Narrative

James Armistead Lafayette and Courage

☐ I can identify how and when an individual should act courageously through the story of James Armistead Lafayette.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>courage</td>
<td>The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk.</td>
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<td>seamstresses</td>
<td>A woman who makes clothing.</td>
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<td>inconspicuously</td>
<td>Not attracting attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>infamous</td>
<td>Having a reputation for bad reasons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>couriers</td>
<td>People who deliver messages.</td>
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Narrative

Free and enslaved Black people served in the Revolutionary War in numerous capacities. More than 5,000 served in the Continental Army, and thousands ran to the British side and served in their military. Whether they chose to support the patriots or the British, Blacks performed a wide variety of important roles. They were soldiers, sailors, guides, spies, seamstresses, wagon drivers, and manual laborers for both sides throughout the war. Some of these jobs subjected them to great dangers and required remarkable courage.

James Armistead was one of the Black Americans who demonstrated that courage and served his country, despite his enslavement. He was born into slavery in Virginia, likely in the year 1748. The American Revolution began in 1775, and soon thereafter Patriot leaders like George Washington recognized the advantages of allowing free Black and enslaved men to fight for the cause. In 1781, the Marquis de Lafayette — a Frenchman who had joined the Americans in the war — was leading troops in Virginia. Armistead received permission from his owner to join Lafayette and assist in the campaign. Lafayette recognized the potential Armistead had to serve as an effective spy and admired his willingness to take on the dangerous task. Lafayette sent Armistead to the British army group commanded by General Charles Cornwallis and offered to spy on the Americans for them. Secretly though, he would be a double agent working for the Patriots and gaining information at the highest levels of the British command.
As a Black man, Armistead blended in inconspicuously when in the British camp. Officers assumed he was a simple servant, and so spoke freely in front of him. As a Virginia native, Armistead was well-acquainted with the terrain. His knowledge of the Virginia countryside allowed him to gain the trust of the British by helping the infamous traitor Benedict Arnold and his forces traverse the Virginia wilderness. This position and trust meant the Britishs were comfortable discussing battle plans, strategy, and tactics when he was within ear shot. Armistead would write notes of what he heard the British were planning and passed it along to Lafayette via couriers. Additionally, he passed along false information to the British to mislead them. If he was discovered, the British would have executed him.

Later in 1781, Armistead discovered Cornwallis’s plan to remain in Yorktown, Virginia in order to refit his army. He depended on the British fleet to bring those supplies up the York River — a decision that left him vulnerable to being trapped by American forces. Armistead relayed this information to Lafayette and Washington, who marched two large armies to Virginia and utilized a French fleet to cut off the Royal Navy from supplying or rescuing Cornwallis’s army. Washington and his French allies soon forced Cornwallis to surrender at the Battle of Yorktown. This would be the final major battle of the war that led to American independence.

Armistead had demonstrated immense courage working as a spy. Captured spies at the time on both sides were immediately hanged. Sadly, when the Virginia legislature passed a law a few years after the war that allowed slave owners to manumit enslaved men who had fought as soldiers during the war, Armistead was not included. The law only applied to soldiers and not spies. He petitioned the Virginia legislature for his freedom for services rendered to his country during the war. In it, he made an appeal to the natural rights of the Declaration of Independence. It read:

“That your petitioner perswaded of the just right which all mankind have to Freedom, notwithstanding his own state of bondage [enslavement], with an honest desire to serve this Country in its defence thereof, did...he often at the peril of his life...kept open a channel of the most useful communications to the army of [this] state.”

When Lafayette heard about Armistead’s courageous appeal and struggle for his freedom, he personally wrote an appeal to the Virginia legislature requesting that an exception be made for Armistead.

He wrote:

“This is to certify that the bearer by the name of James has done essential services to me while I had the honour to command in this state. His intelligences from the enemy’s camp were industriously collected and faithfully delivered. He perfectly acquitted himself with some important commissions I gave him and appears to me entitled to every reward his situation can admit of.”

Since LaFayette was widely-known for serving at Washington’s side during the Revolutionary War, the Virginia assembly agreed to pass a law that allowed for Armistead’s manumission. As a sign of gratitude, Armistead added “Lafayette” to the end of his name. He lived as a free man and went on to raise a family and own a farm. Decades later, the Marquis de La-
fayette toured the United States. In Yorktown, he saw a familiar face in the cheering crowd. He rushed over and embraced Armistead, and the two old friends shared a joyful reunion.

**Analysis Questions**

1. What were some ways that Blacks contributed during the Revolutionary War?

2. Why was James Armistead Lafayette effective as a double agent?

3. Why did serving as a spy require an especially large amount of courage?

4. If Armistead had fled from his owner and joined the British, he would have been guaranteed his freedom. Why do you think that he risked his life and potentially remaining a slave after the war to serve on the side of the Patriots?

5. Why was Armistead not given his freedom after the war, along with other enslaved individuals who served as soldiers for the Patriots? Why was this an injustice?

6. Cowardice is the opposite of courage and may be defined as, “Failing to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger.” How can knowing the definition of cowardice help us better understand and exhibit the virtue of courage?