

People Not Property Lesson Plan
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“When Freedom Wore a Red Coat” - Paths to Freedom

Overview:

Students will use primary and secondary sources found on the People Not Property website to analyze the choices enslaved men and women had when contemplating self-liberation. The lesson focuses on the time period of the American Revolution and proclamations made by the British to encourage escape to the British army. Students will engage in historical empathy by creating first-person narratives of enslaved men and women while using and analyzing historical evidence.

Objectives:

Enslaved people did not passively accept their condition. Resistance was a constant aspect of their lives. Some resisted in large and dramatic ways, while others carried out smaller, more-covert actions. In this lesson, students will contemplate the choices enslaved men and women had at the time of the American Revolution. Students will familiarize themselves with the stories and people who chose to escape to the British or the patriot army. By investigating the lives of these people, students will make a human connection with the past.

Guiding Questions:

Why is it important to study the individual stories of enslaved people?

Why do we know so little about enslaved people of the North?

What does it mean to resist?

What can we learn about how men and women resisted slavery by studying escape to the British army during the American Revolution?

Class Periods:

Two to three, 50-minute periods

Grade Levels:

8-12

Teaching Hard History Key Concepts:

1. Slavery, which Europeans practiced before they invaded the Americas, was important to all colonial powers and existed in all North American colonies.

5. Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.

10. By knowing how to read and interpret the sources that tell the story of American slavery, we gain insight into some of what enslaving and enslaved Americans aspired to, created, thought and desired.

Teacher Background:

During the Revolutionary War, freedom, liberty and equality were words frequently heard in the British colonies. When enslaved people heard the promise, “All men are created equal,” many dreamed of a country where these Enlightenment ideals might be realized. Joining the Revolutionary War effort seemed like a natural way to ensure freedom. However, as early as 1639, colonies restricted Black citizens from serving in the military. Fearing slave rebellions or the killing of enslavers, colonies like Virginia and Massachusetts had laws outlawing Black military service, gun ownership and combat fighting. Even with the laws on the books, Black men fought in the French and Indian War, and in the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Under George Washington’s command and the leadership of the Continental Congress, by 1775 Blacks were banned from the Continental Army. The reasoning was that Blacks might use guns against their masters, that enslaved men might run away to join the army, and that laborers were needed in the fields to harvest crops. However, due to manpower shortages, in January 1777, Washington changed his mind and allowed free Blacks to enlist in the Continental Army. Around 1778, in New England, enslaved men were allowed to serve in the army in place of their master, with the promise of freedom after three years of service. In November 1775, John Murray, Lord Dunmore and royal governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation stating that any able-bodied enslaved man could join the British army and receive freedom at the end of the contest and a British victory. On June 30, 1779, British General Henry Clinton issued an even more extensive proclamation. The Philipsburg Proclamation was meant to weaken the patriots by denying them their main source of labor. Clinton proclaimed that once an enslaved person reached British lines, their status as property ended. They were no longer the property of anyone else and fighting in the army was not a requirement for freedom. However, any captured Black person fighting with the patriots would be sold most likely to the West Indies. It has been estimated that approximately 5,000 to 8,000 Black soldiers served on the side of the Continental Army and around 20,000 joined the British redcoats. In 1783, 4,000 liberated enslaved men and women left New York with the British army to be resettled in Nova Scotia.

Teacher Preparation:

- Become familiar with the People Not Property website.
<https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/>
- Watch the introductory video.
- Find and bookmark the areas of the website to be used in the lesson, especially the section “Choosing Resistance.”
- Copy or share student handouts.

Procedures:

- Bell ringer:
 - Ask students to define resistance in their own words. Have them brainstorm ways that enslaved people resisted enslavement.
- Students can turn and talk to a partner about their responses to the question, or the teacher can hold an all-class discussion.
- Continue the lesson by asking questions to engage students in thinking about how enslaved people resisted their condition and why it is important to study their stories.
 - Provide students with the following handout and talk about the difference between covert and overt resistance: [Resistance Handout](#)
 - As students explore the site, have them divide examples of resistance into categories of overt and covert. Have students give their rationale for each choice. This could be done on a Google Doc or on a sheet of notebook paper.
- Introduce students to the “Making Choices” section of the People Not Property website.
 - <https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/making-choices.php>
- Have students complete the “What Could They Do?” activity.
 - <https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/what-could-they-do.php>
- Navigate to the “Running Away” section of the site.
 - <https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/running-away.php>
- Divide students into four groups and have each group review one of the ads.
 - Students should record information such as this:
 - Name, age, date, reward amount, occupation/skill, injuries/scars and any other information the student finds to be interesting
- Each group should consider what people like Norton Minors, Ben, Sobiner and Nell would have to think about before attempting an escape, given what they know about the realities of enslavement. Report back to the class the group’s observations.
- What would you take with you if you were planning to escape?
- Where would you go?
- How would you get away?
- What means would you use in your escape?

*****Note*****

If time is limited, the lesson could stop at this point.

Explain to students that self-liberation was common during the American Revolution. Give a minilecture on the background based on the Teacher Background.

Distribute handout: What Do the Proclamations Actually Say?

https://moar-media-production.s3.amazonaws.com/343b6851-12db-407a-bca0-950188d196b4/Documents_101520_FindingFreedom_FFTG_Worksheets-Unit6bFINAL.pdf

Conduct a close reading of the documents. This can be done in the four groups or as a class. The students should summarize the source in their own words.

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/analyze-a-written-document-intermediate>

Have students explore the “Stories about Seizing Opportunity” section of the People Not Property site. Take notes on important points and facts on the following:

Imagine what an enslaved person would have to consider before deciding to flee to the British army.

<https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/stories-about-seizing-opportunity.php>

Assessment: Give Students Choice

The People Not Property site describes the story of Bridget. Her fate has been lost to history. Have students write the ending of what they think might have happened to Bridget based on the facts given.

<https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/seizing-opportunity.php>

Write five to seven journal entries from the perspective of an enslaved man or woman who fled to join the British or patriot army.

- You joined Titus “Colonel Tye’s” Ethiopian Regiment
- Or
- You were one of the men who hid with Felix Cuff in Devil’s Den. Cuff joined the patriot army.

<https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/stories-about-seizing-opportunity.php>

Using the “Stories about Using the Law” section of the site, have students choose one of the stories and write an editorial to a newspaper in favor of the person’s appeal to the courts for freedom.

<https://peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/stories-about-using-the-law.php#5>