged by your securing them, so that I may obtain them again." We have no record that his friend was able to find any of those who had escaped.

In time, Washington realized that slavery was terrible. When he died in 1799, he freed his slaves. But how would these people, once freed, make a living? Washington instructed his heirs to provide education for the children, give job training for those who could work, and support those too old to work. To get enough money for all this, Washington instructed his heirs to sell of some of his land.