

Section 2

The Declaration of Independence and African Americans

Drafting the Declaration

The **Declaration of Independence** that the Continental Congress adopted on July 4, 1776, was drafted by a slaveholder in a slaveholding country. When Thomas Jefferson wrote “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,” he was not supporting black claims for freedom. Men like Jefferson and John Adams, who served on the drafting committee with Jefferson and Ben Franklin, frequently distinguished between the rights of white men of British descent and a lack of rights for people of color. So convinced were Jefferson and his colleagues that black people could not claim the same rights as white people that they felt no need to qualify their words proclaiming universal liberty.

The draft declaration that Jefferson, Adams, and Benjamin Franklin submitted to Congress for approval did denounce the Atlantic slave trade as a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant [African] people.” But Congress deleted this passage because delegates from the deep South objected to it. The final version of the Declaration referred to slavery only to accuse the British of arousing African Americans to revolt against their masters.

Jefferson and the other delegates did not mean to encourage African Americans to hope the American War for Independence could become a war against slavery. But that is what African Americans believed. Black people were in attendance when Patriot speakers made unqualified claims for human equality and natural rights; they read accounts of such speeches and heard white people discuss them. In response African Americans began to assert that such principles logically applied as much to them as to the white population. They forced white people to confront the contradiction between the new nation’s professed ideals and its reality.

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What did the Declaration of Independence mean to African Americans?
- ▶ What influence did the ideas of John Locke have on the ideology of the American Revolution?
- ▶ What role did African Americans play in the events and debate that led to the American Revolution?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ Declaration of Independence, p. 115
- ▶ Enlightenment, p. 116
- ▶ natural laws, p. 116

▶ Guide to Reading/ Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher’s Resource Manual*.

▶ Document

4-9 *The Declaration of Independence*

▶ Recommended Reading

Jack P. Greene. *All Men Are Created Equal: Some Reflections on the Character of the American Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.

The Impact of the Enlightenment

At the center of that ideology was the European **Enlightenment**. The roots of this intellectual movement, also known as the Age of Reason, lay in Renaissance secularism and humanism dating back to the fifteenth century. Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, published in England in 1687 shaped a new way of perceiving human beings and their universe. Newton used mathematics to portray an orderly, balanced universe that ran according to natural laws that humans could discover through reason.

What made the Enlightenment of particular relevance to the Age of Revolution was John Locke's application of Newton's ideas to politics. In his essay "Concerning Human Understanding," published in 1690, Locke maintained that human society—like the physical universe—ran according to **natural laws**. He contended that at the base of human laws were natural rights all people shared. Human beings, according to Locke, created governments to protect their natural individual rights to life, liberty, and private property. If a government failed to perform this basic duty and became oppressive, he insisted, the people had the right to overthrow it. Locke also maintained that the human mind at birth was a *tabula rasa* (i.e., knowledge and wisdom were not inherited, but were acquired through experience). Locke saw no contradiction between these principles and human slavery. During the eighteenth century that contradiction became increasingly clear.

Most Americans became acquainted with Locke's ideas through pamphlets that a radical English political minority produced during the early eighteenth century. This literature portrayed the British government of the day as a conspiracy aimed at depriving British subjects of their natural rights, reducing them to slaves, and establishing tyranny. After the French and Indian War, during the 1760s, Americans, both black and white, interpreted British policies and actions from this same perspective.

The influence of such pamphlets is clear between 1763 and 1776 when white Patriot leaders charged that the British government sought to enslave them by depriving them of their rights as Englishmen. When they made these charges, they had difficulty denying that they themselves deprived African Americans of their natural rights. George Washington, for example, declared in 1774 that "the crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition, that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us tame and abject, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway."

African Americans in the Revolutionary Debate

During the 1760s and 1770s when powerful slaveholders such as George Washington talked of liberty, natural rights, and hatred of enslavement, African Americans listened. Most of them had been born in America,

► Teaching Notes

Newton's insights supported the rationalized means of production and commerce associated with the Industrial Revolution that began in England during the early eighteenth century. An emerging market economy required the same sort of rational use of resources that Newton discovered in the universe.

► Recommended Readings

David Brion Davis. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975. This magisterial study discusses the influence of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution on slavery and opposition to slavery in the Atlantic world.

Bernard Bailyn. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.

they had absorbed English culture, they were united as a people, and they knew their way in colonial society. Those who lived in or near towns and cities had access to public meetings and newspapers. They were aware of the disputes with Great Britain and the contradictions between demanding liberty for oneself and denying it to others. They understood that the ferment of the 1760s had shaken traditional assumptions about government, and many of them hoped for more changes.

The greatest source of optimism for African Americans was the expectation that white Patriot leaders would realize their revolutionary principles were incompatible with slavery. Those in England who believed white Americans must submit to British authority pointed out the contradiction. Samuel Johnson, the most famous writer in London, asked, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” But white Americans made similar comments. As early as 1763, James Otis of Massachusetts warned that “those who every day barter away other mens['] liberty, will soon care little for their own.” Thomas Paine, whose pamphlet *Common Sense* rallied Americans to endorse independence in 1776, asked them to contemplate “with what consistency, or decency they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more.”

Such principled misgivings among white people about slavery helped improve the situation for black people in the North and upper South during the war, but African Americans acting on their own behalf were key. In January 1766 slaves marched through Charleston, South Carolina, shouting “Liberty!” In the South Carolina and Georgia low country and in the



A black youngster joins in a Boston demonstration against the Stamp Act of 1765.

► Recommended Readings

Gary B. Nash. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Benjamin Quarles. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. 1961; reprint, New York: Norton, 1973. This classic study remains the most comprehensive account of black participation in the War for Independence. It also demonstrates the impact of the war on black life.



Twenty-eight fugitive slaves attempt to escape from the eastern shore of Maryland.

► Reading Check

Although the authors of the Declaration distinguished between the rights of white people and those of black people, many African Americans drew the logical conclusion that the rights described in the Declaration should apply to them as well. African Americans were familiar with the Patriot rhetoric of human equality and natural rights and hoped that the War for Independence would become a war against slavery.

► Documents

4-1 *An Early Abolitionist Speaks Out against Slavery in 1757*

John Woolman was a Quaker who dedicated much of his life to eradicating slavery and the mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. He felt the slave owner was injured as much as the slave through slavery, at least in his soul and inner conscience. Woolman's thinking would become the foundation of abolitionism. This selection, taken from Woolman's journal, exemplifies his antislavery message.

4-3 *Slave Petition to the Governor of Massachusetts, 1774*

During the American Revolution, speeches, pamphlets, and revolutionary rhetoric about the natural rights helped inspire not just colonists to seek independence but inspired countless slaves to believe in the possibility of freedom. The Revolution rhetoric moved many slaves to petition state legislatures.

Chesapeake, slaves escaped in massive numbers throughout the revolutionary era. So many slaves fled in the South that between 1770 and 1790 the percentage of black people in South Carolina's population dropped from 60.5 percent to 43.8 percent, and in Georgia from 45.2 to 36.9.

Throughout the southern colonies, rumors of slave uprisings were everywhere. However, it was in New England—the heartland of anti-British radicalism—that African Americans formally made their case for freedom. As early as 1701, a Massachusetts slave won his liberty in court, and there were eleven similar suits before 1750. As the revolutionary era began, such cases multiplied. In addition, although slaves during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had based their freedom suits on contractual technicalities, during the revolutionary period, they increasingly sued on the basis of principles of universal liberty. They did not always win their cases—John Adams, a future president, was the lawyer who defeated one such case in Boston in 1768—but they set precedents.

African Americans in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut also petitioned their colonial or state legislatures for gradual emancipation. These petitions indicate that the black men who signed them were familiar with revolutionary rhetoric. African Americans learned this rhetoric as they joined white radicals to confront British authority.

In 1765 black men demonstrated against the Stamp Act in Boston. They rioted against British troops there in 1768 and joined Crispus Attucks in 1770. Black Minutemen stood with their white comrades at Lexington and Concord. In 1773 black petitioners from Boston told a delegate to the colonial assembly, “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them. . . . The divine spirit of *freedom*, seems to fire every human breast.”



Reading Check

What did the Declaration of Independence mean to African Americans?