**Teacher Materials**

Long before the American Revolution, African women and women of African descent understood that slavery robbed them of their natural rights. They hated being enslaved and fought for their freedom.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence claimed American colonies had a right to liberty from Great Britain. Enslaved women listened and overheard the conversations of their enslavers concerning liberty from oppressive power. They understood the implications for their own lives. It reinforced their beliefs that they had a right to freedom. Freedom over families, of movement, labor, where to live, and so much more. They acted on the ideals colonists professed.

The Revolutionary War brought British troops and a breakdown in social order, and this brought increased opportunities to escape slavery. Men and women who escaped were abolitionists, abolishing the practice of slavery in their own lives.

Advertisements announcing the escape of enslaved people frequently appeared in Revolutionary Era newspapers. They speak to the power, ingenuity, and bravery of African women and women of African descent. “Running away” was a strategic act of self-emancipation. Some women escaped with men or with children. Some fled to areas occupied by British troops, seeking safety, freedom, and work. Enslaved women lacked freedom of movement and could face severe punishment if caught and returned to enslavers. Advertisements offering rewards for the return of “runaway” women demonstrate the value enslaved women placed on freedom.

Some women took their fights to court. Jenny Slew sued John Whipple Jr. of Ipswich in 1765. Slew argued that she was a free woman, and that Whipple was illegally enslaving her. Her case was tried in the Essex Superior Court in Salem. John Adams observed the case and wrote in his diary that freedom suits like this were occurring across New England. Jenny ultimately won her case, and the news of her success would have been heard by other enslaved women in Salem and Essex County.

“The Revolution affirmed the idea that freedom was a universal birthright. The outbreak of revolutionary conflict emboldened thousands of enslaved women to declare and claim their freedom… Inspired by natural rights ideology, Black women seized upon every opportunity to undermine the system of slavery through flight.” -Karen Cook Bell

For more on enslaved women in the Revolutionary Era, see Bell’s 2021 book, Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America.

Notes on Colonial and Early American Newspapers

* Newspaper advertisements were important for providing rapid and widespread communication.
* Across New England, newspapers were read aloud in public places like churches, especially when they contained important announcements.
* Literate and illiterate enslaved people read or heard aloud information communicated in newspapers. This included news of revolutionary protests, arguments for freedom and independence, important printings like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and advertisements for escaped and “for sale” enslaved people.

Advertisements for escaped enslaved people

* Enslaved people frequently escaped with a large amount of clothing. Clothing could be used as disguise, to trade or sell for other resources, or as protection against harsh New England weather. It points to the planning and forethought enslaved people put into their escapes.

* Mention of injuries, wounds, and scars are evidence of the violent nature of slavery.
  + Some injuries are evidence of violence inflicted by enslavers on enslaved people. They may have been a form of punishment or a general method of control. Some may have been sustained after previous attempts of escape.
  + Violence was meant to contain enslaved people. Instead, it often intensified the motivation to seek freedom.
  + Enslaved people, including women, often sustained injuries from dangerous work environments. Without electricity or running water, 18th century household labor was extremely difficult and physically taxing. Tasks included carrying heavy buckets of water, cooking in hot kitchens, and laboring in freezing outdoor spaces.
* Enslaved people faced many risks in their attempts to flee slavery. These included harsh weather conditions (heat and cold), a lack of food and other resources, unfamiliar or unknown directions, risk of capture, and ultimately punishment.