Whose Liberty?

Black perspectives on freedom during the American Revolution

8.C.2.2.E "Examine the views of free and enslaved Blacks toward the revolution, including petitions to colonial governments for a ban on slavery and the British recruitment of enslaved Black men in exchange for freedom."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two different ways Black people pursued freedom or rights. Circle a risk or limit connected to each way, then number the ways 1 and 2 so you can compare them.

Different Paths to Freedom

1. In the 1770s, crowds in the American colonies argued that British rule violated their rights. Free and enslaved Black people heard these claims and asked what liberty would mean for them. Their answers were not all the same. Some free Black men fought with Patriot forces, believing independence could protect rights they already had or lead to greater equality. Yet free Black people still faced discrimination, and independence did not promise equal treatment. For enslaved people, liberty could mean something immediate: an end to being owned.

2. Enslaved Black petitioners in Massachusetts took the colonists' language about natural rights to the colonial government. In the early 1770s, they asked lawmakers to end slavery, arguing that they deserved freedom just as other people did. Their petitions exposed a contradiction: how could colonists demand liberty from Britain while keeping people enslaved? A petition offered a way to press that argument without taking up a weapon. It did not, however, guarantee a change in the law. The petitioners wanted the revolution's claims about rights to apply to them too.

3. In 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to enslaved men held by rebel owners if they joined British forces. The offer did not cover everyone enslaved in Virginia. Some men fled plantations to enlist, judging the British offer a more direct path to freedom than Patriot promises. Joining meant danger from fighting, disease, or capture. Other enslaved Black people sought freedom through Patriot service. These different choices did not make the desire for freedom less real. They show how people weighed political ideals against the chances and risks before them.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How might liberty have meant something different to a free Black Patriot and an enslaved Black petitioner?

2. How did the Massachusetts petitioners use the colonists' argument about liberty to challenge slavery?

3. Why might some enslaved men have chosen Lord Dunmore's offer instead of waiting for Patriot promises to bring freedom?

4. Why was Dunmore's offer not a path to freedom for every enslaved person in Virginia?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write five or six sentences for a colonial newspaper comparing two Black responses to the Revolution from the passage. Explain what each person or group hoped to gain, give one risk or limit for each, and end by explaining why they might have made different choices.

ANSWER KEY

Whose Liberty?

GRADE 8 · 8.C.2.2.E

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two different ways Black people pursued freedom or rights. Circle a risk or limit connected to each way, then number the ways 1 and 2 so you can compare them. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How might liberty have meant something different to a free Black Patriot and an enslaved Black petitioner?	**A free Black Patriot might have hoped to protect existing rights or gain equality. An enslaved petitioner sought an end to being owned.**
2	How did the Massachusetts petitioners use the colonists' argument about liberty to challenge slavery?	**They argued that they deserved freedom too, exposing the contradiction between demanding liberty from Britain and keeping people enslaved.**
3	Why might some enslaved men have chosen Lord Dunmore's offer instead of waiting for Patriot promises to bring freedom?	**Dunmore offered eligible men freedom for joining British forces, which could seem more direct than Patriot promises. Joining also carried risks.**
4	Why was Dunmore's offer not a path to freedom for every enslaved person in Virginia?	**His offer applied to enslaved men held by rebel owners who joined British forces, not to everyone enslaved in Virginia.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Enslaved Black petitioners in Massachusetts asked colonial lawmakers to end slavery, using the colonists' own claims about liberty. They hoped those claims would bring them freedom, but a petition could not force lawmakers to act. Some enslaved men chose to join British forces after Lord Dunmore offered freedom to men held by rebels. They hoped to gain freedom sooner, although joining exposed them to fighting, disease, and capture. These people chose different paths because a petition and a British military offer gave them different chances to pursue liberty.

Accept comparisons involving free Black Patriots, enslaved petitioners, or enslaved people seeking freedom through military service. Responses should distinguish a hoped-for gain from a risk or limit and should not imply that Dunmore's offer applied to everyone enslaved.