



PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT



One out of every five people in British North America on the eve of the American Revolution was a person of African descent. Most, but not all, of these men, women and children were enslaved. For some, this meant that they themselves had been captured in Africa and transported against their will to the American colonies, perhaps with a stop in the Caribbean. They might remember their homes, families, and communities, and speak one or more languages from their places of origin, including countries today known as Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, Angola and Côte D'Ivoire. They might bring specialized skills like the knowledge of how to grow and harvest rice or cultivate indigo to create a rich blue dye. Others, however, were third- or perhaps fourth-generation in North America and unused to any other experience. They might speak the language of those Europeans closest to them, including Dutch, French, Spanish and/or English.

Depending on their region and their owners' occupation and class, the work and lives of enslaved people varied greatly. People of African descent living near the coast and in New England were more likely than others to be sailors or work in a job supporting traders and merchants. Those in the southern colonies were more likely to be involved in farming indigo, rice or cotton, while in the Mid-Atlantic, tobacco and wheat farming were a strong possibility. Enslaved people in the North were more likely to live alongside their owners with 1-2 enslaved people in a household, while further south an owner might count many more enslaved people as his or her property, and they were more likely to share housing away from their owners.

Enslaved people in the north, and in cities or towns, were also more likely to encounter and interact with free people of color. Philadelphia, for example, had approximately 1,000 enslaved people in 1775, and another 300-400 free people of African descent. Such examples of freedom, especially in a city where so many Revolutionaries gathered, might have heightened enslaved people's hopes for their own lives. But wherever they were and with whomever they could, people of African descent worked to resist slavery. Before the American Revolution, there were at least 30 known slave rebellions in the Caribbean and North American colonies. The language of the Revolution – that “all men are created equal” – provided a new opportunity to demand change. The chaos of war provided opportunities to seek freedom, wherever the chances seemed best.

Did You Know? The British issued two proclamations, one in 1775 and one in 1779, stating that any enslaved people who were owned by rebels and who would fight with or support the British would be made free and be protected by them. Thousands of people of African descent freed themselves by running to the British Army, like Boston King in South Carolina, and Deborah [last name unknown] in Virginia.