

# African Americans Choose Sides

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Student Background

African Americans, on both sides, fought bravely in many major battles. These soldiers were paid less than their white counterparts, often received inferior weapons and clothing, and were given some of the toughest positions in the service.

Historians estimate that at least 800 enslaved African Americans succeeded in their escape to join the British after the issuance of *Lord Dunmore's Proclamation* in hopes that they would gain their freedom after the war. His Proclamation inspired *thousands* more to follow behind the British throughout the remaining years of the war.

On the other hand, it is estimated that 5,000 free black Patriots fought for the American side in hopes that *their* participation would lead to more freedom and civil rights for African Americans. Early in the war, African Americans in New England rallied toward the Patriot cause and fought alongside whites in early battles. By 1775, General Washington barred the further recruitment of black soldiers in the Continental Army, as he feared the prospect of armed slave revolts. General Washington changed his policies throughout the war; he allowed the enlistment of free blacks with "prior military experience" in January 1776 and extended the enlistment terms to "all free blacks" in January 1777 in order to help fill the depleted ranks of the Continental Army. Because the states constantly failed to meet their quotas of manpower for the army, Congress authorized the enlistment of "all blacks, free and slave," in 1777. Of the Southern states, only Maryland permitted African Americans to enlist. In 1779, Congress offered

slave masters in South Carolina and Georgia \$1,000 for each slave they provided to the army, but the legislatures of both states refused the offer. Thus, the greatest number of African American soldiers in the American army came from the North.

The concept of freedom was very important to blacks on both sides. Some slaves who fought with the Patriots gained their freedom from their owners after the war was over; many did not. In an effort to keep their promise, the defeated British government refused to return former slaves who joined Dunmore's regiment to their owners at the end of the war. Historians estimate that 3,000 to 4,000 slaves and freed black people were secured safe passage and their freedom to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and Britain after the war. A 150-page document titled "The Book of Negroes" details the number of slaves sent to Nova Scotia; this group of black Loyalists became the first settlement of Black Canadians. Other black Loyalists, however, particularly those who were in Charleston or St. Augustine at the end of the war, often suffered a starker fate. The final evacuation of both cities was chaotic, and various Loyalists took what profit they could by seizing and selling blacks back into slavery.

In the new United States of America, many years would pass before slavery would be abolished and African Americans would gain the rights that were outlined in the Declaration of Independence. An estimated 100,000 African Americans escaped, died, or were killed during the American Revolution.