



REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS



HISTORY
OF
PHILIP'S W
COMMONLY
THE GREAT IN

Promises Made, Promises Broken: The Rhode Island First Regiment and The Struggle for Liberty

GUIDING QUESTION:

What is the meaning of “liberty,” and how do different narratives challenge our understanding of freedom for formerly enslaved soldiers who fought for Rhode Island in the American Revolution?

CO-AUTHORS:

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► OVERVIEW

The 1778 act creating the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, also known as the “Black Regiment,” was passed to address the shortage of men fighting for the Continental Army in the American Revolution. The Act, which promised freedom and pensions for enslaved men who enlisted if they fought and survived the war, was repealed by the General Assembly three months later. The Rhode Island First distinguished themselves in major battles for American independence and then fought for their rights promised by the state of Rhode Island. In this lesson, students will explore ideas and perspectives about liberty and freedom from an African heritage perspective in the Revolutionary period.

► OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- › Explore and analyze primary sources from Rhode Island during the Revolutionary War;
- › Discuss the meaning of freedom and liberty to enslaved people, through the passage of the Act creating the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, also known as the “Black Regiment,” and the experience of Thomas Nichols; and
- › Integrate evidence from primary sources to support new ideas and perspectives about liberty and freedom in the Revolutionary period.

► STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

- › CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- › CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CONNECTIONS TO C3 FRAMEWORK

- › D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.
- › D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

► DOCUMENTS USED

PRIMARY SOURCES

Letter to Benjamin and Phoebe Nichols, dictated by Thomas Nichols, January 18, 1781
Varnum Memorial Armory Museum, East Greenwich, Rhode Island
<http://smallstatebighistory.com/amazing-letter-discovered-from-a-black-soldier-of-the-first-rhode-island-regiment-containing-a-shocking-request/>

Painting, Jean Baptiste Antoine De Verger, *Soldiers in Uniform*, c. 1781–1784
Library of Congress (2021669876)
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021669876/>

Painting, John Trumbull, *George Washington and William Lee*, 1780
The Metropolitan Museum of Art (24.109.88)
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12822>

Rhode Island General Assembly, Act allowing slaves to enlist in the Continental Battalion, February 1778
Rhode Island Department of State, Rhode Island State Archives
<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/Black-Regiment.pdf>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Article, Cameron Boutin, “The 1st Rhode Island Regiment and Revolutionary America’s Lost Opportunity,” January 17, 2018
Journal of the American Revolution
https://allthingsliberty.com/2018/01/1st-rhode-island-regiment-revolutionary-americas-lost-opportunity/#_edn10

Illustration, *Peter Salem shoots Major Pitcairn at Bunker Hill*, 1894
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (b11216895)
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-a121-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Painting, Frank Quagan, *Soldiers in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment*, c. 1976
Designed for the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the 1st Rhode Island Regiment
Varnum Armory Museum, East Greenwich, Rhode Island
<https://varnumcontinentals.org/2020/01/featured-exhibit-frank-quagans-rendition-of-varnums-black-regiment/>

► TEACHER-CREATED MATERIALS

- › Revolutionary War Images Primary Source Packet
- › Document Analysis Graphic Organizer

► ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- › Review the article, “The 1st Rhode Island Regiment and Revolutionary America’s Lost Opportunity” for background information.
- › Prepare to project the Revolutionary War Images to the class.
- › Make one copy of the following for each student:
 - » Primary Source Packet (use originals or transcriptions as preferred)
 - » Document Analysis Organizer
- › Organize students into groups of two to five students each.

Students interested in this topic might be interested in researching the following for an NHD project:

- › **Caesar Babcock’s Revolutionary War Pension Application (1834)**
- › **The 54th Massachusetts Regiment (1863–1865, 2008–present)**
- › **The Reconstruction Amendments (1865–1870)**
- › **Buffalo Soldiers (1866–1951)**
- › **Double V Campaign (1942–1945)**

► PROCEDURE

ACTIVITY ONE (15 MINUTES)

- › Organize students into groups of two to five students each and designate students to be the group recorder and presenter to the class. Rotate these tasks as needed.
- › Explain that you will project four images from or about the American Revolution. Ask each group to discuss each image and make observations. The designated recorder should write a list of at least five observations from the group for each image.
 - » **Teacher Tip:** This activity will work best with limited guidelines for observations.
- › Project the four Revolutionary War Images to the students. Give students one to two minutes to view each image.
- › Return to the first image and share observations as a class.
- › Ask the students:
 - » *When you think of images of other battles or wars, how are the ones examined in this activity similar? How are they different?*
 - » *How are African American soldiers depicted in these images?*
 - » *How might someone in the Revolutionary period have reacted to these images? In the North? In the South? In Great Britain?*

ACTIVITY TWO (30 MINUTES)

- › Distribute one copy of the Rhode Island General Assembly, Act allowing slaves to enlist in the Continental Battalion and one Document Analysis Graphic Organizer to each student.
- › Project the transcript of the primary source and read aloud as a whole class or in smaller groups. Direct students to underline or highlight key words and phrases while reading or listening.
- › Work in small groups to identify five to ten key words from the document. Allow students to work in groups to write a two- or three-sentence summary of the document, in their own words. Circulate to check for understanding. Direct students to complete the Document Analysis Graphic Organizer. Monitor progress and answer questions.
- › Discuss the source with the whole class:
 - » *What stood out to you? What did you notice about the source?*
 - » *Who or what does the source's author(s) seem most concerned about? Why?*
 - » *Do you think the Rhode Island government upheld the promises made in the document? Why or why not?*
 - » *What are some of the questions your group generated? Where might you go to find the answers?*

ACTIVITY THREE (30 MINUTES)

- › Distribute and project the transcription of the Letter to Benjamin and Phoebe Nichols.
- › Read, in groups, the letter by Thomas Nichols, while underlining or highlighting key words and phrases. Repeat the process above and have students complete the Document Analysis Graphic Organizer.
- › Discuss the source with the whole class:
 - » *Why would Thomas Nichols write to his former enslavers?*
 - » *What difficulties might previous enslaved soldiers, like Thomas Nichols, have faced that might be different from white soldiers?*
 - » *How does this source connect to the previous source? Could Thomas Nichols have been re-enslaved? Who was supposed to provide care for Thomas Nichols?*

- › Ask students to consider both primary sources, as well as the greater context of the Revolutionary War and ideas of freedom and liberty in this time period.
- › Ask students, *How do the primary sources studied today complicate our understanding of liberty and freedom in the Revolutionary period?*

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- › Ask students to propose an idea for how the Rhode Island First could best be commemorated and remembered for their bravery and fight for individual freedom, aside from a monument or memorial. Ask students how they could incorporate multiple perspectives into their commemoration.
- › Ask students to brainstorm a list of perspectives from the Revolutionary Era that are less commonly known or discussed.

To access a PDF containing all of the sources and materials to complete this lesson plan, go to: nhd.org/RevIdeals.

Revolutionary War Images

IMAGE ONE

Painting, Jean Baptiste Antoine De Verger, *Soldiers in Uniform*, c. 1781–1784

Library of Congress (2021669876)

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2021669876/>



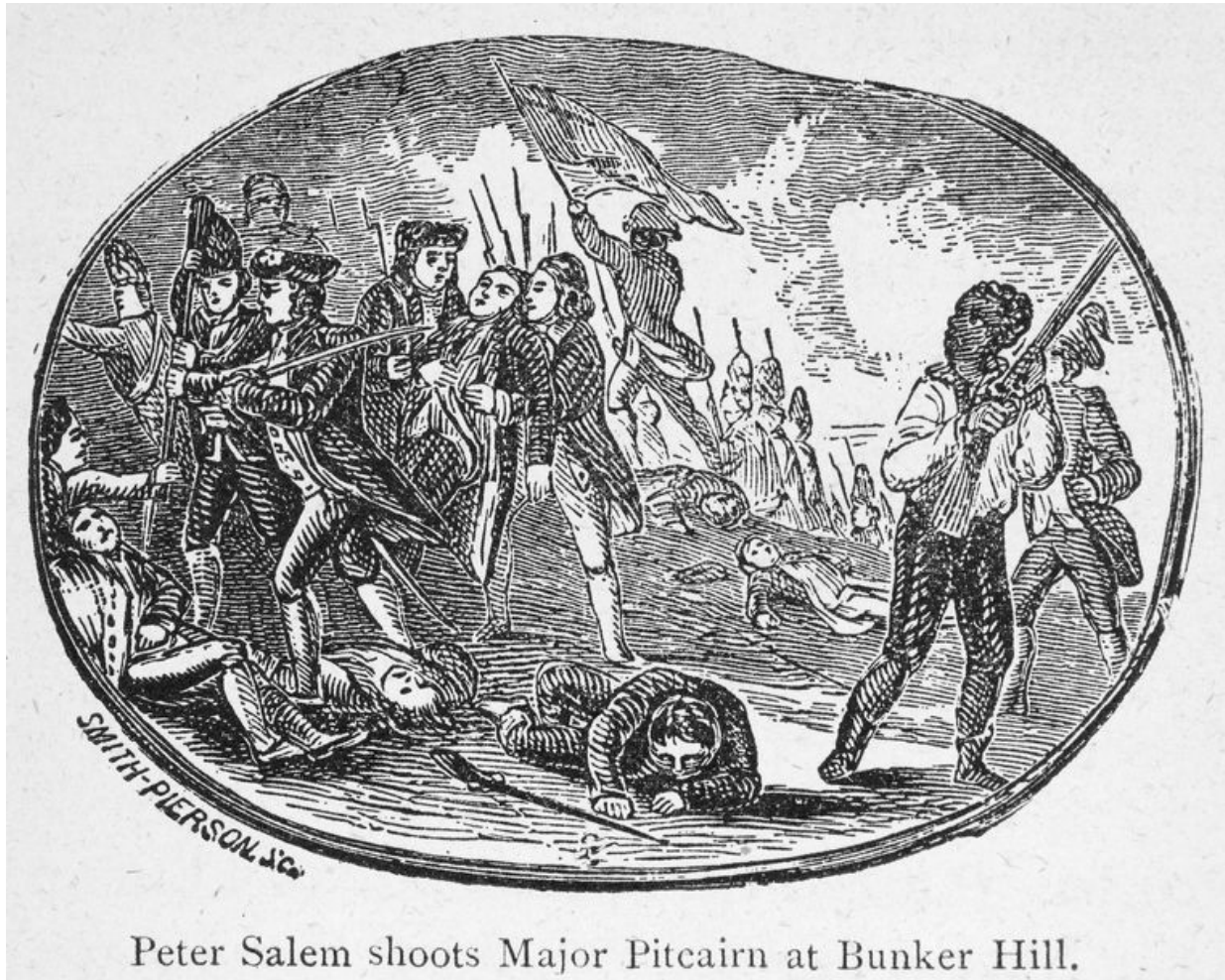
Revolutionary War Images (Con't)

IMAGE TWO

Illustration, *Peter Salem shoots Major Pitcairn at Bunker Hill, 1894*

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (b11216895)

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-a121-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



Peter Salem shoots Major Pitcairn at Bunker Hill.

Revolutionary War Images (Con't)

IMAGE THREE

Painting, John Trumbull, *George Washington and William Lee*, 1780

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (24.109.88)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12822>



Revolutionary War Images (Con't)

IMAGE FOUR

Painting, Frank Quagan, *Soldiers in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment*, c. 1976

Designed for the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the 1st Rhode Island Regiment

Varnum Armory Museum, East Greenwich, Rhode Island

<https://varnumcontinentals.org/2020/01/featured-exhibit-frank-quagans-rendition-of-varnums-black-regiment/>

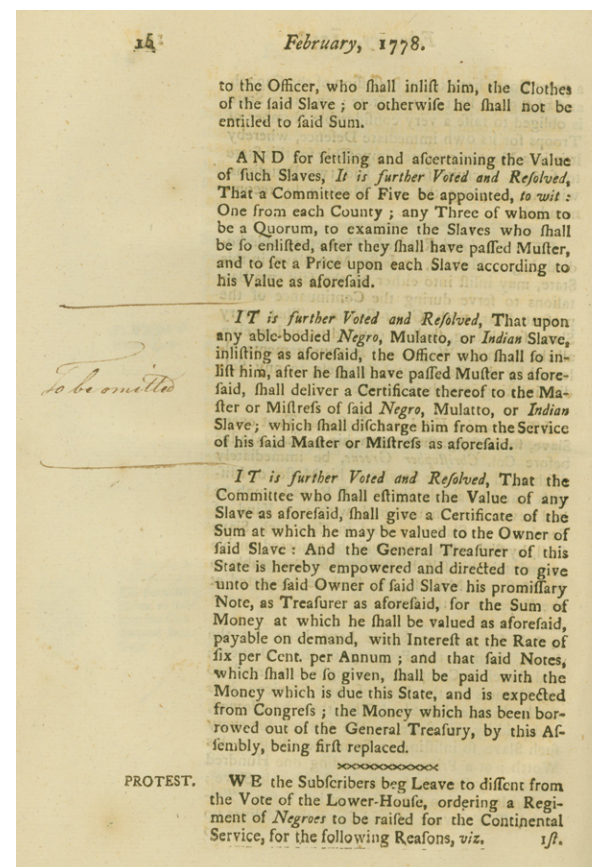
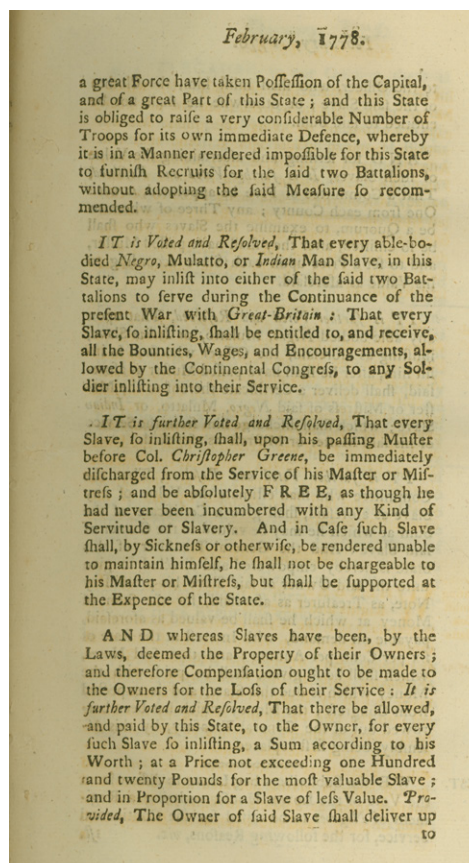
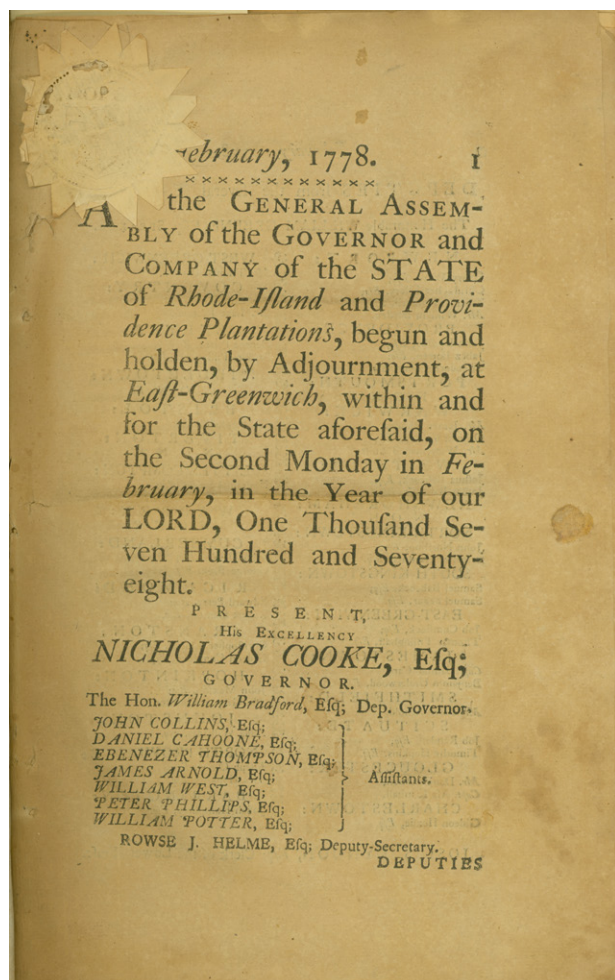


Primary Source Packet

Rhode Island General Assembly, Act allowing slaves to enlist in the Continental Battalion, February 1778

Rhode Island Department of State, Rhode Island State Archives

<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/Black-Regiment.pdf>



Primary Source Packet (Con't)

Rhode Island General Assembly, Act allowing slaves to enlist in the Continental Battalion, February 1778
Rhode Island Department of State, Rhode Island State Archives
<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/Black-Regiment.pdf>

Transcription:¹

Whereas, for the preservation of the Rights and Liberties of the United States, it is necessary that the whole power of the Government should be exerted in recruiting the Continental Battalions: And whereas his Excellency General Washington hath enclosed to this State the Proposal made to him by Brigadier-General Varnum to enlist into the two Battalions, raising by this State, such Slaves as should be willing to enter into the Service: And whereas History affords us frequent Precedents of the wisest, the freest, and bravest Nations have liberated their Slaves, and enlisted them as Soldiers to fight in the Defense of their Country; and also whereas the Enemy with a great Force have taken Possession of the Capital, and of a great Part of this State; and this State is obliged to raise a very considerable Number of Troops for its own immediate Defense, whereby it is in a Manner rendered impossible for this State to furnish Recruits for the said two Battalions, without adopting the said Measure so recommended. It is Voted and Resolved, that every able-bodied Negro, Mulatto, or Indian Man Slave, in this State, may enlist into either of the said two Battalions to serve during the Continuance of the present War with Great-Britain: That every Slave, so enlisting, shall be entitled to, and receive, all the Bounties, Wages, and Encouragements, allowed by the Continental Congress, to any Soldier enlisting into their Service.

It is further Voted and Resolved, that every Slave, so enlisting, shall, upon his passing Muster before Col. Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the Service of his Master or Mistress; and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been encumbered with any Kind of Servitude or Slavery. And in Case such Slave shall, by Sickness or otherwise, be rendered unable to maintain himself, he shall not be chargeable to his Master or Mistress, but shall be supported at the Expense of the State.

And whereas Slaves have been, by the Laws, deemed the Property of their Owners; and therefore Compensation ought to be made to the Owners for the Loss of their Service: It is further Voted and Resolved, That there be allowed, and paid by this State, to the Owner, for every such Slave so enlisting, a Sum according to his Worth; at a Price not exceeding one Hundred and twenty Pounds for the most valuable Slave; and in Proportion for a Slave of less Value. Provided, The Owner of the said Slave shall deliver up to the Officer, who shall enlist him, the Clothes of the said Slave; or otherwise he shall not be entitled to said Sum.

And for settling and ascertaining the Value of such Slaves, It is further Voted and Resolved, That a Committee of Five be appointed, to wit: One from each County; any Three of whom to be a Quorum, to examine the Slaves who shall be so entitled, after they shall have passed Muster, and to set a Price upon each Slave according to his Value as aforesaid.

It is further Voted and Resolved, That upon any able-bodied Negro, Mulatto, or Indian Slave, enlisting as aforesaid, the Officer who shall so enlist him, after he shall have passed Muster as aforesaid, shall deliver a Certificate thereof to the Master or Mistress of said Negro, Mulatto, or Indian Slave; which shall discharge him from the Service of his said Master or Mistress as aforesaid.

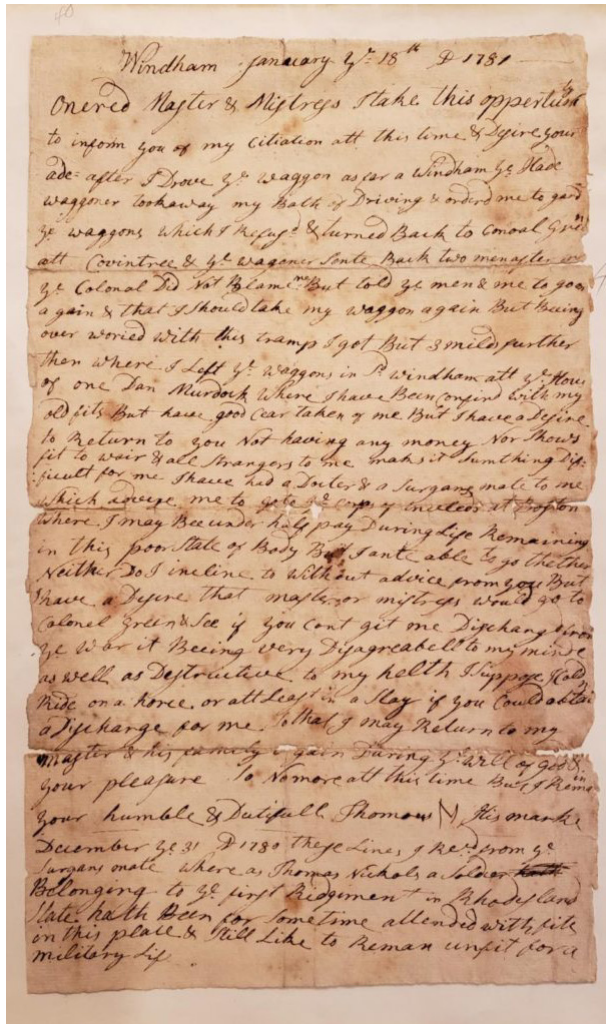
It is further Voted and Resolved, That the Committee who shall estimate the Value of any Slave as aforesaid, shall give a Certificate of the Sum at which he may be valued to the Owner of said Slave: And the General Treasurer of this State is hereby empowered and directed to give unto the said Owner of said Slave his promissory Note, as Treasurer as aforesaid, for the Sum of Money at which he shall be valued as aforesaid, payable on demand, with Interest at the Rate of six per Cent. per Annum; and that said Notes, which shall be so given, shall be paid with the Money which is due this State, and is expected from Congress; the Money which has been borrowed out of the General Treasury, by this Assembly, being first replaced.

¹This version of the source was provided by the State Department of Rhode Island and adapted from the original version at the Rhode Island State Archives. This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document. It can be accessed at <https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/Black-Regiment.pdf>.

Primary Source Packet (Con't)

Letter to Benjamin and Phoebe Nichols, dictated by Thomas Nichols, January 18, 1781
Varnum Memorial Armory Museum, East Greenwich, Rhode Island

<http://smallstatebighistory.com/amazing-letter-discovered-from-a-black-soldier-of-the-first-rhode-island-regiment-containing-a-shocking-request/>



Transcription:²

The letter is from Thomas Nichols of Warwick, Rhode Island. It was sent to Benjamin and Phoebe Nichols of Warwick, who had once enslaved Thomas Nichols.

Windham [, Connecticut,] January 18th, 1781

Honored Master & Mistress:

I take this opportunity to inform you of my situation at this time and desire your aide. After I drove 3 wagons as far as Windham, a wagoner took away my badge of driving and ordered me to guard the wagons, which I refused. I turned back to Colonel Christopher Greene at Coventry and the wagoner sent back two men after me. The Colonel did not blame me but told the men and me to go on again and that I should take my wagon again. But being over worried with this tramp I got but 3 miles further than where I left the wagons in South Windham at the house of one Dan Murdock where I have been confined with my old fits. But good care is taken of me. But I have a desire to return to you. Not having any money, nor clothes fit to wear and all strangers to me makes it something difficult for me. I have had a Doctor and a Surgeon's Mate [examine] me who advise me to go to the Corps of Invalids at Boston, where I may be under half pay during the life remaining in this poor state of body. But I am not able to go there. Neither do I incline to do so without advice from you. But I have a desire that Master or Mistress would go to Colonel Greene and see if you can't get me discharged from the war, it being very disagreeable to my mind as well as destructive to my health. I suppose I could ride on a horse or at least in a sly if you could obtain a discharge for me so that I may return to my master and his family again, bearing the will of God and your pleasure. So no more at this time. But I Remain your humble and dutiful Thomas.

"N" His mark

December 31, 1780. These lines I received from the Surgeon's Mate: Whereas Thomas Nichols a soldier belonging to the First Regiment in Rhode Island State has been for some time attended with fits in this place and still likely to remain unfit for military life.

² Transcription provided by Small State, Big History: The Online Review of Rhode Island History.

Document Analysis Organizer

Rhode Island General Assembly, Act allowing slaves to enlist in the Continental Battalion, February 1778

Key words (list five to ten):

Summary of source (two or three complete sentences, in your own words):

Sourcing and Context

Who created this source? _____ When was this source created? _____

Why was this source created? _____

How does this source fit with other events during this time period (historical context)?

Close Reading

Which individuals or groups of people were included in the Rhode Island General Assembly Act? Was anyone left out?

What did the enslaved people receive for their military service? What requirements did the enslaved need to meet?

How were enslavers compensated, and what promises were made to them?

Document Analysis Organizer (Con't)

Analysis

Answer the questions below using complete sentences and evidence from the source.

1. How is this source valuable to a student studying the American Revolution? Consider the source's content, origin, and purpose in your analysis.

2. What about this document is unusual or groundbreaking? Does this document change the way you view the American Revolution? Why or why not?

Questions

Write at least two questions you have about this source.

Document Analysis Organizer

Thomas Nichols Letter, 1781

Key words (list five to ten):

Summary of source (two or three complete sentences, in your own words):

Sourcing and Context

Who created this source? _____ When was this source created? _____

Why was this source created? _____

How does this source fit with other events during this time period (historical context)?

Close Reading

What service did Thomas Nichols complete as part of the Rhode Island First?

What medical condition might Thomas Nichols have suffered by fighting in the war? How can we tell?

What is Thomas Nichols asking of his former enslavers?

Document Analysis Organizer (Con't)

Analysis

Answer the questions below using complete sentences and evidence from the source.

1. How might Thomas Nichols view liberty or freedom?

2. What perspectives and information does this letter provide that a secondary source cannot?

Questions

Write at least two questions you have about this source.
