

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION IN FOUR QUESTIONS: DIGGING DEEPER FOR UNFAMILIAR STORIES

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“ There is nothing more common than to confound the terms of the American revolution with those of the late American war. The American war is over: but this is far from being the case with the American revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of government, after they are established and brought to perfection.

Dr. Benjamin Rush
Address to the People of the United States, January 1787¹

What was the American Revolution? When, even, was the American Revolution? Perhaps these sound like simplistic questions when teachers and students dedicate so much time every year to the study of this foundational moment in United States history. Yet Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and a signer of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, invited Americans to ask these questions in 1787, while the war was still quite fresh in their minds. He also implicitly encouraged them to ask others as well, as they considered the years-long struggle they had just been through and what work needed to be done for the future of the nation.

The American Revolution is a huge topic—one that is too big for a single National History Day® (NHD) project. But it has many different avenues and stories that might speak to different students. The following questions, topics, and resources are meant to spark historical research or new questions.

HOW DID PEOPLE BECOME REVOLUTIONARIES?

Before we can answer the question “How did people become Revolutionaries?,” we really must first ask, “Who were the people of the American Revolution?” British North America on the eve of the American Revolution was a richly diverse place. Approximately 2.5 million people lived in what would become the United States of America.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution offers students hundreds of potential topic ideas for National History Day projects. Consider some of the ideas and digital resources in this article to inspire student research.

The Revolutionary era was full of conflict and contradictions, soaring ideals, surprising successes, and deep disappointments. The more we can grapple with its complexities, the better equipped we will be to understand and actively participate in the United States in which we live today.

One way to begin is as the Museum of the American Revolution (MoAR) does, with four questions that serve as the organizing structures of our core galleries:

- > **How did people become Revolutionaries?**
- > **How did the American Revolution survive its darkest hour?**
- > **How revolutionary was the war?**
- > **What kind of nation did the American Revolution create?**

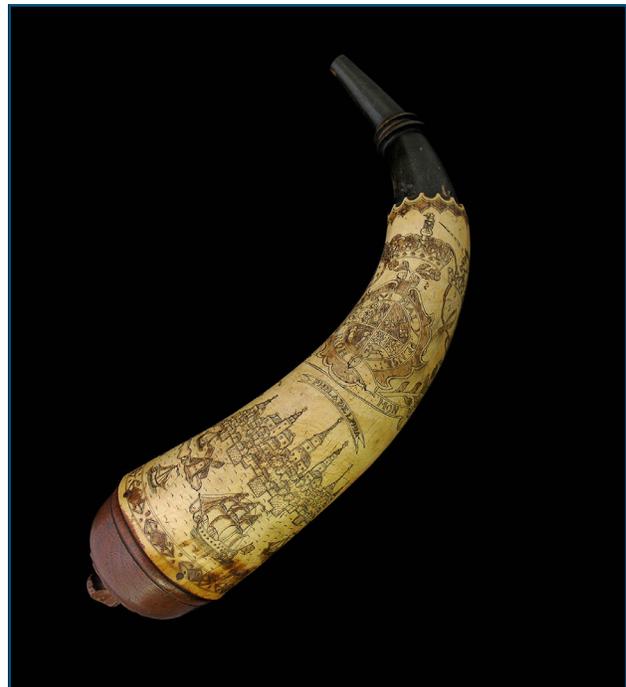
Taking a self-paced Virtual Museum Tour (museumvirtualltour.org/) of the Museum of the American Revolution will allow students to see how artifacts and documents can be analyzed to draw conclusions in response to these questions.

¹ *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber, and Margaret A. Hogan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

Approximately one-tenth of the North American population were American Indians, people who had long called this land home, and who represented great diversity among themselves. From the Choctaw and the Cherokee nations in the American South and Southeast to the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy in upstate New York to those of the Wabanaki Confederacy in New England, the men, women, and children in these cultural groups spoke different languages, practiced different customs, and had varying relationships with the land, the spiritual world, each other, and the various peoples of European and African descent with whom they came into contact.²

Those Europeans came from the Netherlands and Denmark, German principalities, France, Spain, and especially the British Empire, including England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Some were recent arrivals while others lived in North America for generations. These colonists engaged in trade networks that connected them to the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, reaching east across the Atlantic Ocean and west across what they considered the frontier, to the Pacific Ocean and Asia's eastern shores. Juniata College owns one fascinating object that may be evidence of this trade: a small Muslim charm made of copper, which reads, in Arabic, "No God but Allah." Found at Fort Shirley in western Pennsylvania, it may have been carried by a European colonist or American Indian who had directly or indirectly traded with a member of the African or Asian Muslim community, or it may have been owned by a free or enslaved person of African descent—a number of whom were Muslim—who was at the fort on business or performing labor.³

People of African descent made up approximately one-fifth of the population of the colonies on the eve of the American Revolution. Most were enslaved, serving those who claimed to own them from the fishing and shipping communities of New England to the indigo, rice, and wheat plantations of the mid-Atlantic and American South. By the 1760s, some had lived in the colonies for generations, while others were recent arrivals. They were from cultural groups such as the Fon, Igbo, Hausa, Akan, and Mande, and brought a variety of skills, beliefs, and cultures with them. One way to learn more about their identities and roots, and their pathways to the European colonies to which they were forcibly taken, is to explore the many resources available at slavevoyages.org. Historic Hudson Valley's project, *People, Not Property* (peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org/), explores what life was like for these men, women, and children as they worked to build communities despite the hardships of their enslavement. Sites like *The Geography of Slavery* (www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/), and *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761* (revolt.axismaps.com/) help to illustrate how enslaved people of African descent resisted their status as property, both in the mainland colonies and in the British Caribbean.



Philadelphia powder horn, c. 1770, Museum of the American Revolution (2003.00.0123). Link to an image of this artifact: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/philadelphia-powder-horn>.

If we are going to ask how people became Revolutionaries, we should remember that most American colonists were not, in fact, Revolutionaries. Many colonists felt that it was logical, safe, lucrative, or morally correct to remain loyal to King George III and the British Empire. After the French and Indian War, many colonists felt a strong affinity to the British Empire. They were proud to be subjects within it. Material culture, such as the Philadelphia powder horn seen above, bore both symbols of the empire and of specific colonies.

QUESTIONS TO INSPIRE NHD RESEARCH:

- > How did freedom change over time for women, indentured servants, or enslaved Africans?
- > How did various groups of people attempt to negotiate their place in colonial society?
- > How did American Indians interact with the French and other groups who moved about the Atlantic World?

² A map exploring a number of these nations is featured in the Museum of the American Revolution's core gallery and in the Virtual Museum. It can be found in the Oneida Nation Theatre.

³ At the time of writing, this charm is on loan to the Museum of the American Revolution and can be found in the Declaration of Independence gallery, or in the Virtual Museum's *Becoming Revolutionaries* section, under the subsection *The Promise of Equality*: <https://museumvirtualltour.org/>.

American colonial tavern signs, ceramics, home goods, and other objects displayed the names, likenesses, and symbols of British monarchs and military leaders. Many examples of this can be seen in the *Rule Britannia!* gallery of the museum (through the Virtual Museum or in person) or in the Collections area of the website. When conflict arose, many colonists continued to feel this affinity, while others were swayed by other critical concerns.

In 1763, King George III established a boundary along the Appalachian Mountains beyond which European colonists were not to go. He hoped to maintain peace with American Indians who were frustrated by continued demands upon their land and the displacement of their families and communities. As conflict between the American colonists and representatives of the British Empire heated up in the mid-1760s and 1770s, both sides courted American Indians, seeking their soldiers, their knowledge of the land, and other skills and resources they could provide. Leaders such as Thayendanegea of the Mohawk Nation and Cunne Shote of the Cherokee Nation traveled to London to build relationships with and assess the trustworthiness of the king.⁴ The growing colonial unrest forced them, and many others, to evaluate their options and decide what would best benefit their communities. Ultimately, the Oneida Nation and part of the Tuscarora Nation decided to fight alongside the American colonists. This put them at odds with their brothers and sisters in the Iroquois Confederacy, though those bonds have since been repaired. What has the American Revolution meant to them?

People of African descent likewise had to decide which side was most likely to serve their needs. For those who were enslaved, who could offer them freedom, and for those who were free, who offered the best possibility for fair and equal treatment? *Finding Freedom* (www.amrevmuseum.org/interactives/finding-freedom/app) uses the stories of five people of African descent living in Virginia in 1781 to explore the difficult decisions that were necessary for these men and women to navigate the complexity of this time to what they hoped would be their benefit. Ultimately, 15,000 to 20,000 men of African descent chose to fight with the British to gain their freedom, approximately three times as many as had chosen to support the Revolutionaries.

Remembering that the British colonial world encompassed more than just the 13 colonies, one might also look at Canada, the Caribbean, and the Ohio territories and ask, why did they choose not to ally with the Revolutionaries? Students can begin to explore this in the *Season of Independence: The People Speak* digital resource, also on the MoAR website: www.amrevmuseum.org/interactives/season-of-independence/app.

⁴ A portrait of Cunne Shote was painted during his trip, around 1762, and can be seen at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma: <https://collections.gilcrease.org/object/01761015>.

⁵ Images of the original Declaration of Independence, as well as a transcription, can be found online through the National Archives and Records Administration, at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>.

With all of this said, why then, did people choose to be Revolutionaries? Certainly, many of the causes are well-known: taxation without representation, the large presence of a standing army, perceived legislative overreach by British Parliament, and a sense of being abandoned by King George III. American colonists petitioned, boycotted, organized, and protested in a variety of ways, some well-known, some less so. For example, the Boston Tea Party is quite familiar to most Americans. But New Yorkers and Philadelphians turned ships carrying tea, away from their docks. Revolutionaries in Charleston, South Carolina, left a shipment of tea in a warehouse to rot rather than let it be sold. New Jerseyans burned a shipment of tea and an angry crowd in Annapolis, Maryland, forced merchants to burn their ship because it was carrying a load of tea. How did colonists across the colonies become Revolutionaries?

The king's role in "transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation, and tyranny" was particularly galling for angry—and perhaps fearful—colonists.⁵ By the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, King George III had contracts with the princes of regions in modern-day Germany, such as Hesse-Kassel, Brunswick, and Anspach-Bayreuth, to hire their subjects as soldiers.

QUESTIONS TO INSPIRE NHD RESEARCH:

- > How and why did individuals or groups become—or choose not to become—Revolutionaries? What reasons did the patriots give for challenging their reigning regime?
- > Why did Loyalists (or Tories) make the decision to stay loyal to king and country?
- > How and why did enslaved men and women, American Indian nations, and women become involved in the American Revolution? What did they hope to accomplish?



Christopher Ludwick's Cookie Board, 1754–1801, Museum of the American Revolution. Access an image of the artifact at <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/christopher-ludwicks-cookie-board>.

As historians have often taken the Revolutionaries at their word, the perception of these soldiers as mercenaries has persisted for over a century, but new analysis suggests that these men had much less control over their circumstances and benefitted much less than one might assume a soldier of fortune would.⁶ Interestingly, some even chose to desert their armies and blend into local German communities in the colonies, hoping life here would offer them a better chance at freedom. German immigrant Christopher Ludwick, a baker and confectioner who became Baker General of the Continental Army, was personally involved in recruiting them and even caring for German prisoners of war. What did the dream of freedom, liberty, and equality mean for them, and for Ludwick, as a more established immigrant?⁷

Choosing sides was a matter of logic and loyalty, but it was also a matter of emotion, and visual culture was an effective tool at swaying that. Revolutionaries, Loyalists, and the British used symbols and imagery to communicate powerful ideas about right versus wrong, belonging versus not belonging, strength versus vulnerability, and more.

⁶ To learn more about Hessians in the American Revolution, see David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Almost a century later, in his *Speech at Chicago* (July 10, 1858), Abraham Lincoln used the metaphor of an “electric cord” as connecting immigrants in his era to the ideals of the American Revolution. The speech is challenging in its understanding of race and attitudes toward African Americans, but that complexity is worth exploring. The speech has been published in the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume 2, published by The Abraham Lincoln Association in 1953, and has been made available online through the University of Michigan at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln2/1:526?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

⁸ This image can be found in the Collections section of the MoAR website, or in the American Liberties gallery. In the Virtual Museum, this area is referred to as *Propaganda on Both Sides* and contains a side-by-side examination of details of both propaganda pieces.

Many students are familiar with Paul Revere's engraving of Henry Pelham's image of the Boston Massacre and are aware that it is a form of political propaganda. The British created similar works, such as *A New Method of Macarony Making, as Practised at Boston*.⁸ The Library of Congress has a large collection of British satirical prints from the Revolutionary Era ([loc.gov/collections/british-cartoon-prints/](https://www.loc.gov/collections/british-cartoon-prints/)), which are fun to explore.

During World War II, the U.S. government created a poster to encourage and inspire Americans on the homefront to serve their country. Alongside images of modern troops, it featured the phrase “Americans will always fight for liberty,” images of Continental Army soldiers, and the flag that is believed to have flown at George Washington's headquarters and to have traveled with him on the field. This poster can be seen online in the Museum's *Multimedia Timeline of the American Revolution*.



Washington's Headquarters Flag, 1777–1783, Museum of the American Revolution. You can access an image of this artifact here: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/washingtons-headquarters-flag>.

The Museum of the American Revolution's *Multimedia Timeline of the American Revolution* ([amrevmuseum.org/timeline/](https://www.amrevmuseum.org/timeline/)) includes a number of examples of objects with meaningful symbols of the Revolutionary era and war, as well as examples of how this history has been commemorated or celebrated over time.

HOW DID THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION SURVIVE ITS DARKEST HOUR?

American colonists faced a variety of challenges over the course of the war, from not enough troops to troops that were not trained in a standardized fashion, constantly low supplies to disease and low morale. So, how were the 13 colonies (later, states) able to beat the British Empire? One answer worth exploring is the role of military intelligence, and of the people who gathered it: spies. Steer students to fascinating resources, such as *Spy Letters of the American Revolution*, housed at Clements Library at the University of Michigan (clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/). While many students know the names Nathan Hale and Benedict Arnold, a much larger network existed to help the U.S. Continental and British Armies gather intelligence and plot military strategy. Students might explore George Washington's famous spy letter, housed at the International Spy Museum (spymuseum.org/exhibition-experiences/about-the-collection/collection-highlights/george-washington-spy-letter/) or check out their exhibit on how *Spying Launched a Nation*.⁹

Students might look to other nations involved in the American Revolution. While the British and the Americans take center stage, much was accomplished because of alliances made with other countries. For instance, help from allies such as the Oneida and part of the Tuscarora nation is important to explore as well, including their military role at the Battle of Oriskany and their role in sharing supplies during the Valley Forge encampment. Other students might investigate the role of the French government in supporting the Revolutionaries. Students can see French swords and firearms on the Museum's website, as well as commemorative materials from the Marquis de Lafayette's return to the United States in 1824.

QUESTIONS TO INSPIRE NHD RESEARCH:

- > How have the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution inspired other movements in history?
- > How did other countries emulate the American Revolution?
- > How did activists for civil rights and women's rights use the language of these documents to promote their cause?

⁹ The International Spy Museum's SpyCast is a podcast that interviews ex-spies and espionage scholars on a variety of topics. Students might find the episode, "Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War" interesting. Access the podcast at spymuseum.org/multimedia/spycast/episode/author-debriefing-spies-patriots-and-traitors-american-intelligence-in-the-revolutionary-war/.

¹⁰ Look both in the Collections area (www.amrevmuseum.org/learn-and-explore/collection) and in the *Multimedia Timeline of the American Revolution* (www.amrevmuseum.org/timeline/).

¹¹ This practice, never an official policy of the Continental Army as a whole, was named for its promoter, Thomas Sumter, a brigadier general in the South Carolina militia. Beginning in 1781, he used the offer of pay in confiscated Loyalist property, including enslaved people, as a recruitment incentive to enlist new soldiers. Georgia practiced a similar policy. A useful brief explanation can be found in Matthew Spooner's essay, "The Problem of Order and the Transfer of Slave Property in the Revolutionary South," found in *The American Revolution Reborn*, edited by Patrick Spero and Michael Zuckerman. For a similar practice in Virginia, consult *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia*, by Michael A. McDonnell.

But they can also see a pair of Spanish pistols of the type that were carried by Spanish officers in the Revolutionary War battles that took place in the Mississippi Valley and along the Gulf of Mexico toward the end of the war.¹⁰

HOW REVOLUTIONARY WAS THE WAR? WHAT KIND OF NATION DID THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION CREATE?

The Revolutionary War accomplished something the colonists did not initially intend: American independence from Great Britain. But from the moment they set this in their sights, they knew they needed to begin laying the foundation for self-governance. While much focus is placed on the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and perhaps the Articles of Confederation, students should also look at the state constitutions that were created during the years of Revolution.

Pennsylvania's state constitution, for example, was considered quite radical, and perhaps the most democratic of them all, though it prohibited Jewish individuals and atheists from serving in public office. Massachusetts' constitutional ratification process served as a model for that of the federal Constitution years later. Many constitutions removed property ownership requirements for their voters, typically white males. New Jersey's constitution removed gender and racial limitations and for almost 31 years, women and free people of African descent who owned enough property were able to vote in the state. The Museum's online exhibit, *When Women Lost the Vote* (amrevmuseum.org/exhibits), is an excellent source of information on this topic.

Treatment of people of African descent—and the rights they were afforded—are another way of exploring the revolutionary nature of the war and the era as a whole. On one hand, soldiers of African descent generally fought in integrated units within the Continental Army, but on the other, some enslaved people were actually given to white soldiers in South Carolina state regiments as payment for those soldiers' service, through a policy known as "Sumter's law."¹¹ Gradual abolition, by which children born after a certain date to enslaved mothers were freed in their 20s or 30s, began in the northern states during the war. However, the American North continued to invest in and use the products produced by the labor of enslaved people, and slavery flourished in the southern region after the war's end.

African American women like Sarah Louisa Forten, her mother, and sisters—the family members of a Revolutionary War privateer named James Forten—helped found the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 to fight against the practice.

Websites like those of James Madison’s Montpelier (montpelier.org/learn/tag/slavery/), George Washington’s Mount Vernon (mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/), and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello (monticello.org/slavery/) are useful to explore the contradictions between slavery and freedom in the lives of the early nation’s prominent leaders and the experiences of those enslaved by them. Other sites, like the African Burial Ground (nps.gov/afbg/index.htm), administered by the National Park Service, focus exclusively on the stories and experiences of people of African descent.

Exploring the pension applications of veterans of the Continental Army opens up additional paths of inquiry and can highlight both their experiences during the war and their circumstances in the early to mid-1800s as they sought financial assistance from often difficult situations. The National Archives and Records Administration holds the original applications, but they have been digitized and placed online by Ancestry.com and Fold3.com (libraries sometimes offer free access to these services). Many transcriptions of applications for veterans from the American South, however, as well as for many who were from elsewhere but fought in the southern region, can be found online for free at revwarapps.org/. How did these men, and sometimes, their widows, think about the war and what it had meant to and for them?

What did Loyalists, some of whom evacuated the United States at war’s end, but many of whom did not, believe the American Revolution meant to and for them? Some answers can be found in Loyalist claims for compensation from the British government. These, and other records, can be found in repositories such as Library and Archives Canada (bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/Pages/introduction.aspx), The Loyalist Collection of the University of New Brunswick (loyalist.lib.unb.ca/), and the National Archives of the United Kingdom (nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/american-revolution/).

The Revolutionary nature of the war can be explored through the way in which maps and cartography were used to project political and social understandings and ideals for a new nation. The American Philosophical Society’s exhibit, *Mapping a Nation* (amphilsoc.org/museum/exhibitions/mapping-nation-shaping-early-american-republic-online-exhibition), is a useful starting point for this topic.

Finally, as students ask, “What kind of nation did the Revolution create?” they can choose to examine subsequent events in United States history through the lens of the goals and ideals of the American Revolution. This, of course, would bring them back to Benjamin Rush’s original examination of the American Revolution. If “nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed” and “[i]t remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of government, after they are established and brought to perfection,” then has the Revolution yet ended? Or are we all actors in its ongoing story?¹²

¹² *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution.*

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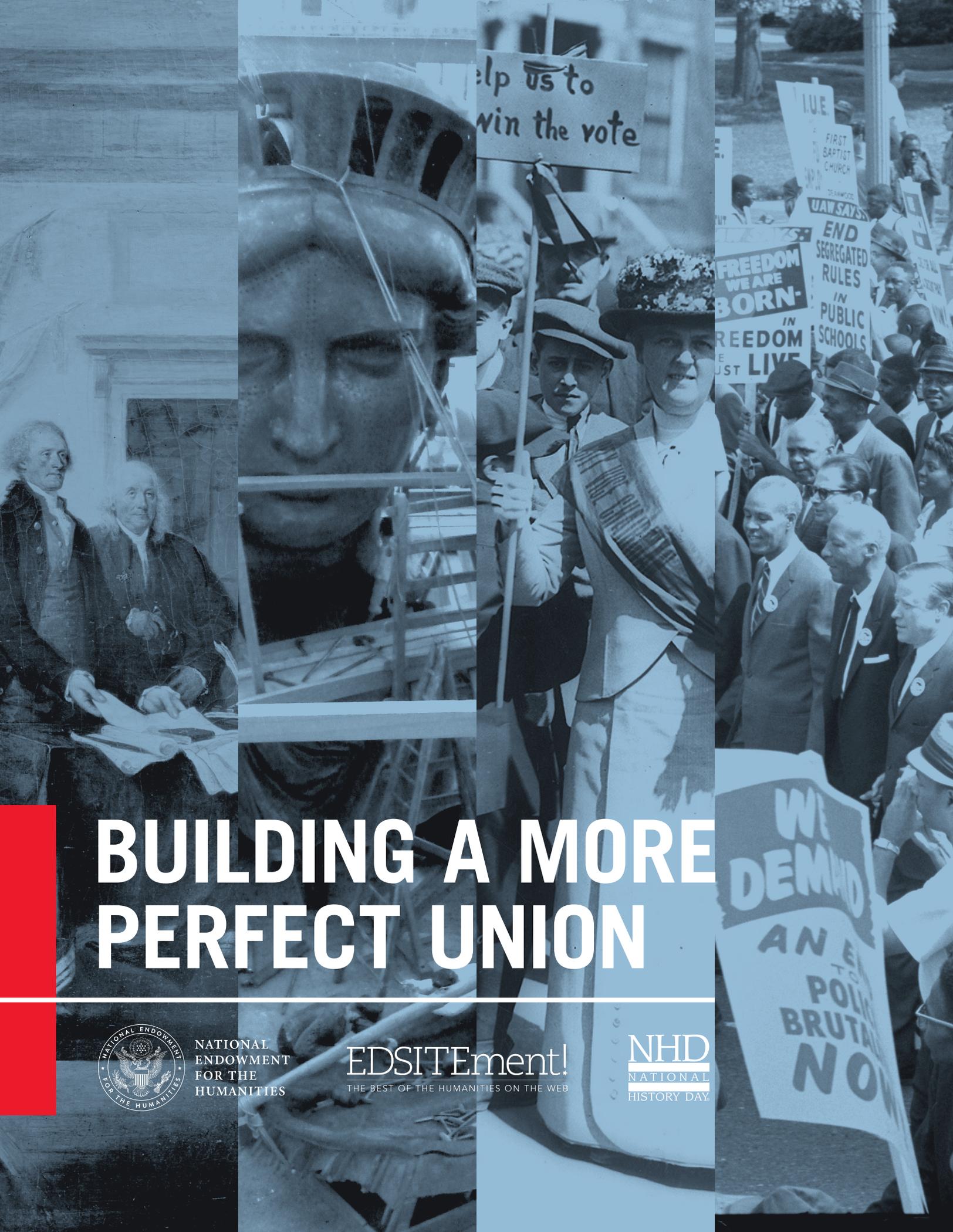
Lesson Plan: Taking Up Arms and the Challenge of Slavery in the Revolutionary Era
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/taking-arms-and-challenge-slavery-revolutionary-era>

Media Resource: Picturing America: Paul Revere
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/media-resources/picturing-america-paul-revere>

Media Resource: Coming of the American Revolution
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/general-resources/coming-american-revolution>

Media Resource: People Not Property: Stories of Slavery in the Colonial North
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/media-resources/people-not-property-stories-slavery-colonial-north>

Humanities Feature: Celebrating Freedom
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