

Primary Source:

“An act directing the emancipation of certain slaves who have served as soldiers in this state, and for the emancipation of the slave Aberdeen,” Virginia General Assembly, October 20, 1783

Slavery
& the
Founding

BILL of RIGHTS
INSTITUTE

- 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

After the end of the fighting, Blacks who had served for either side in the American Revolution expected their freedom in return for their military service. Many of the enslaved people who fought for the British under promises of freedom left with them at the end of the war. They resettled in Nova Scotia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the British empire. Those who served the Patriot cause also sought to secure their liberty. A year after Virginia allowed slaveholders to manumit (free) their enslaved persons, the legislature passed the following law granting freedom to some enslaved who fought for the Patriot side.

“An act directing the emancipation of certain slaves who have served as soldiers in this state, and for the emancipation of the slave Aberdeen,” Virginia General Assembly, October 20, 1783

<https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-directing-the-emancipation-of-certain-slaves-who-have-served-as-soldiers-in-this-state-and-for-the-emancipation-of-the-slave-aberdeen-october-20-1783/#:~:text=This%20act%2C%20passed%20during%20the,served%20in%20the%20Virginia%20Navy>

"I. WHEREAS it hath been represented to the present general assembly, that during the course of the war, many persons in this state had caused their slaves to enlist in certain regiments or corps raised within the same...and it appearing further to this assembly, that on expiration of the term of enlistment of such slaves that the former owners have attempted again to force them to return to a state of servitude, contrary to the principles of justice, and to their own solemn promise.

II. And whereas it appears just and reasonable that all persons enlisted as **afosesaid** [as discussed above], who have faithfully served agreeable to the terms of their enlistment, and have thereby of course contributed towards the establishment of American liberty and independence, should enjoy the blessings of freedom as a reward for their toils and labours; Be it therefore enacted, That each and every slave, who by the appointment and direction of his owner, hath enlisted in any regiment or corps raised within this state...and hath served faithfully during the term of such enlistment, or hath been discharged from such service by some officer duly authorized to grant such discharge, shall from and after the passing of this act, be fully and compleatly **emancipated** [freed], and shall be held and deemed free in as full and ample a manner as if each and every of them were specially named in this act;..."

Notes

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

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

2. How does this document connect the actions of African Americans to principles of justice and liberty?

3. Does this act apply to any African Americans who enlisted in the military? Explain.