

WORKSHEET 19**Multicultural Resources****African Americans and the Revolutionary War**

Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

Many colonists found it difficult to choose sides in the American Revolution. Should they remain loyal to Britain and the King? Or should they fight to gain independence for the colonies? The choice was even more difficult for African Americans. Many African Americans were enslaved during that time. Which would bring them freedom sooner—independence or a British victory?

When the Revolution broke out, many African Americans chose the Patriot side. They joined the Minutemen, the new navy, and guerrilla groups. Then the Continental Congress decided to stop enlisting African American soldiers. Many colonists feared that African Americans might use their weapons to start slave rebellions across the colonies.

The British, on the other hand, quickly began recruiting African American slaves as soldiers. Lord Dunmore, the British Governor of Virginia, announced he would grant freedom to any slave who would fight with the British. Within a week some 500 slaves joined the British. Dunmore gave them guns and uniforms with the words “Liberty for Slaves” written across the chest. The Continental Congress quickly changed its mind and began recruiting African Americans again.

Some 5,000 African Americans joined the Patriots. One African American Patriot was Prince Hall. Hall had been a slave for twenty years before gaining his freedom in 1770. In 1776 Hall joined the

Massachusetts militia. Both during and after the Revolution, he led the movement for better conditions for African Americans.

“Don’t one of you fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” Peter Salem, an African American Minuteman, followed those instructions carefully. At a critical moment in the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, Salem reportedly took aim at an important British officer and shot him. He became a hero of the day.

Another African American Patriot at the Battle of Bunker Hill was 28-year-old Salem Poor. A free African American, Poor showed

so much courage during the battle that fourteen officers sent a report to the Continental Congress praising him. The officers asked that Poor be given “the reward due to so great and distinguish[ed] a character.”

The American Revolution brought changes for African Americans on both sides. In the new United States, many free African Americans went into business as artisans and merchants. In northern cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, African Americans established communities. In the South, thousands of slaves had escaped to freedom during the war. Many who had fought with the British or escaped from slavery moved to the new British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Thomas Peters, an African American pioneer and soldier for the British, helped found the settlement and the town of Freetown.



Peter Salem

1. What decision did African Americans have to make when the Revolution began? What influenced that decision? _____

2. Why did the Continental Congress stop enlisting African American soldiers? _____

3. Why did the Continental Congress later change its mind and enlist African American soldiers again? _____

4. Who was Prince Hall? Peter Salem? Salem Poor? _____

5. How did the Revolution affect African Americans? _____

6. **Critical Thinking** If you had been a free African American during the American Revolution, on which side would you have chosen to fight? Why? Would your choice have been different if you were a slave? Explain your answer. _____

