

Introduction: African Americans and the American Revolution

"We hold this truth to be self-evident, that God created all men equal, and is one of the most prominent features in the Declaration of Independence and in that glorious fabric of collected wisdom, our noble constitution. This idea embraces the Indian and the European, the Savage and the Saint, the Peruvian and the Laplander, the white man and the African." So spoke Philadelphia's prosperous black sailmaker, James Forten, 37 years after the declaration first received printer's ink. Was Forten mistaken that white Americans of the revolutionary generation subscribed to the notion that unalienable rights were universal, not limited just to white European males? Many historians believe that men such as Forten were wrong, that the founders really meant all white men are created equal, that only they were entitled to the fabled "unalienable rights." Conventional wisdom has it that white revolutionary leaders believed Africans— even those who were free— were not endowed with fully human attributes and therefore were not considered to be among "all men" claimed in the declaration to have been created equal.

To be sure, many white Americans did not intend to include African Americans and others (such as women) under the canopy guaranteeing unalienable rights and equality as a birthright. But many did. Hardly any writer who attacked slavery in the 1760s and 1770s imagined that Africans were not part of the human race. James Otis made this explicit in his *Rights of the British Colonists* in 1764, and a decade later the Massachusetts General Court debated a bill premised on this principle. Abigail Adams expressed the same view in 1774, insisting that black Americans had "as good a right to freedom as we have." In the same year, Tom Paine insisted that "the slave, who is the proper owner of his freedom, has a right to reclaim it." Samuel Hopkins, writing in 1776 from Newport, Rhode Island, the center of New England slave trading, made it his business to keep the matter squarely before the Second Continental Congress. The enslaved Africans, he exhorted, "behold the sons of liberty oppressing and tyrannizing over many thousands of poor blacks who have as good a claim to liberty as themselves, [and] they are shocked with the glaring inconsistency."

Your task is to investigate the impact of the Revolution on African Americans, including its impact on ideas about slavery and freedom. Using pages 238-248 in your textbook and the sources I have compiled here, create a poster documenting the social, political and ideological impacts of the Revolution on African Americans, their rights and their freedom. Was the American Revolution revolutionary for African Americans? How did the Revolution challenge traditional ideas about race and slavery, and how did revolutionary ideals also fall short of their rhetoric of freedom and liberty?

Introduction

In 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, who was loyal to the Crown, was losing control of his colony, especially after much of the militia joined the Patriot cause. In a desperate effort to preserve his authority, Dunmore attempted to create an alternative to the militia by issuing the proclamation below. About 800 Afro-Virginians responded to Dunmore's Proclamation and formed what Dunmore called the Ethiopian Regiment. In early December, however, rebel militiamen attacked Dunmore and forced him to flee, taking his black volunteers with him. Unfortunately, many British soldiers could not resist the temptation to sell some of these black volunteers back into slavery in the West Indies. In addition, those who fled on Dunmore's ship back to England were exposed to smallpox.

Questions to Consider

- Towards which group of African Americans did Dunmore direct his call?
- Which African Americans did the Proclamation leave out?
- What did Dunmore promise the slaves of rebels?

Document

By His Excellency the Right Honorable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, His Majesty's Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of VIRGINIA, and Vice Admiral of the same.

A PROCLAMATION

As I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have taken Place between Great Britain and this Colony, without being compelled, by my Duty, to this most disagreeable, but now absolutely necessary Step, rendered so by a Body of armed Men, unlawfully assembled, firing on his Majesty's Tenders, and the Formation of an Army, and that Army now on their March to attack his Majesty's Troops, and destroy the well-disposed Subjects of this Colony: To defeat such treasonable Purposes, and that all such Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace and good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course of the civil Law is unable to effect, I have thought fit to issue this my Proclamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be obtained, I do, in Virtue of the Power and Authority to me given, by his Majesty, determine to execute martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony; and to the End that Peace and good Order may the sooner be restored, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms to resort to his Majesty's STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to his Majesty's Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences, such as Forfeiture of Life, Confiscation of Lands, etc. etc. And I do hereby farther declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their Duty, to his Majesty's Crown and Dignity. . .

1778. SERMON calling for Americans to honor ideals in the Declaration

Introduction

Throughout the revolutionary era, Americans chanted "SLAVERY" as a rallying call to oppose Britain's autocratic rule. To be taxed unfairly was SLAVERY. To have British troops police them in their cities was SLAVERY. To be threatened with trial without jury was SLAVERY. To fail to defend one's God-given natural rights of freedom was succumbing to SLAVERY. The irony of white men who owned or tolerated the enslavement of black Africans while stridently demanding their "natural rights" as men did not escape commentators at the time. Some directly called it hypocrisy and challenged Americans to live up to their ideals as stated in the Declaration of Independence. "Can it be believed," questioned a clergyman in 1778, "that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery?" A Presbyterian minister in New Jersey, Rev. Jacob Green minced few words in deeming as hypocrites those Americans who would not demand an end to "negro slavery" while they were fighting for their liberty from Britain.

Questions to Consider

- What impact do revolutionary ideals appear to have had on attitudes toward slavery? How white men use the language and ideas of the Revolution to argue against slavery?
- How did the American Revolution draw attention to slavery and questions of abolition? How might it have turned some people toward advocating abolition?

Document

Can it be believed that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery? What foreign nation can believe that we who so loudly complain of Britain's attempts to oppress and enslave us are, at the same time, voluntarily holding multitudes of fellow creatures in abject slavery, and that while we are abundantly declaring that we esteem liberty the greatest of all earthly blessings? . .

In our contest with Britain how much has been said and published in favor of liberty? In what horrid colors has oppression and slavery been painted by us? And is it not as great a sin for us to practice it as for Britain? Thou that sayest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Is not the hard yoke of slavery felt by negroes as well as by white people? Are they not fond of liberty as well as others of the human race? Is not freedom the natural unalienable right of all? What say the Congress in their declaration of independence? "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: that to secure these rights governments are instituted." Thus [declares] the Congress. If liberty is one of the natural and unalienable rights of all men, as doubtless it is if 'tis self-evident, i.e., so clear that it needs not proof how unjust, how inhuman but actually to violate this right? Britain is attempting to violate it; we in America have a long time been in the actual violation of it.

Alexander Hamilton Supports the Use of Black Soldiers

Introduction

British officials were not alone in considering the recruitment of African American soldiers. As the war dragged on, the Continental Army had trouble meeting quotas for soldiers. Rhode Island raised a battalion of black soldiers in 1778, and Henry Laurens, a young South Carolinian, was also interested in the idea. Laurens, anticipating that other South Carolinians might object, asked Alexander Hamilton, then a member of General George Washington's staff, to write to John Jay, a member of the Continental Congress, in an effort to garner congressional support for the plan. South Carolina was unimpressed and refused to accept black recruits.

Questions to Consider

- Why did Hamilton support the idea of recruiting slaves for the American army?
- What opposition did he anticipate the proposal would generate? How did Hamilton answer that opposition?
- What does Hamilton's letter suggest about American racial attitudes?

Document

Col Laurens...is on his way to South Carolina, on a project...This is to raise two three or four battalions of negroes... by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess...He wishes to have it recommended by Congress to the state; and, as an inducement, that they would engage to take those battalions into Continental pay.

It appears to me, that...in the present state of Southern affairs, it...promises very important advantages. Indeed, I hardly see how a sufficient force can be collected in that quarter [the South] without it; and the enemy's operations there are growing infinitely serious and formidable. I have not the least doubt, that the negroes will make very excellent soldiers, with proper management...

I frequently hear it objected to the scheme of embodying negroes that they are too stupid to make soldiers. This is so far from appearing to me a valid objection that I think their want of cultivation (for their natural faculties are probably as good as ours) joined to that habit of subordination which they acquire from a life of servitude, will make them better soldiers than our White inhabitants.

I foresee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest of those unwilling to part with their property. But it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation.



The First Rhode Island Regiment, known as the Black Regiment, at the Battle of Bloody Run Brook, 1778

State Constitutions & Voting Rights

Introduction

After declaring independence in 1776, states began writing their own constitutions and forming new governments. During roughly this time, a few states experimented with black suffrage in their first state constitutions. In their new constitutions, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania allowed free black men (and in New Jersey, women) to vote. However, by the early 1800s, these broader suffrage rights were curtailed, and the right to vote was taken away from blacks and women. By 1790, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Vermont allowed free blacks to vote.

Questions to Consider

- How might the "spirit of '76" and the spread of the ideals of the declaration have impacted the writing of state constitutions? Why might states have been more willing to expand rights such as voting at this time?

Document: New Jersey Constitution (1776): Article 4

4. That all Inhabitants of this Colony of full Age, who are worth Fifty Pounds proclamation Money clear Estate in the same, & have resided within the County in which they claim a Vote for twelve Months immediately preceding the Election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council & Assembly; and also for all other publick Officers that shall be elected by the People of the County at Large.

Document: Pennsylvania Constitution (1776): Section 6

SECT. 6. Every freemen of the full age of twenty-one Years, having resided in this state for the space of one whole Year next before the day of election for representatives, and paid public taxes during that time, shall enjoy the right of an elector: Provided always, that sons of freeholders of the age of twenty-one years shall be entitled to vote although they have not paid taxes.

Document: New York Constitution (1777): Section VII

VII. That every male inhabitant of full age, who shall have personally resided within one of the counties of this State for six months immediately preceding the day of election, shall, at such election, be entitled to vote for representatives of the said county in assembly; if, during the time aforesaid, he shall have been a freeholder, possessing a freehold of the value of twenty pounds, within the said county, or have rented a tenement therein of the yearly value of forty shillings, and been rated and actually paid taxes to this State...

Pennsylvania's Gradual Emancipation Act

Introduction

Most states in the North did not abolish slavery immediately. Instead, they passed "Gradual Emancipation" laws which called for a phasing out of slavery. With its statute of 1780, Pennsylvania became one of the first states to enact such legislation. Pennsylvania Quakers had long questioned the morality of slavery and played a crucial role in the passage of the law. The law did not, however, simply free slaves; in fact, it did not free a single slave living at the time it was passed. Between 1777 and 1784, five states ended slavery — Vermont, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut; however, in many cases they proposed gradual emancipation. For example, states would declare that children born of an enslaved woman to be free after a certain date or after they turned 21.

Document: Pennsylvania Constitution, 1780

[W]e rejoice that it is in our power, to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us ... We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing, as much as possible, the sorrows of those, who have lived in undeserved bondage ...

III. Be it enacted, and it is hereby enacted, That all persons as well Negroes and Mulattoes as others, who shall be born within this state from and after the passing of this act, shall not be deemed and considered as servants for life, or slaves; and that all servitude for life, or slavery of children, in consequence of the slavery of their mothers, in the case of all children born within this state from and after the passing of this act as aforesaid, shall be, and hereby is, utterly taken away, extinguished, and for ever abolished.

IV. Provided always, and be it further enacted, That every Negro and Mulatto child, born within this state after the passing of this act as aforesaid (who would, in case this act had not been made, have been born a servant for years, or life, or a salve) shall be deemed to be, and shall be, by virtue of this act, the servant of such person, or his or her assigns, who would in such case have been entitled to the service of such child, until such child shall attain unto the age of twenty-eight years, in the manner, and on the conditions, whereon servants bound by indenture for four years are or may be retained and holden ...

Document: Constitution of Vermont, 1777

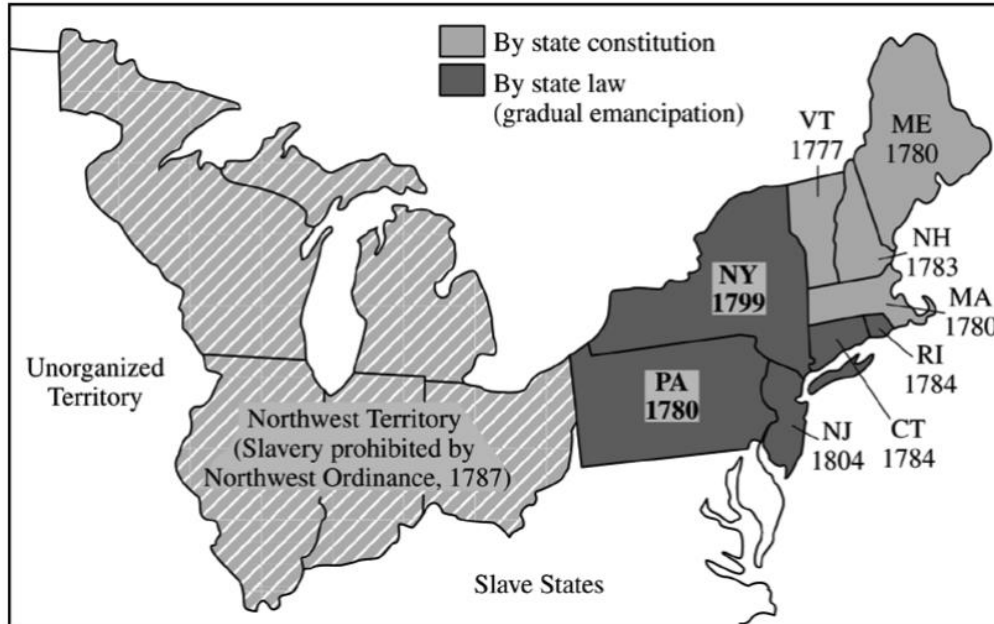
Chapter I: A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the State of Vermont

I. That all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights; amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety. Therefore, no male person, born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave, or apprentice, after he arrives to the age of twenty-one years; nor female, in like manner, after she arrives to the age of eighteen years, unless they are bound by their own consent, after they arrive to such age, or bound by law for the payment of debts, damages, fines, costs, or the like.

Document: Massachusetts Constitution, 1780

Part 1, Article I: All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.

EARLY EMANCIPATION IN THE NORTH, 1777-1804



The map above shows the dates northern states adopted emancipation laws. The table below shows the number of slaves in each state from 1790 to 1860.

State	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Maine	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
New Hampshire	157	8	0	0	3	1	0	0
Vermont	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Massachusetts	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Rhode Island	958	380	108	48	17	5	0	0
Connecticut	2648	951	310	97	25	17	0	0
New York	21193	20903	15017	10088	75	4	0	0
New Jersey	11423	12422	10851	7557	22554	674	236	18
Pennsylvania	3702	1706	795	211	403	64	0	0
Delaware	8887	6153	4177	4509	3292	2605	2290	1798
Maryland/DC	103036	107707	115056	111917	107499	93057	94055	90374
W. Virginia*	4668	7172	10836	15119	17673	18488	20500	18371
Kentucky	12430	40343	80561	126732	165213	182258	210981	225483
Ohio	X**	0	0	0	6	3	0	0
Indiana	X	28	237	190	3	3	0	0
Illinois	X	107	168	917	747	331	0	0
Michigan	X	0	24	0	1	0	0	0
Wisconsin	X	0	0	0	31	11	0	0
Missouri	X	X	2875	10222	25091	58240	87422	114931
Iowa	X	X	X	X	X	16	0	0
Utah	X	X	X	X	X	X	26	29
Nebraska	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	15
Kansas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	2
Total:	169102	197880	241015	287607	342636	355777	415510	451021

* The census data separated the counties that would make up West Virginia to highlight the differences between this area and the rest of Virginia.

**Xs note years when a particular state or territory was not yet recognized as part of the United States and thus not included in the census data.

The Entrenchment of Slavery in the South

Introduction

In much of the South, military occupation by the British and British attempts to use slavery as a tactic to upset the American cause threatened the social order of the South. Many Southerners responded by deciding that the restoration and regulation of slavery was necessary for the rehabilitation of the South after the war. The result was the further entrenchment of slavery throughout the South. In some states where a large percentage of the slave population had been lost from slaves running away to join either army or to escape to Canada, planters began to import slaves from Africa in earnest in mass quantities.

Questions to Consider

- How did the events of the Revolution help entrench slavery in Southern society?
- The Revolution united the 13 colonies, which then became states, in order to gain independence from Britain. How did issues regarding slavery threaten this unity?

Document: Importation of Slaves to South Carolina, 1770-1800

Year	Slave Population	Slaves Imported
1770	75,178	21,840
1780	97,000	18,866
1790	107,094	19,200
1800	146,151	19,991

1783. A JUDGE'S ASSERTION of the unconstitutionality of slavery: The Quock Walker Case

Introduction

In several cases known together as the "Quock Walker Case," the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared in his remarks to the jury that slavery was incompatible with the new state constitution of 1780. While the case did not mark an immediate end of slavery in Massachusetts, the state census of 1790 listed no slaves in the state.

Questions to Consider

- According to the judge, what changes have occurred that make slavery incompatible with the Massachusetts constitution?
- How might this case have set an example or precedent for other states? How might it have affected both white and black ideas about slavery?

Document

As to the doctrine of slavery and the right of Christians to hold Africans in perpetual servitude, and sell and treat them as we do our horses and cattle, that (it is true) has been heretofore countenanced by the custom formerly, but nowhere is it expressly enacted or established....Sentiments more favorable to the natural rights of mankind, and to that innate desire for liberty which heaven, without regard to complexion or shape, has planted in the human breast have prevailed since the glorious struggle for our rights began. And these sentiments led the framers of our constitution of government by which the people of this commonwealth [Massachusetts] have solemnly bound themselves to each other to declare that all men are born free and equal, and that every subject [person] is entitled to liberty, and to have it guarded by the laws as well as his life and property. In short, without resorting to implication in constructing [analyzing] the constitution, slavery is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence. The court are therefore fully of the opinion that perpetual servitude can no longer be tolerated in our government, and that liberty can only be forfeited by some criminal conduct or relinquished by personal consent or contract....every subject is entitled to liberty, and to have it guarded by the laws, as well as life and property-- and in short [our Constitution] is totally repugnant [incompatible] to the idea of being born slaves.

Introduction

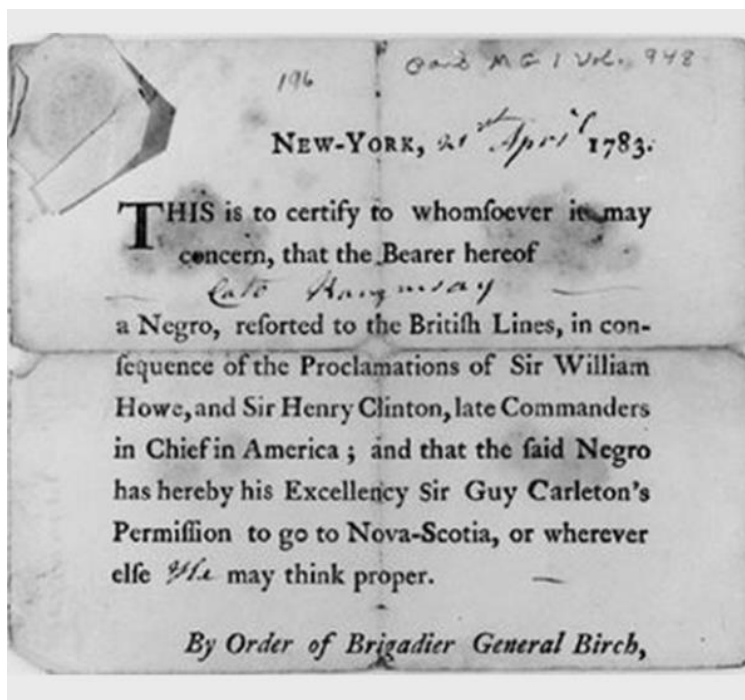
A British moral philosopher, economic thinker, and Presbyterian minister, Richard Price championed the American Revolution. In its Enlightenment foundations and its victory through united purpose, he drew unprecedented hope for "a new era in the history of mankind" one based on civil liberty, just ownership of land, wisely distributed political power, and sound economic principles. While praising the Americans, he also alerted them to their precarious position. Nurture your infant nation with your ideals, guard against the age-old frailties of human nature, or the Revolution may prove to be "an opening to a new scene of human degeneracy and misery" instead of a beacon of hope and a "refuge to the world." In this excerpt, he gives his recommendations on what should be done about the slave trade in America. This issue would surface at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when the Founders would debate the government's role in regulating and ending slavery.

Questions to Consider

- How does Price connect revolutionary ideals and the Americans' fight for liberty to the abolition of slavery? Why do Americans, according to him, have a responsibility to abolish slavery?
- Does Price think slavery should be abolished immediately and why? What does he suggest Americans do about slavery?

Document

THE NEGRO TRADE cannot be censured in language too severe. It is a traffic [trade] which, as it has been hitherto carried on, is shocking to humanity, cruel, wicked, and diabolical. I am happy to find that the United States are entering into measures for discountenancing [discouraging] it, and for abolishing the odious slavery which it has introduced. 'Till they have done this, it will not appear they deserve the liberty for which they have been contending. For it is self-evident that if there are any men whom they have a right to hold in slavery, there may be others who have had a right to hold them in slavery. I am sensible, however, that this is a work which they cannot accomplish at once. The emancipation of the Negroes must, I suppose, be left in some measure to be the effect of time and of manners [custom]. But nothing can excuse the United States if it is not done with as much speed and at the same time with as much effect as their particular circumstances and situation will allow. I rejoice that on this occasion I can recommend to them the example of my own country. — In Britain, a Negro becomes a freeman the moment he sets his foot on British ground.



A Black Loyalist Pass, 1783

White Patriots claimed their freedom by fighting against the British; thousands of black slaves won their liberty by fighting for them. This pass certifies that Cato Rammsay (actually Ramsey), "a Negro, resorted to the British Lines" in search of the freedom promised by Virginia Royal Governor Dunmore and British Commander Henry Clinton to slaves who escaped from Patriot owners. Now age forty-five and a "slim fellow," Ramsey had escaped from his owner, John Ramsey of Norfolk, Virginia, in 1776, probably fleeing to Dunmore's ships. Seven years later, he ended up in New York, reunited with his wife, China Godfrey (thirty-five) and their three children: James (twenty), Betsey (fifteen), and Nelly Ramsey (ten), who had fled subsequently from other owners. As the British evacuated New York in 1783, Ramsey and his family were free "to go to Nova-Scotia," where they worked as farmers.

An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States Northwest of the River Ohio. Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, July 13, 1787

Introduction

On July 13, 1787, the Confederation Congress (which was America's first governing body under the Articles of Confederation) passed the Northwest Ordinance. The act created a system of government for the Northwest Territory. It also specified how the various parts of the Northwest Territory could become states. Perhaps most significantly, the Ordinance forbade slavery in these territories, establishing the Ohio River as the boundary between free and slave territory in the region between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. This division helped set the stage for national competition over admitting free and slave states.

Questions to Consider

- What might be the significance of the federal government asserting its authority to regulate slavery?
- How did the Ordinance foreshadow future conflicts between the territorial expansion of the US and the expansion of slavery?

Document

Art. 6. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.



The map to the right shows the Northwest Territory and the years each territory entered the Union as a state.

Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage, 1789

Introduction

Abolitionist movements, in existence since before the 1770s amongst groups like the Pennsylvania Quakers, increased markedly during and after the Revolution. The Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage was founded in 1789, the same year the former colonies replaced their Articles of Confederation with the new Constitution, "in order to form a more perfect union."

Questions to Consider

- According to the Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, why is spreading abolition necessary?
- How did the society plan to promote abolition?

Document

The present Attention to Europe and America to Slavery seems to constitute that Crisis in the Minds of men when the united Endeavors of a few may greatly influence the Public Opinion and produce, from the transient Sentiment of the Times, Effects extensive, lasting and useful.

The common Father of Mankind created all Men free and equal, and his great Command is that we love our Neighbor as ourselves, doing unto all men as we would they should do unto us.

The human Race, however varied in Color or Intellects, are all justly entitled to Liberty, and it is the Duty and the Interest of Nations and Individuals, enjoying every Blessing of Freedom, to remove this Dishonor of the Christian Character from amongst them--From the fullest Impression of the Truth of these Principles, from an earnest Wish to bear our Testimony against Slavery in all its Forms, to spread it abroad as far as the Sphere of our Influence may extend, and to afford our friendly Assistance to those who may be engaged in the same Undertaking, and in the humblest hope of Support from that being who takes as an offering to himself what we do for each other, WE, the Subscribers, have formed ourselves into The MARYLAND SOCIETY for promoting the ABOLITION of SLAVERY, and for the RELIEF of FREE NEGROES and OTHERS unlawfully held in BONDAGE. . . .

VII. The Duty of the Counsellors [lawyers] shall be to explain the Laws and Constitutions of the States which relate to the Emancipation of Slaves, and to urge their Claims to Freedom, when legal, before such Persons or Courts as are authorized to decide upon them. . . .

XII. No Person holding a Slave as his Property shall be admitted a Member of this Society. Nevertheless, the Society may appoint Persons of legal Knowledge [who are] Owners of Slaves as Honorary Counsellors.