

### African Americans & the American Revolution

By Clare McCormick, Portland Stage *PlayNotes* – reprinted with permission

In *The Niceties*, Zoe’s thesis for her American history research paper can be summed up in a single sentence: “The American Revolution was only possible because of the existence of slavery.” Her argument rests on the theory that the United States never underwent a complete revolution. She believes that the American Revolution ended in its early phases because the middle and upper class white men who controlled it were disinclined to address the social and economic disparities that existed between them and those individuals most likely to benefit from the effects of a complete revolution – namely, enslaved African Americans, upon whose labor - Zoe contends - the revolution was built. The ensuing war with England, which sought to determine whether white Americans – or more specifically, white American men – would have sovereignty over their own fates, would spark national debates on whether this independence should be extended to all Americans.

While slavery was widespread in many regions of the country throughout much of early American history, free black men, paradoxically, enjoyed the right to vote prior to the Revolution. Once America declared – and won – its independence from England, though, many white Americans quickly rescinded the freedoms of black Americans, as many states removed their right to vote. Many of the country’s early heroes also exhibited similar behavior. George Washington, for instance, was notorious for the inhumane treatment of his slaves. In 1796, after Oney Judge, an enslaved woman owned by Washington, escaped from his Virginia household to freedom in New Hampshire, the nation’s first president issued a cash reward for her capture and return. When this failed, his family developed a plot to kidnap Oney. Fortunately, she thwarted the attempt.



Portrait of an African American Revolutionary War sailor, circa 1780, artist unknown. Image credit: Newport Historical Society

Slavery was present, to varying degrees, in every state despite black Americans’ frequent involvement in, and support of, the American Revolution. It is estimated by some historians that over 3,800 African Americans from the Northeastern colonies alone participated in Revolutionary War efforts and, at one point, nearly a third of the Continental Army consisted of black soldiers. While Zoe is correct in her assessment that there is a deficit of primary sources to shed light on these individuals’ experiences, we do know that some sources exist, and we have been able to glean parts of African Americans’ stories via contextual clues from documents and legal records of the era. Before the Revolution, and in its early years, the Northeast (the area of the country in which *The Niceties* takes place) represented an epicenter of slavery. A 1754 census of the region accounts for over 4,500 enslaved people, with white citizens of Boston alone holding one-third of these people in bondage. While many of these individuals were able to access freedom via conscription

into the Continental Army, men who opposed the war or were not able to fight, and women (who were forbidden from enlisting), had no means of seeking freedom other than the courts. This led many black New Englanders, when seeking their freedom, to use the rhetoric of the American Revolution in an attempt

to force lawmakers and slave-owners to reexamine their ideas about individual rights and freedom from oppression.

In 1773, just prior to the formal beginning of the Revolution, an enslaved man known only as Felix petitioned the Massachusetts state government to obtain his freedom. Felix's case rested on the victories of those that came before him, including that of a slave simply known as Adam who, in 1701, successfully sued his owner, John Saffin, for his release. Adam claimed that Saffin had reneged on a promise to give him his freedom after an agreed-upon length of service. Felix's case sparked intense debate in Boston as African Americans in the area rallied to Felix's defense, including the issuance of a number of publications that asserted that "mere custom is the tyrant that keeps us in bondage."

Men like Felix and Adam tapped into what Civil Rights activist and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People co-founder W.E.B. DuBois would later describe as "double-consciousness," a concept that seeks to explain the internal conflict that comes with rationalizing one's existence as someone who is American, with all associated rights and privileges, but who also is a black American - an identity that has been violently oppressed and devalued in this country's history. "It is a peculiar sensation," says DuBois, "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

This practice of using language and rhetoric that grappled with black American's double-consciousness was also employed by the poet Phillis Wheatley, a freed, educated black woman living in Boston. Her poem, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth," spoke with a double-consciousness of the white Americans' pursuit of freedom, and their simultaneous oppression of non-white Americans, using the language and ideology of her oppressors against them in order to further her cause. Wheatley wrote,

**Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?**

Felix eventually won his freedom, and many others followed in his footsteps. By the 1790s, no enslaved people were listed on the Massachusetts census. However, while slavery was informally ended in Massachusetts by the end of the 1700s, it was not officially halted by specific legislation until 1865.

While, as Zoe contends, we do not have an overabundance of preserved, primary documents to help us learn about individuals like Felix and Adam, and all who came before and after them, the conversation continues about how best to examine the sources currently available, as well as methods for developing new approaches for expanding the scope of what historians consider credible sources. “Some stories,” Janine tells Zoe, “are easier to tell than others. It’s an unfortunate consequence of sound methodology.” If it is true that credible sources do not yet exist to tell the full story of American history – one which includes the perspectives of early African Americans and other non-dominant voices – how will we ever fully understand our own country’s history?