

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Black Refugees: David George

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in a **Grade 4-8**. This lesson is a natural follow-up to the ConSource lesson “**Enslaved Americans: Seeking Freedom.**”

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 play the role of David George, an enslaved African-American who tried three times to escape, became a preacher while still in captivity, and eventually found freedom by escaping to the British. After the war George went to Canada, but his trials were not over. A mob of former soldiers raided his house and threatened him with bodily harm if he continued to preach. Students are asked: Would you still preach in the face of such threats? They learn the outcome: “I stayed and preached, and the next day they came a beat me with sticks, and drove me into the swamp.” George had escaped from slavery, but not from bigotry. He then hears of Sierra Leone, a free settlement in Africa. Students are asked: Should David George and his family journey across the Atlantic to this distant land, not knowing what they might encounter there? Students learn that the road to freedom was not so smooth. While the Revolutionary War opened cracks in the institution of slavery, the quest for real freedom continued. The lesson is a natural follow-up to the ConSource lesson “Enslaved Americans: Seeking Freedom.”

LESSON OBJECTIVES

*By encountering the personal experiences of one enslaved African-American, students will be able to understand the extreme brutality of slavery.

*Students will be able to explain that while any enslaved person might wish to escape, a successful flight to freedom depends in part on favorable circumstances.

*Students will be able to reveal, through this narrative, the bigotry that continues long after slavery.

*Students will be able to explain the appeal of Sierra Leone to those who had once been enslaved, but also its potential hazards.

*By personally engaging with the question of whether to brave the dangers of a cross-Atlantic journey to a new and experimental settlement, students will be better able to empathize with people confronting such monumental decisions.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: David George — from Slavery to Freedom

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 5-10 minutes
2. Presentation of George's troubles in Canada: 5-10 minutes
3. Students, as David George, consider whether to continue preaching: 10 minutes
4. Presentation: Sierra Leone: 5-10 minutes
5. Students, as David George, consider whether to move to Sierra Leone: 10 minutes
6. Presentation of historical outcome and wrap up discussion: 5-10 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

- A. David George — from Slavery to Freedom

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

- B. Preaching in Canada
- C. Sierra Leone—The Promised Land?
- D. Historical Outcome: Life in Sierra Leone

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: David George — from Slavery to Freedom**. Go over instructions on that sheet.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 5-10 minutes

Review questions: His parents? His treatment as a slave? His escape? His service with the British? Where did he go after the war? Ask students to compare the climate in Virginia, where he grew up, to the climate in Canada.

2. PRESENTATION GEORGE'S TROUBLES IN CANADA: 5-10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout B. Preaching in Canada**.

3. STUDENTS, AS DAVID GEORGE, CONSIDER WHETHER TO CONTINUE PREACHING: 10 minutes

This can be done as a class, in breakout groups, or by individuals writing their responses.

4. PRESENTATION: SIERRA LEONE: 5-10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C. Sierra Leone—The Promised Land?**

5. STUDENTS, AS DAVID GEORGE, CONSIDER MOVING TO SIERRA LEONE: 10 minutes

Students discuss the pros and cons of moving to Sierra Leone, and in the end make their decision.

6. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME AND WRAP UP DISCUSSION: 5-10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout D. Historical Outcome—Life in Sierra Leone**.

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

Visit the amazing website [“Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People.”](http://blackloyalist.com/cdc/index.htm) This site has all sorts of information about former slaves who found freedom with the British. (If you are reading this in hard copy, here is the address: <http://blackloyalist.com/cdc/index.htm>)

On the left menu, click “Our Story.” This produces a menu where you can find out more about many different topics related to African-Americans in the Revolutionary War.

Click “People” on the left menu for many short biographies. You will find David George, Thomas Peters, and John Clarkson there. Try clicking on other names to learn about what they did.

Best of all, click “Documents” on the left menu. On that page, look under “Personal Accounts.” If you click on “George’s Life,” you will find David George’s full story. In 1793 two fellow ministers had long conversations with him, wrote down what he said, and put it into a long article for a magazine: “An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone in Africa, Given by Himself.” That is what you can read here.

Take a look at what others said, in their own words. “King’s Memoirs” is the story of Boston King, another former slave who found freedom with the British, moved to Canada, and finally found a home in Sierra Leone. We know about his life because he too wrote a long article for a magazine: “Memoirs of the Life of BOSTON KING, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself.”

Everything you find on this “Documents” page is a primary source, what people said or wrote at the time. Until recently, these sources were really hard to find. Now, here they are on the Internet. This is *real* history. Everything we know about the past comes from primary sources like these.

Vocabulary for “Black Refugees: David George”

abolitionist — a person who works to end a practice they think is terrible, like slavery

bigotry — the habit of deciding that someone is bad or stupid or weak or somehow worse than others without knowing them or having any proof

enslaved — forced to become a slave

prejudice — having a bad opinion of people, without knowing them, because their skin color or religion or dress or language or something else is different

recruit (noun) — a person who has just joined the army (or navy or some other group)

recruit (verb) — to try to get a person to join a group, such as the army

refugee — a person who has fled a country because of things that threaten his or her life, like wars or slavery or a hurricane

Handout A: David George — from Slavery to Freedom

During the Revolutionary War, several thousand slaves fled from their patriot masters to join the British side, hoping to be free. One of these individuals was David George.

George's mother, Judith, and his father, John, had been captured in Africa and carried across the sea to America. They had nine children who, at birth, became the "property" of a man in Virginia. George called him "a very bad man to Negroes." George saw his sister Patty "so whipped that her back" looked like "it would rot." He saw his brother hung by his wrists from a cherry-tree and given 500 lashes after trying to escape. David was also whipped, but his "greatest grief" was seeing his mother, the master's cook, kneel and beg for mercy whenever the master beat her because he didn't like a meal she prepared.

Three times David George escaped from this terrible place. Three times his master's sons tracked him down. Finally, he was purchased by a patriot who traded with Creek Indians and ran a large trading post. David George said his new master was "very kind," and even though he was still enslaved, life changed. He married a woman named Phillis, who was part African-American and part Native American. In the woods or fields where slaves gathered, he listened to black preachers who came to the trading post. Before long, David George became a preacher himself.

Early in 1779, David, Phillis, and their young children had an opportunity to escape—this time for good. When the King's soldiers set up camp near the trading post, David and Phillis and their children took flight. They had heard that the British would welcome them if they escaped, and they wouldn't be treated as slaves. The family followed the troops when they marched off to Savannah, a major city that the British held. There, David became a butcher and sold meat to the British while Phillis washed the soldiers' clothes.

When the British lost the Revolutionary War, many people who had supported them—both white and black Loyalists—could not safely stay in the United States. They became refugees. About 500 hundred whites and a handful of blacks crowded onto one boat that sailed toward Nova Scotia, in Canada. This was British territory. On board were David George and his family. After 22 days, they landed in a strange, snow-covered world. This would be their new home.

QUESTION:

David George escaped from slavery several times, but only one of his escapes was successful. What was different about his final escape?

Handout B: Preaching in Canada

In Canada, David George and other black refugees faced hardships. They arrived just as winter did. Snow fell. Cold winds came through the walls of a hut a refugee built in a hurry. Food was often scarce. And prejudice made lives much worse. A stranger might not apologize after bumping into a black woman. That was hurtful, but other insults hurt more. They made day-to-day survival harder. The new black loyalists were given the worst, rocky parcels to farm. Whites received the best. Black people who earned a wage were paid less than whites.

Prejudice was very dangerous too. As always, David George preached and inspired and comforted the people who came to hear him. Before long 50 people or so were arriving each evening. Most were dark-skinned, but a few white people came, too. This alarmed some, including a mob of former soldiers who wrecked George's house and attacked houses belonging to his black neighbors. Still he preached. Unless he quit, some told him, they would beat him bloody.

If you were David George, would you go on preaching? Would you risk it? As you think this over, remember George's treatment during slavery—how he was whipped, and what happened to his brother and sister and mother.

Handout C. Sierra Leone—The Promised Land?

Here, in David George's own words, is what happened: "I stayed and preached, and the next day they came and beat me with sticks, and drove me into the swamp." He and his family moved to a new place, Birchtown, but never again could he feel safe. Although life in Canada was hard for all Loyalist refugees, it was hardest for any, like George, who had dark skin. But how could they ever escape the bigotry that haunted their race? Where on earth could they go?

In October of 1791, an Englishman named John Clarkson arrived in Canada. The Sierra Leone Company had sent him to tell Canadian blacks about a "free settlement on the coast of Africa." Those who signed up would receive their own land, and they wouldn't even have to pay for it. The company would pay. The people who started this company were abolitionists and they realized that freeing slaves was not enough. Former slaves could use some help in starting life anew.

John Clarkson spread the word about the new project. So did Thomas Peters, a refugee who had been born in Africa and brought to America as a slave. Peters had just returned from London, where he presented a petition from his fellow refugees who were being treated unfairly in Canada. In London, the Sierra Leone Company asked Thomas Peters to work alongside Clarkson.

Many who heard were interested, but they also knew that the venture was risky. They would have to cross the same rough seas that their ancestors had when they were shackled together below decks and taken from Africa. Would storms toss the ship about—or even sink it? What would they find on landing? They talked among themselves of strange African fevers that could kill or leopards that might steal a baby in the middle of the night and of hostile Africans who might attack. They worried that they might be cheated out of good land once again, the way they had in Canada.

SO: Would you make the journey if you were David George? Weigh the risks carefully. Your life depends on your answer.

Handout D. Historical Outcome—Life in Sierra Leone

David George signed up. He also handed John Clarkson a list of other refugees who might be interested. In January of 1792, 1,200 passengers boarded ships that would make a seven-week crossing. David George, Thomas Peters, and John Clarkson were on those ships, which were battered by winter gales and monstrous waves.

“There was great joy to see the land,” David George said afterwards. The Sierra Leone Company had appointed John Clarkson to be the governor of new colony. He was trusted by almost all the people who had followed him to this land. Under his direction, the new colonists cleared thick jungle. For hours at a time they swung their machetes, muscles aching. But no matter how hard they worked, there was never enough food. Many suffered from the strain and from constant fevers and illness.

A few months after they arrived, Thomas Peters became ill and died. Then John Clarkson became ill and sailed back to London. Before leaving, he promised he would return—but he couldn’t keep the promise because the Sierra Leone Company fired him. Clarkson had treated the colonists fairly. The governor who took his place at the end of 1792 was nothing like him. He wanted to rule over the black colonists, no questions asked. In September of 1794, things grew worse. Seven French ships came into the harbor. There was a war going on between France and Britain; now Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, became France’s target. Cannon ball after cannon ball smashed whatever they hit. Fires broke out. People tended to the injured as smoke billowed around them. When French sailors disembarked, they looted everywhere and everything, even the clothes they stripped off people’s backs.

The new governor wanted black settlers to share the costs of rebuilding. Worse still, he insisted they sign loyalty oaths. After all they had suffered and done, this was an unbearable insult. The settlers sent a petition to the Sierra Leone Company in London, demanding change. These letters were ignored. David George and the others had been told that land would be free. Never would there be taxes or fees or rents. Now they were told to pay fees. Some rebelled and decided that they would make their own laws and elect their own governor. They armed themselves. British troops put the rebellion down, killing some at once, hanging others later, and banishing more. Freetown might not be as free as the rebels had wanted, but not all who came from Canada joined their rebellion. For these people, Freetown was now their home.

Sierra Leone grew. Blacks freed in Jamaica came as settlers. So did people the British liberated from the slave ships they captured. For many, including David George, it was a refuge. He preached freely. He prospered. Never again would he call another man “master.” Here he was his own master.