

Liberty for All: Voices from the American Revolution

The Declaration of Independence

Original Document:

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 — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Modified Document:

We [believe] that all men are created equal, that [God gives them] certain [fundamental] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are [established] among Men, [and get their power from] the consent of the governed.

Main Idea in Your Own Words:



Discuss:

How might this statement have inspired less powerful members of colonial society (including African Americans, women, and men without property)? _____

What might these groups have wanted from the Revolution? _____



Abigail Adams Reminds John Adams to “Remember the Ladies”

In this famous letter, Abigail Adams, already planning for the war's successful conclusion, admonishes her husband John Adams to consider inequality between men and women when developing laws for a newly independent nation.

Braintree March 31 1776

I long to hear that you have declared [independence]—and by the way, in the new laws which I suppose you [will need] to make, I [hope] you w[ill] remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.

Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.

If particular attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to [start] a rebellion, and will not [obey] any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.



That [men] are naturally tyrannical is a truth thoroughly established . . . but [men who] wish to be happy [voluntarily] give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.

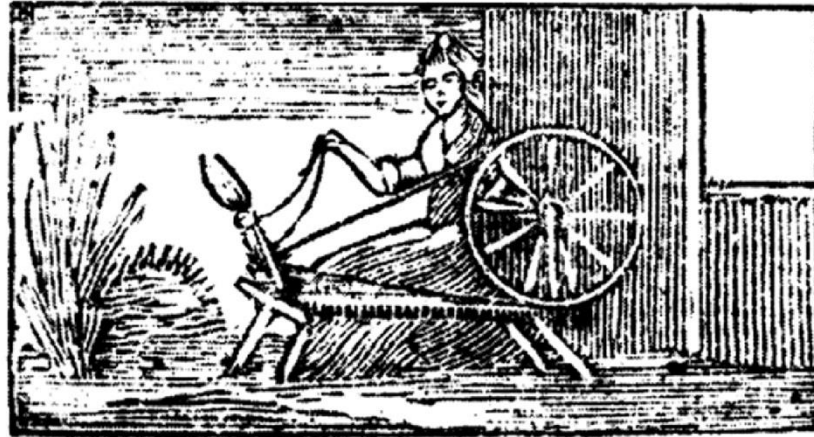
Why then, not [make it impossible for] vicious and lawless [men] to [treat women] with cruelty and indignity . . .

Source: Abigail Adams, "Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776," letter, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, eds. L.H. Butterfield et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), vol 1: 369-371; from Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

NOTE: ASHP has shortened this document and modernized its spelling and punctuation; ASHP's word substitutions appear in brackets.



Massachusetts Women Spin for Liberty



Isaiah Thomas, "Spinner," woodcut, from "Mother Goose's Melody, or Songs for the Cradle," 1794.

In 1767, Britain imposed the Revenue Act (also known as the Townshend Duties) on the colonies; this Act required colonists to pay taxes on goods imported from England. Many colonists responded by forming non-importation agreements, refusing to buy imported goods and urging other colonists to do the same. For women, who could not vote or hold office, non-importation campaigns were a way to participate in colonial politics; many of them publicly gave up drinking tea and began spinning their own yarn, to avoid buying cloth imported from Britain. The following newspaper account describes two of many “spinning bees” that took place in Massachusetts in July 1769.

On July 12th . . . fifty-five true Daughters of Liberty & Industry . . . met at the house of Rev. Mr. Forbes, with thirty -four [spinning] wheels; and from 5 o'clock in the morning, to 7 in the evening picked, carded, and spun [a large amount] of cotton wool...



The next day, and for several [more] days; others [also] affected [by] . . . the cause of Liberty and Industry, but [who] could not leave their families to join their sisters on that day, sent in their [yarn] spun out of their own materials.

July 16. --- Newport [Rhode Island]. July 10. We can assure the public, that spinning is so much encouraged among us, that a lady in town, who is very [wealthy], and who is between 70 and 80 years of age, has within about three weeks become a very good spinner, though she never spun a thread in her life before.

Thus has the love of liberty and [fear] of tyranny, kindled in the [hearts] of old and young, [created] a glorious flame, which will[represent women] of the present time far [into the future].

Source: *New-York Journal*, August 24, 1769.

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A Revolutionary Veteran Describes His Experience



From *The Book of Trades, or Library of the Useful Arts*, 1807, American Social History Project.

Massachusetts shoemaker Sylvanus Wood served the Patriot cause in the American Revolution in a variety of ways. He fought as a Minuteman at the battle of Lexington and Concord, served three tours of duty in the Continental army, and made shoes for Continental soldiers. After the Revolution Wood became a farmer, and in 1830 he submitted an application (excerpted below) for a government pension based on his military service.

On the morning of April 18, 1775, Robert Douglass and myself heard the Lexington bell about one hour before day. We concluded that trouble was near. We waited for no man but [hurried] and joined Captain Parker's company at [dawn]. Douglass and myself stood together in the center of the company when the enemy first fired. .



.. I helped carry six dead into the meetinghouse and then set out after the enemy . . .

I was in the [troop] reinforcement on Long Island when we evacuated the island. . . . We marched on and came to a place called Frog's Point. There we had a small brush with the enemy. I received a [bullet] through my left shoulder . . .

[H]aving a chance to make shoes for the army, I bought leather, hired [workers], made shoes, and delivered them for the soldiers. . . .

I sent an application [for a pension] eight or nine years ago to Congress. . . . If I am [ever going to receive money] for service done in the army, I need it now [and so do] my fellow soldiers who have done no more than I have. I think I have been neglected.

Sylvanus Wood, "A Revolutionary Veteran Describes His Experience," HERB: Resources for Teachers, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1654>. John C. Dann, ed., *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6-9.

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James Cannon Urges “Common Sense and a Plain Understanding” in the Pennsylvania Constitution

In 1776, Pennsylvania organized a constitutional convention to write a new state constitution. James Cannon, a radical patriot leader, advised Pennsylvania militia members to be certain to select delegates [representatives] to this convention who would respect the rights and authority of the people.

A government made for the common good should be [created] by men who have no interest besides the common interest of Mankind.

It is the happiness of America that there is no rank above that of freeman existing in it; and much of our future welfare and tranquility will depend on its remaining so forever.

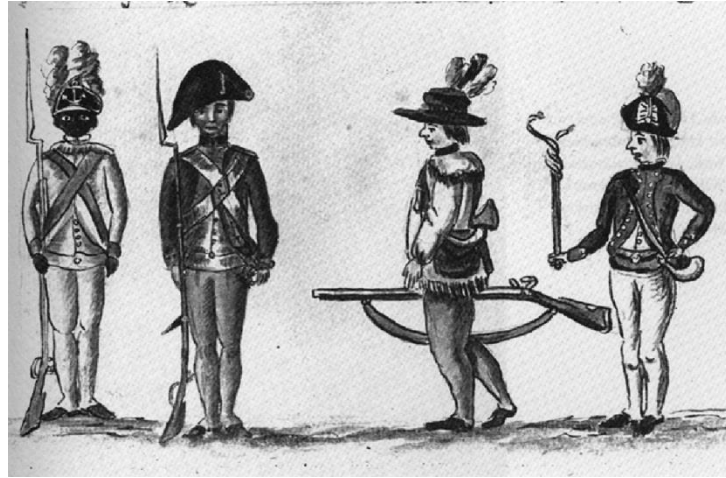
For this reason, great and over-grown rich men will be improper to be trusted, they will [want to create] distinctions in society, because they will [gain] the benefits of all such distinctions. . . .

Honesty, common sense, and a plain understanding . . . are fully equal to the task— men of like passions and interests with ourselves are most likely to frame us a good Constitution. . . .

Source: Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 130.



A Revolutionary Veteran Describes African-American Soldiers



Jean-Baptiste-Antoine DeVerger, "American Foot Soldiers, Yorktown Campaign, 1781," watercolor, 1781.

A white veteran of the revolutionary war, known only as "Dr. Harris," delivered this speech before the Congregational and Presbyterian Anti-Slavery Society in New Hampshire in 1844.

I served in the Revolution, in General Washington's army, three years under one enlistment. . . . Liberty is dear to my heart—I cannot endure the thought, that my countrymen should be slaves.

. . . There was a *black* regiment in the same situation. Yes, a regiment of *negroes*, fighting for *our* liberty and



independence,—not a white man among them but the officers,—stationed in this same dangerous and responsible position.

Had they been unfaithful, or given way before the enemy, all would have been lost. *Three times in [a row]* they were attacked, with most desperate [courage] and fury, by well disciplined and veteran troops, and *three times* they did successfully repel the assault, and thus [protect] our army from capture.

They fought through the war. They were brave, hardy troops. They helped to gain our liberty and independence.

Source: William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855; reprint, New York: Arno, 1968), 128-131.

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Slaves Petition the Massachusetts Legislature

Throughout the revolutionary era, scores of slaves signed petitions that linked their demands for freedom with the cause of American independence. Below is the text of one such petition presented to the Massachusetts legislature on January 13, 1777.

[We understand] that [we] have, in common with all other men, a natural & unalienable right to that freedom, which [God] has [given] equally [to] all and which [we] have never [given up in] any contract or agreement

But [we] were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hand of power, from [our] dearest friends, & some of [us] even torn from the embraces of [our] tender parents . . . & brought [here] to be sold like beasts of burden, & like them condemned to slavery for life—

[We live] among people [believing in] the mild religion of Jesus--people [who understand] the sweets of rational freedom [and who] resent the unjust [efforts] of others to reduce them to a state of bondage & subjection. . . .



Every principle from which America has acted in the course of her unhappy difficulties with Great-Britain, pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of [us].

[We] therefore humbly [beg] your honors, to [consider] this petition, & [pass a law] whereby

[slaves] may be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural right of all men--& their children (who were born in this Land of Liberty) may not be held as slaves after they arrive at the age of twenty one years.

Lancaster Hill

Peter Bess

Brister Slenten

Prince Hall

Jack Purpont (his mark)

Nero Suneto (his mark)

Newport Symner (his mark)

Job Lock

Source: Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, Vol. 1 (1951).

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Petition Worksheet

Historical Perspective (eg. women, white working men, African American): _____

	<p>What actions or activities did the person/people in this document perform during the Revolutionary crisis?</p> <p>**include a <u>quotation</u> from the document to support your answer.</p>	<p>What concerns and/or hopes (if any) are being expressed in this document?</p> <p>**include a quotation from the document to support your answer</p>
Document #1		
Document #2		



Assignment:

Using information from your documents, write a Petition to the 1787 Constitutional Convention that:

- Explains the group's response to the American Revolution (i.e., what they thought and did).
- Argues how members of the group should be treated under the new Constitution.

Your petition will be graded according to the extent that it

- clearly summarizes the main ideas contained in the documents.
- effectively incorporates at least two facts from the documents.
- demonstrates an understanding of how workingmen/women/African Americans contributed to the American Revolution by using at least one example from the documents.
- demonstrates an understanding of how workingmen/women/African Americans used revolutionary ideas about liberty to argue for their own equality by using at least one example from the documents.



Petition to the Constitutional Delegates of the United States of America:

Summer 1787

