



AMERICAN REVOLUTION INSTITUTE LESSON PLAN

A Plea to End Slavery: The Essay of “Vox Africanorum”

The American Revolutionaries appealed to ideals of liberty, equality, and natural and civil rights to explain the aims of their revolution against British rule. On May 15, 1783, as the Revolutionary War was coming to an end, the *Maryland Gazette* printed an essay making a plea to end slavery signed “Vox Africanorum.” which is Latin for ‘Voice of the Africans.’ We do not know the identity of the writer. This lesson connects the antislavery movement of the Revolutionary generation to the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

Suggested Grade Level

Middle and High School

Recommended Time Frame

One +/- 50-minute session

Objectives and Essential Questions

Students will:

- connect the antislavery movement of the Revolutionary generation to the principles of liberty, equality, natural and civil rights, and citizenship; and
- develop skills to assess historical documents critically.

Materials and Resources

1. Essay of “Vox Africanorum,” *Maryland Gazette*, May 15, 1783

Background Knowledge

The American Revolutionaries appealed to ideals of liberty, equality, and natural and civil rights to explain the aims of their revolution against British rule.

Laws leading to the abolition of slavery were adopted in several of the newly independent states between 1777 and 1784. Residents of Vermont—a region claimed by New York and New Hampshire—organized their own state government, including a provision in the state constitution to bring slavery to an end. The Pennsylvania Assembly adopted an act for the gradual abolition of slavery in 1780. In 1783 the Massachusetts Superior Court held that slavery was incompatible with the state constitution and declared enslaved people in the state to be free. The Connecticut and Rhode Island legislatures passed gradual abolition laws in 1784. Elsewhere laws forbidding the further importation of slaves and laws making it easier for slave owners to voluntarily free, or *manumit*, their slaves were adopted.

During this period of revolutionary change, antislavery ideas were expressed for the first time in the upper South—in Maryland and Virginia, where slavery had been legal since the early seventeenth century and where enslaved laborers did most of the work involved in raising tobacco, the region’s most important crop.

Sequence and Procedure

1. Introduce the *Maryland Gazette* essay, explaining that it was published on May 15, 1783, in the newspaper published in the state capital, Annapolis, and signed “Vox Africanorum,” which is Latin for “Voice of the Africans.” Inform students that the identity of the writer is unknown. He—or she, though the chance that the essay was written by a woman is small—made a plea for the end of slavery.
2. Divide students into small groups and assign each a section of the “Vox Africanorum” essay with the direction to read and discuss the excerpt, determine its main idea, and be prepared to share their analysis with the class.

To a people whose characteristic virtues are *justice* and *fortitude*, in the exercise of which they have become the wonder and astonishment of the universe, we, the black inhabitants of these United States, humbly submit the following address.

When Great-Britain essayed to make her first unjust and wicked attempts to forge chains to enslave America, the noble spirit of liberty and freedom uttered her voice. America, with the meekness of a lamb, remonstrated against the wickedness of the attempt; but Britain, lost to every sentiment of justice and virtue, and sunk in every vice, obstinately persisted in the rash attempt. America then, nobly animated with the love of liberty, assuming the fortitude of a lion, stepped forth, and proclaimed, “We Will be Free.” The world beheld with admiration mingled with applause, and heaven smiled approbation.

Determined in her resolutions, America has borne the storms and complicated pressures of an eight years war, purchased at the price of her blood and treasure, and even at the risque

of her existence, she has at length obtained her liberty, the darling object of her soul; universal joy has diffused itself through all her borders; acclamations of gratitude on this occasion, from the lips of her every free-born son have ascended to the throne on high; the glorious deeds of America are recorded in the court of heaven.

When an address is made to men, who have been born free—to Americans, who have been alarmed, and nobly roused into virtuous activity at the first dawns of slavery—to men whose hearts are warm—whose minds are expanded with the *recent acquisition of their own liberty and freedom*—to men whose actions and whose sufferings have been unparalleled in the annals of mankind during a conduct of many years, to retain, and to transmit, without diminution, the rights of humanity and blessings of liberty to their posterity—When an address I say, is made to *such men*, by fellow creatures groaning under the chains of slavery and oppression, can we doubt of their becoming the friends and advocates of the enslaved and oppressed? Can we doubt of touching their feelings and exciting their attention?—No—to doubt would be wickedness in the abstract—it would be sinning against the solemn declarations of a brave and virtuous people.

We have lately beheld, with anxious concern, your infant struggles in the glorious cause of liberty—We attend to your solemn declaration of the rights of mankind-- to your appeals, for the rectitude of your principles, to the Almighty, who regards men of every condition and admits them to a participation of his benefices—We admired your wisdom, justice, piety, and fortitude.

To that wisdom, justice, piety, and fortitude, which has led you to freedom and true greatness, we now appeal. Freedom is the object of our humble address.

Our abject state of slavery, a state of all others the most degrading to human nature, is known to every American; We shall not, therefore, descend to the disagreeable task of wounding the feelings of any by a description. In the language of your humble addresses to the inexorable throne of Britain, permit us humbly to address you. Liberty is our claim. Reverence for our Great Creator, principles of humanity, and the dictates of common sense, all convince us that we have an indubitable right to liberty. Has not the wisdom of America solemnly declared it? Attend to your own declarations—“These truths are self-evident—all men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We shall offer no arguments—nay, it would be insulting to the understanding of America at this enlightened period, to suppose they stood in need of arguments to prove our right to liberty. It would be to suppose she has already forgot those exalted principles she has so lately asserted with her blood.

Though our bodies differ in colour from yours; yet our souls are similar in a desire for freedom. Disparity in colour, we conceive, can never constitute a disparity in rights. Reason is shocked at the absurdity. Humanity revolts at the idea!

Let America cease to exult—she has yet obtained but partial freedom. Thousands are yet groaning under their chains; slavery and oppression are not yet banished this land; the

appellation of master and slave, an appellation of all others the most depressing to humanity, have still an existence. We are slaves! To whom? Is it to abandoned Britons? Permit us to refer you to facts; let them make the reply. A people who have fought—who have bled—who have purchased their own freedom by a sacrifice of their choicest heroes—will never continue the advocates for slavery.

Pride, insolence, interest, avarice, and maxims of false policy, have marked the conduct of Britain—but shall pride, insolence, considerations of interest, avarice or maxims of false policy, lead America to a conduct inconsistent with her principles? Forbid it Justice—forbid it Wisdom—forbid it sound Policy—Every principle which has led America to freedom and greatness forbid it. Has the laws of Nature doomed us to this abject state—shut out as it were, from the benign influences of religion, knowledge, arts and science—excluded from every refinement which renders human nature happy! Why then are we held in slavery? Is it by any municipal law? If so, YE fathers of your country; friends of liberty and of mankind, behold our chains! Lend an ear to the voice of oppression—commiserate the afflictions of a helpless and abused part of the human species. To you we look for justice—deny it not—it is our right.

Vox Africanorum

3. As a class, review the essay, inviting each group to contribute their analysis of the main idea of each section, then as a class, summarize the main ideas of the essay in its entirety.
4. Explain that “Vox Africanorum” was a pseudonym—a pen name adopted by the writer—and that during the Revolutionary era, newspaper and pamphlet writers often used pseudonyms, sometimes to hide their identity, but more often to make their argument stronger. John Dickinson, a Delaware lawyer, wrote a series of letters opposing British taxation in the 1760s using the pseudonym “A Farmer.” The first letter begins “I am a Farmer, settled . . . near the banks of the river Delaware in the province of Pennsylvania. . . My farm is small; my servants are few and good; I have a little money at interest; I wish for no more.” Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote the Federalist essays in favor of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution using the pseudonym “Publius,” as if all the essays had been written by a single person.

Remind students that no one has identified the writer who signed this essay “Vox Africanorum.”

Pose the following questions to the class, instructing students to record their answers.

1. *Who do you think “Vox Africanorum” was? Why did the writer use that name?* [The writer implies that he is a black American, presumably free. While we do not know, it seems unlikely that “Vox Africanorum” was a free black writer. The writer’s knowledge of Latin and skill in building an argument suggests someone with the benefit of a formal education. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the *Maryland Gazette* would have published an essay by an otherwise unknown black writer. It seems more likely that “Vox Africanorum” was a white man committed to the abolition of slavery who adopted a black identity to make his case stronger, but we don’t know for sure.]
2. *Why do you think the Maryland Gazette published the essay of “Vox Africanorum”?*

3. *“Vox Africanorum” wrote that the “characteristic virtues” of Americans are “justice and fortitude.” What is virtue? How had Americans of the Revolutionary era demonstrated justice? What is fortitude, and what examples of American fortitude does “Vox Africanorum” offer?*
4. *In his famous “Liberty or Death” speech, which he gave in 1775, Patrick Henry asked his listeners “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!” How does “Vox Africanorum” use similar language to describe British attempts to impose taxes and other regulations on the American colonies before the American Revolution?*
5. *What experiences does “Vox Africanorum” say should lead other Americans to support the rights and liberties of the enslaved?*
6. *“Vox Africanorum” quotes the famous passage in the Declaration of Independence asserting 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.” “Vox Africanorum” additionally claims that the enslaved are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as much as others. How does “Vox Africanorum” respond to those who might say that the enslaved are no different than other Americans?*
7. *In the final paragraph, “Vox Africanorum” lists the “influences” and “refinements” that lead to human happiness. What does “Vox Africanorum” list? Is this what the Declaration of Independence meant by “the pursuit of happiness”?*
8. *“Vox Africanorum” asserts that black Americans have the same desire for freedom as white Americans, and just as much right to it, and reminds readers that the Declaration of Independence claimed that “all men are created equal.” Obviously many Americans in 1783 didn’t agree that the enslaved were “created equal,” and that they had the same rights as others. Decades of debate over the rights of enslaved Americans followed the Revolution and led to our Civil War. Do you think that the assertion that “all men are created equal” shaped that debate? Why?*
9. Ask students to return to their small groups to discuss and share their answers, then reconvene as a class to review the answers to the eight questions as a group—encouraging students to record key elements from the class discussion about each question.

Assessment and Demonstration of Student Learning

As a class, brainstorm past or present social movements that have appealed to ideals of liberty, equality, natural and civil rights.

Ask each student to research one movement that interests them, specifically finding examples of essays or speeches that invoke America’s highest ideals to justify social change.

Have students write a persuasive essay—employing a pseudonym—in defense of, or in opposition to, the chosen cause, in the voice of a real or imagined individual. The essay should address the high ideals related to the social movement and should incorporate quotations from the Declaration of Independence.

Extension

In the same issue of the *Maryland Gazette* in which the essay of "Vox Africanorum" was published, the sheriff of Cecil County, Maryland, placed a notice regarding a black man in his custody:

Maryland, Cecil county, April 29, 1783

Committed to my custody on suspicion of being a runaway, a young negro fellow, about 25 years of age, of a yellowish complexion, pitted with the small pox, about 5 feet 6 inches high, he calls himself Charles Smith, and says he is a free man and came into Virginia with lord Dunmore. His master, if any, is desired to come, prove property, pay charges, and take him away.

Richard Bond, sheriff of Cecil County

1. As a class, review the notice, and ask the students to consider the following questions as a group. The first questions are to develop the close contextual reading skills necessary to understand historical documents. The later questions move on to interpretation.
2. *What does "committed to my custody" mean? How do you think Charles Smith came to be in the sheriff's custody and where is the sheriff keeping him?* [Charles Smith was probably turned over the sheriff by a white property owner who encountered him in public and challenged his claim to be a free man. The sheriff was probably holding Smith in the local jail while waiting for someone to make a credible claim that he was their slave.]
3. *Why did the sheriff describe Smith in the way he did? What does "pitted with the small pox" mean?* [Smallpox left often left scars, similar to bad acne scars, though not in the majority of cases. A smallpox epidemic had swept through eastern North America during the Revolutionary War. While many people were scarred by smallpox, a "pitted" face was probably unusual enough to be a distinguishing feature.]
4. *If Charles Smith was a runaway slave who claimed to be a free man in order to escape re-enslavement, why would he have claimed to have come "into Virginia with lord Dunmore"?* [Dunmore was the last royal governor of Virginia and fled the colony early in the Revolutionary War, but not before issuing a proclamation offering freedom to male slaves who would join him in to bear arms against the American rebels. Charles Smith might have used Dunmore's name because the governor was long gone. Although Dunmore offered freedom to slaves who would fight with him, he was also a slave owner, though it seems unlikely that Charles Smith came to Virginia with Dunmore as one of his slaves.]
5. *If Charles Smith was a runaway slave, as the sheriff suspected, where might he have been headed?* [Cecil County is in the northeast corner of Maryland, bordering Pennsylvania, which had passed a law for the gradual abolition of slavery in 1780. Charles Smith may have been headed for Pennsylvania where he hoped to live as a free man.]
6. *Charles Smith was taken into custody by someone who suspected he was a runaway slave. What, if any, grounds do you think the person had to believe he was a runaway slave? Was it on the basis of his color alone? What do we call it today when someone is*

detained or arrested on the basis of skin color or ethnicity, with no evidence that they have done anything wrong? [Today we call this "racial profiling."]

7. *How do you think the sheriff expected anyone who claimed to be the owner of Charles Smith to prove his claim?*
8. *What do you think happened to Charles Smith if no one came to claim him?*
9. *Does the sheriff's notice imply that Charles Smith may have some rights that the law will respect? If so, what rights?*

Revolutionary Achievements Category

Highest Ideals

Exploring the Revolution Category

Revolutionary Republic

Consider the related lesson [Imagining the Abolition of Slavery](#) in the lesson plan collection [Imagining the Revolution](#).