

Black Women and the American Revolution



Frontispiece from Phillis Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, 1773. (Gilder Lehrman Institute)

Black Women and the American Revolution

BY ALYSHA BUTLER (CREATED 2021)

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GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One or two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW

This lesson is designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. It enables students to understand, summarize, and evaluate primary source documents of historical significance. Students will learn and practice the skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual source materials.

This lesson is designed to help guide students through the exploration of primary and secondary sources that detail the lives of three Black women (two enslaved, one free) who seized the opportunity during the American Revolution to either pursue and secure their own freedom or speak out against the institution of slavery. The lesson will be based upon student analysis of a variety of sources giving Black women visibility in an era where they are rarely discussed in classrooms.

Students will review and discuss the lives and accomplishments of three Black women during the American Revolution and explain how the American Revolution provided them with opportunities to both secure their freedom and speak out against the institution of slavery, furthering American realization of the principles of the American Revolution.

Students completing this lesson will

- Use secondary sources to illuminate primary sources
- Draw inferences from primary sources
- Interpret artistic work as a historical source
- Explain how Black women used the American Revolution as an opportunity to pursue their own freedom
- Identify historical figures who spoke out against the institution of slavery
- Explain how the Black women featured in this lesson helped the young republic better live up to the ideals of the Revolution

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did Black women pursue their own liberty during the American Revolution?
- How did Black women's pursuit of liberty during the Revolution help the young republic better live up to the ideals of the American Revolution?
- Why is the story of Black women and the American Revolution essential to understanding the founding era?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3; Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

MATERIALS

- Runaway Slave Advertisement, 1783
 - o Background: Excerpt from Zach Sanders, “British Occupation of New York City,” *Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*, George Washington’s Mount Vernon, mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/british-occupation-of-new-york-city/.
 - o “Two Guineas Reward,” *Rivington’s New-York Gazetteer and Universal Advertiser*, December 17, 1783, in *Freedom on the Move*, Cornell University, <https://fotm.link/e7WB3jYRTxCKsYt8imZm5k>.
- Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster,” 1778
 - o Introduction based on James G. Basker, ed., *Slavery and Abolition in the Founding Era: Black and White Voices* (New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2021), p. 5.
 - o Excerpt from Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster,” 1778, in James G. Basker, ed., *Slavery and Abolition in the Founding Era: Black and White Voices* (New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2021), p. 7.
- Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman and the Massachusetts Constitution
 - o Introduction based on “Elizabeth Freeman (‘Mumbet’)” in “The Legal End of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts*, Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/features/endofslavery/end_MA.
 - o Excerpt from the Massachusetts Constitution, 1780, in Bills & Laws, 193rd General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, malegislature.gov/laws/constitution.
- Mary Perth and the Decision to Leave the United States
 - o Excerpts from “Mary Perth,” *People, Slavery and Remembrance: A Guide to Sites, Museums, and Memory*, slaveryandremembrance.org/people/person/?id=PP042.
- Activity Sheets
 - o Chart of Historical Figures
 - o Socratic Seminar Discussion Questions
 - o Writing Reflection

PROCEDURE

Note: This lesson will have a deeper meaning if students are familiar with the events that led to the American Revolution and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence. For example, students should be familiar with the major concepts of freedom, equality, and natural rights in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence.

1. Motivational Activity: Black Women's Resistance during the American Revolution
 - a. Distribute the first activity sheet, which provides some background on Revolutionary New York as context for the primary source, a runaway slave advertisement from 1783. You may choose to share read the Background with the class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading the background aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to serve as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
 - b. Students will independently or with a partner circle three to five words or phrases in the text that best describe New York during the American Revolution. (For example, students could circle "permeable," "porous," and "confusion.") Allow them to share the words they circled with their partner or the whole class. Ask the class to identify any trends or similarities in the words they selected. Ask your students to write one sentence using their own words to describe New York's climate during the war.
 - c. Introduce the runaway slave advertisement in the context of the time it was written. To capture your students' attention and ensure a seamless transition into the activity, you could start by discussing how the atmosphere in New York City during the American Revolution would be conducive for enslaved people to run.
 - d. You may read it with the class or have students read it independently or in groups. They may complete the corresponding questions independently or in pairs or groups.
 - e. Discuss the students' responses and explain to students that some enslaved men and women used the war to secure their freedom and speak against the institution of slavery in different ways. While there are many stories describing the contributions and accomplishments of enslaved and free Black men during the war, little time is dedicated to exploring the contributions and accomplishments of Black women.
2. Distribute the handouts on Phillis Wheatley, Elizabeth Freeman, and Mary Perth and the chart.
3. You have several options for completing the readings, the chart, and the responses to the prompts:
 - a. You may divide the students into groups of three for the readings or assign the readings independently.
 - b. You can assign each member of the group one historical figure from the readings. After each member has read about their figure and completed that section of the chart, they will teach their group about their historical figure. Your students will use the information shared by their group members to complete their own copy of the chart. The chart is intended to be a guide to help readers organize content from multiple sources so that they will be able to answer the discussion prompts.
 - c. If the lesson will be conducted over two days, you could assign the chart in class and assign the discussion prompts for homework or complete one or two of the historical figures together in class along with their corresponding discussion prompts and reserve one figure for homework.
 - d. When reviewing your students' answers, discuss each historical figure and review the students' answers to the prompts before moving on to the next figure.
5. After completing the chart and the discussion prompts, you have the option to engage in a Socratic seminar with the students, asking a series of open-ended questions regarding Black women and the Revolutionary War and encouraging free responses from the class. Your students must center their responses on the readings from the lesson. Organize your class in a circle. It is strongly recommended that you first establish model examples of

how to answer questions and remind students that this activity is a dialogue and not a debate. You can continue by asking clarifying questions if needed in a manner that requires your students to support their response to the question with evidence from the texts. Encourage your students to build off of their peers' responses.

6. If you do not have time for the Socratic seminar, you may assign several questions for homework and use them as an opener for the next class. If you have a learning management system, place several of the questions on the classroom discussion board and require students to answer questions and comment on one of their peer's responses for homework.

ASSESSMENT AND EXTENSIONS

As an assessment or extension activity, you have the option to assign a written reflection activity to complete in class or as homework. Have your students identify a current social justice movement and explain how lessons learned from the actions of one of the historical figures studied in this lesson would influence how the student would contribute to that social movement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

BLACK WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA

by Ashley Robertson Preston, Howard University

“Give me liberty or give me death!” These were the words of Patrick Henry during a March 23, 1775, speech on the rights of colonies. Although the powerful demand was meant to be applied to colonists who were seeking freedom from the British, African Americans were equally concerned about liberty. The American Revolution energized them in their fight for freedom, as they challenged the status of slavery in the courts, through various means of self-emancipation, and as participants in the war. Although they are often overshadowed by male-focused narratives of the period, African American women were a part of the freedom struggle, as they sought to apply the rhetoric of freedom to their own lives. They challenged anti-Black racism on every hand, resisting in the ways that they could.

Prior to the American Revolution, there were many instances of African Americans defying slavery. They led riots and plotted insurrections, all in attempts to control their destinies, whether it was the Slave Rebellion of New York in 1712 or the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739. There were limits to freedom even for those who were not in bondage. In places like Virginia, free Blacks were not allowed to vote and because of increasingly hostile conditions they made up only 5 percent of the African American population in the state by the mid-eighteenth century.¹ The Black population of New England was no more than 2 to 3 percent, but despite these low numbers, freed communities were often threatened with the possibility of being re-enslaved. In Massachusetts women were especially targeted, and if they gave birth to children out of wedlock, they could possibly face a period of servitude.² Because of these conditions, the call for liberty and the Revolutionary War spirit resonated with both enslaved and free women and they responded in various ways.

Phillis Wheatley, the first African American to publish a book of poems, was enslaved for much of her early career before being manumitted in 1774. Within her poetry she addressed topics including her reality of being stolen from the continent of Africa and the conflict between the Revolutionary War's call for freedom and the institution of slavery. In the elegy “On the Death of General Wooster” although Wheatley is patriotic and supportive of America fighting for freedom, the work takes a turn “to remarks on a people being denied theirs.”³ Wheatley's ability to insert the Black freedom struggle into her poetry was an extraordinary feat at the time.

There were also many enslaved women who escaped during the Revolutionary era. As the colonists prioritized the war, enslaved people often experienced more autonomy and some women recognized that it was a favorable time to run away. In her book *Freedom from Bondage*, Karen Cook Bell examines the multiple attempts of Black women freedom seekers. One of those women who escaped was Jenny and she did so with her two-year-old daughter Winney, leaving a Virginia farm in 1776 with the knowledge that reaching the lines of the British army would bring emancipation.⁴ African American women also challenged the institution of slavery through the courts, bringing about freedom suits to petition for liberation. In Massachusetts, Elizabeth Freeman (also known as Mum Bett), became the first African American woman to win her freedom as a result of a lawsuit after her 1781 court case. Ultimately the case set the precedent for the abolition of slavery in the state. In some instances, African American women provided critical support for patriots during the war. After being hired out by her master to serve as a cook for soldiers at Valley Forge, Hannah was able to purchase her freedom by 1780.⁵

From the time that they stepped foot into the Americas, enslaved women resisted their conditions and their desire for liberation took many forms. Although the Revolutionary War was said to be between the colonists and the British, African American women embraced its ideals of liberty and the pursuit of happiness as their very own and they worked to actualize them.

Ashley Robertson Preston is an assistant professor of history at Howard University. She is the author of Mary McLeod Bethune in Florida: Bringing Justice to the Sunshine State (2015).

¹ Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 35.

² Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light*, 41.

³ Mukhtar Ali Isani and Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster”: An Unpublished Poem by Phillis Wheatley,” *Modern Philology* 77, no. 3 (1980): 307.

⁴ Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and Their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67.

⁵ Bell, *Running from Bondage*, 79.

Runaway Slave Advertisement, 1783

Background

On August 22, 1776, New Yorkers heard the cannon blasts of the Battle of Long Island. Five days later, an expeditionary force of over 32,000 British regulars, 10 ships of line, 20 frigates, and 170 transports defeated Washington's troops at Kip's Bay and invaded Manhattan Island. Thus began seven years of British occupation in the City of New York. . . . British occupation was also characterized by permeable boundaries that allowed a thriving black market trading operation. With family members, often women, in particular, evading checkpoints and traveling frequently from New Jersey to the city, authorities had significant difficulty containing this illicit trade. . . . African Americans, too, took advantage of the porous boundaries to better their circumstances. Enslaved people belonging to residents of New York City took advantage of the confusion to obtain their freedom, often slipping across to New Jersey and elsewhere via the same illicit trade routes. As a result of Lord Dunmore's proclamation and similar offers granting freedom to all able-bodied enslaved people who left patriot masters to join the British side, they had great incentive to risk a crossing. . . . Enslaved people on both sides also used the presence of the British Army as leverage in negotiating for better conditions and treatment with their masters. Historians speculate that the wartime situation likely contributed to New York becoming one of the last northern states to pass emancipation laws.

Source: Zach Sanders, "British Occupation of New York City," The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington, George Washington's Mount Vernon, mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia.

Directions

Complete the tasks below based on the description of what it was like in New York during the American Revolution, as depicted in the background above.

1. Circle and list three to five words or phrases that best describe New York during the American Revolution.
2. What trends or similarities can you see in the words you selected that describe New York's climate during the war?
3. Write one sentence using your own words to describe New York's climate during the war.

Primary Source

TWO GUINEAS REWARD. RUN-Away from the Subscriber, the 24th day of November last, a likely Negro Woman, named Sarah, brought up in the family of Mr. Deycay, deceased, where she went by the name of Clarendon, about thirty years of age; she is pretty tall and slender made, her complexion being very black, has a remarkable wart on her right eye-lash. Had on when she went away, a callicoe short gown, black skirt, and a black hat trimmed with edging, but as she has a great number of good cloaths, which she carried away with her, it is impossible to describe the dress she may now be in. It is supposed, that she is kept concealed somewhere in this city, she having a great many relations and acquaintances here. This is to forewarn all persons from harbouring her, as they will answer it at their peril. Any person who will apprehend the said Negro Woman, and secure her so that her mistress may have her again, shall receive the above reward, paid them by me, living at No. 385, Murray-Street. ELIZABETH MILLER. N. B. All Masters of vessels are forewarned not to harbour or carry off the said Negro Woman.

Source: "Two Guineas Reward," Rivington's New-York Gazetteer and Universal Advertiser, December 17, 1783, in Freedom on the Move, Cornell University, freedomonthemove.org.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Questions

1. Who is the enslaved person identified in the advertisement and how are they described? What does the language used reveal about the way enslaved people were viewed at the time?

2.
 - a. According to the text, why might it be difficult to locate and apprehend the runaway? What insight does this give you into the networks and connections that existed among enslaved and free Blacks in northern urban cities during the Revolutionary era?

 - b. How might the confusion caused by the American Revolutionary War empower or hinder these networks?

3. To what degree was the slaveholder concerned about the enslaved person's ability to leave New York? How might the confusion caused by the American Revolutionary War impact their ability to leave New York?

4. To what extent do you think the enslaved person's decision to run away and success in evading capture would be impacted by gender? Explain your answer.

Phillis Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster,” 1778

Background

Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753–1784) was the first African American woman writer to be published. Born in Africa, Phillis was captured and sold into slavery as a child. She was purchased by John Wheatley of Boston in 1761. Wheatley proved herself a prodigy, rapidly mastering English and learning Latin, history, and literature, while also publishing poems in New England periodicals from the age of thirteen. By 1773 she was something of a celebrity, publishing *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in London and making a literary tour to England that summer, moving John Wheatley to free her from slavery. She was a supporter of American independence and wrote to George Washington and other important figures. Wheatley’s life, sadly, wound down to a tragic and premature ending. She endured a difficult marriage, poverty, and illness before dying in 1784, scarcely aged 30.

Primary Source

On the Death of General Wooster (1778) (Excerpt)

. . . Permit, great power while yet my fleeting breath
 And Spirits wander to the verge of Death—
 Permit me yet to paint fair freedom’s charms
 For her the Continent shines bright in arms
 By thy high will, celestial prize she came—
 For her we combat on the field of fame
 Without her presence vice maintains full sway
 And social love and virtue wing their way
 O still propitious be thy guardian care
 And lead Columbia thro’ the toils of war.
 With thine own hand conduct them and defend
 And bring the dreadful contest to an end—
 For ever grateful let them live to thee
 And keep them ever virtuous, brave, and free—
 But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
 Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind—
 While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace
 And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?
 Let virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers
 Be victory our’s, and generous freedom theirs. . . .



Phillis Wheatley, ca. 1773, from the frontispiece of her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06154)

Source for background and poem: James G. Basker, ed., *Slavery and Abolition in the Founding Era: Black and White Voices* (New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2021), pp. 5–7.

Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman and the Massachusetts Constitution

Background

Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman (ca. 1744–1829) was one of the first Black women to win freedom in Massachusetts. The event, according to family lore, that prompted Mumbet to sue for her freedom occurred when the mistress of the house, Mrs. Ashley, attempted to strike Mumbet’s sister, Lizzy, with a heated kitchen shovel. Mumbet blocked the blow, but her arm was injured, and she never regained its full use. Others insist that Mumbet sought her freedom after hearing the Declaration of Independence spoken, and the people of Berkshire County then adopted Mumbet’s cause to test the constitutionality of slavery following the passage of the new state constitution. “Bett” was one of the first enslaved African Americans to be set free under the new Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. This case marked the beginning of a group of “freedom suits” that would ultimately lead the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to outlaw slavery.



Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman, 1811, by Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick. (Massachusetts Historical Society)

Source: “The Legal End of Slavery in Massachusetts,” African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts, Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/features/endofslavery/end_MA.

Primary Source

A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1780 (Excerpt)

Article I.

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness. [Annulled by Amendments, Art. CVI.]

Source: Massachusetts Constitution, Bills & Laws, 193rd General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, malegislature.gov/laws/constitution.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Prompts

1. Underline the phrases and words from Article I of the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution that best embody the principles of the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence.
2. Explain how the outbreak of the American Revolution possibly influenced Freeman's decision to sue for her freedom.
3. Explain how Freeman's legal team used the ideals of the American Revolution to argue for her freedom.
4. Describe the long-term effects Freeman's court case had on the institution of slavery in Massachusetts.
5. Evaluate the following statement, "Elizabeth Freeman's legal victory helped Massachusetts better realize the principles of the American Revolution." To what extent do you agree or disagree? Explain.

Mary Perth and the Decision to Leave the United States

Background

Mary Perth (1740–1813) was enslaved in Norfolk, Virginia, by John Willoughby. In early 1776, Mary became separated from the Willoughby family during the chaos of war, but still legally remained enslaved. Mary ended up in New York and lived on the island of Manhattan where she likely worked for the British army as a domestic laborer. In 1781 Mary heard that the British had surrendered in Yorktown, Virginia, effectively ending the war. She knew she needed to find a way to leave New York before she was discovered by the authorities or the Willoughby family.

Luckily Mary and her husband were able to evacuate to the British territory of Nova Scotia in Canada. Although they were legally free for the first time in their lives, they did not have equal rights in Nova Scotia. They were unable to vote or serve on juries. When they had the opportunity to relocate to Freetown, Sierra Leone, Mary and her husband seized it. Hard work and determination enabled them to build a two-story house and farm on Waters Street in Freetown. Sadly, Mary's husband died shortly after. Left to care for herself, she sold the farm and converted her home into a boarding house for travelers arriving in Freetown. In 1794, a French fleet attacked and raided Freetown, forcing many settlers to take flight. Mary remained, however, and helped protect many of the settlers. After the French departed, the governor recognized Mary's loyalty and heroic acts during the crisis. The governor offered Mary a paid position as the governor's housekeeper, which required her to care for and teach African-born children in the governor's residence.



Freetown, Sierra Leone, ca. 1856 in J. Leighton Wilson, Western African: Its History, Condition, and Prospects (New York, 1856), p. 418. (Wikipedia)

Source: Based on "Mary Perth," People, Slavery and Remembrance: A Guide to Sites, Museums, and Memory, Colonial Williamsburg, slaveryandremembrance.org.

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Prompts

1. Explain how Mary Perth eventually secured her freedom.
2. How does the story of how Mary Perth secured her freedom provide more insight into the runaway advertisement?
3. Explain how Perth's perspective on the British would differ from that of her patriot counterparts.
4. Explain how Perth's experience supports the importance of incorporating multiple voices and perspectives from the American Revolution.
5. Explain what happened to Perth after the war and determine to what extent she was able to secure the type of freedom that was the central theme of the war.

Chart of Historical Figures

Historical Figure	Where did they live?	What are two unique details about their background?	How did they obtain their freedom?	How did they challenge the institution of slavery?	How does their experience impact your understanding of Black women and the American Revolution?
Phillis Wheatley					
Elizabeth Freeman					
Mary Perth					

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Socratic Seminar Discussion Questions

Directions

Be prepared to answer the following questions in a classroom dialogue regarding Black women and the American Revolution. Please be mindful that all answers must be supported by evidence from the texts.

1. How did learning about these women challenge or reaffirm what you knew about slavery in the colonies during the American Revolution?
2. How did learning about these women challenge or reaffirm what you knew about the American Revolution?
3. Which of these women's stories resonated with you most and why?
4. To what extent can the American Revolution be understood if their experiences are omitted from the narrative?
5. Should women like Elizabeth Freeman and Phillis Wheatley be considered patriots? Why or why not?
6. How did the American Revolution provide opportunities for freedom in different ways for each of the women?
7. To what extent should these women also be celebrated as American Revolutionary heroes?

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Writing Reflection

Directions

Respond to the prompt in a one-page written reflection. All answers must provide at least three facts from any one of Phillis Wheatley's, Elizabeth Freeman's, or Mary Perth's life during the American Revolution.

Prompt

Identify one major social movement of today that interests you. Discuss the goals and strategies of the movement and explain how lessons learned from Wheatley, Freeman, or Perth's life could help influence how you would support the movement and why.