

Born Free and Equal

Who Got the Revolution's Liberty, 1776–1804

Unit 3 3.6 The Influence of Revolutionary Ideals

“All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights...”

Massachusetts Constitution
Declaration of Rights, Article I, 1780

What the exam expects

In what ways did slavery change in the late 1700s?

Revolutionary ideals led some Americans to call for the abolition of slavery, but only Northern states moved to end it. Black **freedom petitions** used the Patriots' natural-rights arguments, Pennsylvania began **gradual emancipation** in 1780, and the **Quock Walker case** ended slavery in Massachusetts. In the South, slavery kept growing, especially after the 1793 cotton gin made upland cotton profitable.

What was the immediate impact of the American Revolution on women?

The Revolution raised women's standing in civic life but left their legal status unchanged. The **Daughters of Liberty** boycotted British goods, and women raised money and supplies for the army. Afterward, **republican motherhood** gave mothers the job of raising virtuous citizens and justified new schools for girls, yet **coverture** still put a married woman's property in her husband's hands.

How did the American Revolution change who held power in the new state governments?

The Revolution spread political power to white men of modest means. Republican ideals valued merit over birth, and lower **property qualifications** let more farmers and artisans vote and win seats in legislatures that the new **state constitutions** made the strongest branch. Women could vote only in New Jersey, and only until 1807.

Explain how the ideals of the American Revolution influenced France, Haiti, and Latin America.

The claim of equal natural rights in the **Declaration of Independence** inspired revolutions abroad. The **French Revolution** echoed it in 1789, enslaved people in the **Haitian Revolution** claimed it for themselves and founded Haiti, and **Latin American independence movements** followed in the 1810s. At home, the French Revolution split Federalists from Democratic-Republicans in the 1790s.

Don't mix these up

- ✗ "Prince Hall's 1777 freedom petition led to the end of the Atlantic slave trade." Its ideas fed Northern gradual emancipation laws, and the U.S. ban on slave imports came only in 1808 and freed no one.
- ✗ "Many women fought as soldiers in the Continental Army." Most women aided the war by collecting money, food, and medicine or by running farms; disguised soldiers like Deborah Sampson were rare.
- ✗ "Republican motherhood called for women to vote and hold office." It praised women for raising virtuous citizens at home and left politics to men, though New Jersey let some women vote until 1807.

Study list

	What it was	Why it matters
No taxation without representation 1765	The Patriot principle that only the colonists' own elected assemblies could tax them, as the Stamp Act Congress argued against Parliament.	The argument that justified independence also gave Americans who could not vote a case against their own state governments.
Coverture 1700s	The English common-law rule, which Blackstone described in 1765, that a husband's legal identity covered his wife's. He controlled her property and wages, and she generally could not sue or sign contracts.	The new states kept coverture, which is why New Jersey's women voters were mostly widows and single women.
Daughters of Liberty 1768–1770	Patriot women who spun homespun at public spinning bees and gave up British tea and cloth, especially during the boycott of the Townshend duties.	Boycotts made shopping and spinning political acts, which drew women into the resistance even though they could not vote.
Freedom petitions 1773–1777	Petitions in which Black Massachusetts residents asked lawmakers to end slavery. The best known, from Prince Hall and seven other Black men in January 1777, cited natural rights and the Patriots' cause.	The petitioners turned the Patriots' own case against Britain into a case against slavery in Massachusetts.
Pennsylvania Abolition Society 1775	America's first antislavery society, which mostly Quaker Philadelphians founded days before the war began. Benjamin Franklin later served as its president and signed its 1790 antislavery petition to Congress.	Its members went to court under Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition law and won freedom for Black people whom owners held illegally.
Abigail Adams 1776	A Massachusetts Patriot who wrote to her husband, John Adams, in March 1776, urging him to "Remember the Ladies" and not put "unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands."	She held the Patriots to their own fear of unlimited power, but John Adams answered that he could only laugh.
State constitutions 1776–1780	Written plans of government that most former colonies adopted as they became states, many opening with a bill of rights. They usually put power in elected legislatures and kept governors weak.	Americans who had clashed with royal governors distrusted executive power, and the same distrust shaped the weak Articles of Confederation.

	What it was	Why it matters
New Jersey suffrage 1776–1807	A clause in New Jersey’s 1776 constitution that let all adult inhabitants worth £50 vote. It named neither sex nor race, so some propertied women and free Black men voted.	When an 1807 law limited voting to free white male citizens, democracy in New Jersey moved backward.
Declaration of Independence 1776	Congress’s statement of July 4, 1776, which based government on natural rights and the consent of the governed, charged George III with a long list of abuses, and declared independence.	Its promise of equality freed no one, yet Black petitioners and foreign revolutionaries invoked it to claim rights for themselves.
Property qualifications 1776–1780	Rules in most state constitutions that let a man vote only if he owned property or paid taxes, and set a higher bar to hold office.	As states lowered property tests, more farmers and artisans won seats, and wealthy men held a smaller share of the legislatures.
Gradual emancipation gradual abolition 1780–1804	Northern state laws that freed children born to enslaved mothers after a set date, but only after years of service. Pennsylvania’s 1780 act, the first, made them serve until age 28.	Because people already enslaved generally stayed enslaved, slavery died slowly in the North, lasting in New York until 1827.
Elizabeth Freeman Mum Bett 1781	An enslaved woman known as Mum Bett who, with a man named Brom, sued their Massachusetts enslaver, John Ashley. A county jury freed them, and she took the name Elizabeth Freeman.	Without waiting for lawmakers, enslaved people like Freeman went to court, and Massachusetts juries began to side with them.
Quock Walker case 1781–1783	Massachusetts court cases over Quock Walker, an enslaved man whom Nathaniel Jennison beat for leaving him. In 1783 Chief Justice William Cushing told the jury slavery was inconsistent with the state constitution.	After Cushing’s charge, Massachusetts courts stopped upholding slavery, though the state never passed an abolition law.
Republican motherhood 1780s–1790s	The ideal that women served the republic by raising their children to be virtuous citizens. It justified more schooling for girls but gave women no vote and left coverture in place.	Women gained a political job inside the home, raising the republic’s future citizens, while voting and office stayed with men.
French Revolution 1789–1799	The revolution that overthrew France’s monarchy. Its 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man said men “are born and remain free and equal in rights,” much as Americans had.	American ideas shaped France’s rights declaration, and Lafayette, a veteran of the American war, drafted an early version with Jefferson’s advice.

	What it was	Why it matters
Judith Sargent Murray 1790	A Massachusetts writer whose <i>On the Equality of the Sexes</i> , which she wrote in 1779 and published in 1790, blamed unequal schooling for any gap between women's and men's minds.	Murray claimed women's intellectual equality, going further than republican motherhood, which valued girls' schooling mainly for their children's sake.
Benjamin Banneker 1791	A free Black mathematician and almanac maker from Maryland whose 1791 letter reminded Thomas Jefferson that he had declared all men equal yet held people in slavery.	By quoting the Declaration back to its author, Banneker exposed the contradiction between American equality and slavery.
Haitian Revolution 1791–1804	A revolt of enslaved people in France's sugar colony of Saint-Domingue. They ended slavery there, defeated Napoleon's army, and in 1804 founded Haiti, the first Black-led nation in the Americas.	Haiti's armed revolt terrified U.S. slaveholders, who kept the United States from recognizing Haiti until 1862.
Latin American independence movements 1810s–1820s	Wars in which most of Spain's American colonies won independence by the mid-1820s. Simón Bolívar led the fight in northern South America, with weapons and money from Haiti's president, Alexandre Pétion.	The American and Haitian revolutions inspired these wars, and at Pétion's urging Bolívar promised freedom to enslaved men who joined his army.

Also in the film

Anthony Benezet 1759	Philadelphia Quaker teacher whose 1759 pamphlet argued that slavery harmed enslaved and enslaver alike.
Vermont Constitution of 1777 1777	Vermont, then a self-declared republic, wrote the first ban on adult slavery in what became the United States.
Manumission 1782	An owner's choice to free an enslaved person, which Virginia allowed from 1782 while its enslaved population kept growing.
Female academies 1787	Girls' schools like Philadelphia's Young Ladies' Academy, where Priscilla Mason protested in 1793 that men barred women from the professions.
Benjamin Rush 1787	Philadelphia doctor whose <i>Thoughts upon Female Education</i> argued that girls needed schooling to teach their sons the principles of liberty.
Toussaint Louverture 1791–1803	Formerly enslaved leader of the Haitian Revolution who died in a French prison in 1803 after Napoleon's forces seized him.
Ona Judge 1796	Enslaved woman who fled President Washington's Philadelphia household in 1796 and evaded his efforts to recapture her.

Short-answer practice

“Every Principle from which Amarica has Acted in the Cours Of their unhappy Deficultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favowrs of Your petioners”

Prince Hall and fellow petitioners, Petition for freedom to the Massachusetts legislature, January 13, 1777

(a) Briefly describe ONE claim the petitioners make about the principles of the American Revolution.

(b) Briefly explain ONE way Americans used revolutionary ideas to challenge slavery between 1776 and 1800.

(c) Briefly explain how ONE development between 1787 and 1800 limited the ability of enslaved people to gain freedom by escaping.

**No taxation
without representation**

1765

Born Free and Equal

Coverture

1700s

Born Free and Equal

Daughters of Liberty

1768–1770

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Freedom petitions

1773–1777

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**Pennsylvania
Abolition Society**

1775

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Abigail Adams

1776

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State constitutions

1776–1780

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New Jersey suffrage

1776–1807

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**Declaration of
Independence**

1776

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Property qualifications

1776–1780

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English common-law rule that put a married woman's property and legal identity under her husband's control.

Independence left married women's legal status unchanged.

Black Americans' petitions, like Prince Hall's in 1777, asking legislatures to end slavery on natural-rights grounds.

Northern gradual emancipation laws drew on their arguments.

Patriot who asked her husband, John Adams, in 1776 to "Remember the Ladies."

The new states kept husbands' legal power over wives.

The 1776 rule that let propertied women and free Black men vote in New Jersey until 1807.

Women voted nowhere else in the new nation.

State rules that let a man vote only if he owned property or paid taxes.

Democracy widened for white men of modest means.

Patriot principle that only the colonists' own elected assemblies could tax them.

In 1780 Paul and John Cuffe, free Black taxpayers, turned it against Massachusetts.

Patriot women who spun homespun and boycotted British goods to resist the Townshend duties.

In wartime, women went on to raise money and supplies for the army.

The first American antislavery society, which Philadelphia Quakers started in 1775 and Franklin later led.

Antislavery societies soon followed in New York and other states.

The new states' written plans of government, which mostly made legislatures strong and governors weak.

The same fear of power later drove the Anti-Federalists.

Congress's 1776 statement that based government on natural rights and consent and declared the colonies independent.

Revolutions in France, Haiti, and Latin America echoed its ideals.

Gradual emancipation

gradual abolition

1780–1804

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Elizabeth Freeman

Mum Bett

1781

Born Free and Equal

Quock Walker case

1781–1783

Born Free and Equal

Republican motherhood

1780s–1790s

Born Free and Equal

French Revolution

1789–1799

Born Free and Equal

Judith Sargent Murray

1790

Born Free and Equal

Benjamin Banneker

1791

Born Free and Equal

Haitian Revolution

1791–1804

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Latin American independence movements

1810s–1820s

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Mum Bett, an enslaved Massachusetts woman who sued for her freedom and won in 1781.

Two years later, Quock Walker's case ended slavery in Massachusetts courts.

The ideal that educated mothers should raise their children to be virtuous republican citizens.

It led to girls' schools and, later, the cult of domesticity.

Massachusetts writer whose *On the Equality of the Sexes* argued that women's minds equaled men's.

She applied the Revolution's idea of equality to women.

Revolt in which enslaved people in Saint-Domingue ended slavery and founded independent Haiti.

Its success alarmed U.S. slaveholders, who feared revolts at home.

Northern laws that freed enslaved women's future children, but only after years of unpaid service.

Slavery slowly became a mostly Southern institution.

Massachusetts case where Chief Justice Cushing told a jury in 1783 that slavery clashed with the state constitution.

The 1790 census counted no enslaved people in Massachusetts.

The 1789 revolution that declared men born free and equal in rights and overthrew France's king.

It deepened the split between America's first two parties.

Free Black mathematician whose 1791 letter called out Jefferson for preaching equality while enslaving people.

The almanac he sent answered Jefferson's doubts about Black intellect.

Wars that freed most of Spain's American colonies by the mid-1820s, with help from Haiti.

The American and Haitian revolutions inspired their fight.

Model answers

- (a) Briefly describe ONE claim the petitioners make about the principles of the American Revolution.

The petitioners claim that every principle Americans used to justify resisting Great Britain argues even more strongly for freeing enslaved people. In their view, the Patriots' own case against British rule is also a case against slavery in Massachusetts.

- (b) Briefly explain ONE way Americans used revolutionary ideas to challenge slavery between 1776 and 1800.

Massachusetts courts used the state's 1780 constitution, which declared all men "born free and equal," against slavery. In the Quock Walker case of 1783, Chief Justice William Cushing told a jury that slavery was inconsistent with that constitution, and the state's courts stopped enforcing slavery.

- (c) Briefly explain how ONE development between 1787 and 1800 limited the ability of enslaved people to gain freedom by escaping.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 let an enslaver seize a person who had fled to another state and take that person back with a judge's or magistrate's certificate, without a jury trial. So escaping to a free state did not make anyone legally free.