

Primary Source:

James Armistead's Petition to the Virginia General Assembly, November 30, 1786

- How did African Americans participate in the Revolutionary War?
- How did their actions reflect a desire to enjoy their natural rights?

- I can connect actions taken by African Americans during the Revolutionary War to an understanding of natural rights of equality and justice.
- I can summarize the main ideas of historical text.
- I can create an argument supported by evidence from primary sources.

Building Context

Born enslaved, James Armistead volunteered to join the Patriot army in 1781 with his owner's consent. Armistead served as a spy for Marquis de Lafayette, and was instrumental in reporting troop movements that helped secure the Patriot victory at the Battle of Yorktown. As a spy (rather than a soldier), Armistead was not eligible for emancipation under Virginia law. Armistead petitioned the General Assembly for his freedom for his services and received a testimonial from the Marquis de Lafayette in support of his case. Armistead was emancipated in 1786 and took the name "Lafayette" in honor of his French commander.

James Armistead's Petition to the Virginia General Assembly, November 30, 1786

<https://www.virginiamemory.com/docs/LafayettePet.pdf>

"To the honorable the Speaker & gentlemen of the gen Assembly,

The petition of James (a slave belonging to Will: Armistead of New Kent county [a county in Virginia]) humbly sheweth: That your petitioner

Notes

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, during the ravages of **Lord Cornwallis** thro' this state, by the permission of his master, enter into the service of the **Marquiss Lafayette**: That during the time of his serving the Marquiss he often at the peril of his life found means to frequent the British Camp, by which means he kept open a channel of the most useful communications to the army of the state: That at different times your petitioner conveyed **inclosures** [enclosures or documents], from the Marquiss into the enemies lines, of the most secret & important kind; the possession of which if discovered on him would have most certainly endangered the life of your petitioner: That he undertook & performed all commands with cheerfulness & fidelity, in opposition to the persuasion & example of many thousands of his unfortunate condition. For proof of the above your petitioner begs leave to refer to the certificate of the Marquiss Lafayette hereto **annexed** [attached or included with this petition], & after taking his case as here stated into consideration he humbly **intreats** [entreats or asks] that he may be granted that Freedom, which he flatters himself he has in some degree contributed to establish; & which he hopes always to prove himself worthy of: nor does he desire even this inestimable favor, unless his present master from whom he has experienced everything, which can make tolerable the state of slavery, shall be made adequate compensation for the loss of a valuable workman; which your petitioner humbly requests may be done & your petitioner shall ever pray &c”

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. Why did James Armistead petition the Virginia Assembly?

2. How did Armistead serve the Patriot cause?

3. How does Armistead appeal to Founding principles in his petition?

4. What evidence does this document provide about the role of African Americans in the Revolutionary War?