African Americans

For the largest of America's minorities—the African-American population—the war had limited, but nevertheless profound, significance. For some, it meant freedom, because many slaves took advantage of the British presence in the South in the final years of the war to escape. The British enabled many of them to leave the country— not out of any principled commitment to emancipation, but as a way of disrupting the American war effort. In South Carolina, for example, nearly a third of all slaves defected during the war. Africans had constituted over 60 percent of the population in 1770; by 1790, that figure had declined to about 44 percent.

For other African Americans, the Revolution meant an increased exposure to the concept, although seldom to the reality, of liberty. Most black Americans could not read, but few could avoid exposure to the new and exciting ideas circulating through the towns and cities, and even at times on the plantations, where they lived. At times, they attempted to apply those ideas to themselves. The results included incidents in several communities in which African Americans engaged in open resistance to white control. In Charleston, South Carolina, for example, Thomas Jeremiah, a free black, was executed in 1775 after Patriot leaders accused him of conspiring to smuggle British guns to South Carolina slaves. It also produced some eloquent efforts by black writers (mostly in the North) to articulate the lessons of the revolution for their people. "Liberty is a jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven," the black New Englander Lemuel Hayes wrote in 1776. "Even an African has Equally good a right to his Liberty in com-mon with Englishmen.... Shall a man's Couler Be the Decisive Criterion wherby to Judg of his natural right?"

That was one reason why in South Carolina and Georgia—where slaves constituted half or more of the population—there was great ambivalence about the rev-olution. Slave owners opposed British efforts to emancipate their slaves, but they also feared that the revolution itself would foment slave rebellions. The same fears helped prevent English colonists in the Caribbean islands (who were far more greatly outnumbered by African slaves) from joining with the continental Americans in the revolt against Britain. In much of the North, the combination of revolutionary sentiment and evangelical Christian fervor helped spread antislavery sentiments widely through society. But in the South, white support for slavery survived. Southern churches rejected the antislavery ideas of the North and worked instead to develop a rationale for slavery—in part by reinforcing ideas about white superiority, in part by encouraging slave owners to make slavery more humane.

As in so many other periods of American history, the Revolution exposed the continuing tension between the nation's commitment to liberty and its commitment to slavery. To people in our time, and even to some people in revolutionary times, it seems obvious that liberty and slavery are incompatible with one another. But to many white Americans in the eighteenth century, especially in the South, that did not seem obvious. Many white southerners believed, in fact, that enslaving Africans—whom they considered inferior and unfit for citizenship—was the best way to ensure liberty for white people. They feared the impact of free black people living alongside whites. They also feared that without slaves, it would be necessary to recruit a servile white workforce in the South, and that the resulting inequalities would jeopardize the survival of liberty. One of the ironies of the American Revolution, therefore, wa that white Americans were fighting both to secure freedom for themselves and to preserve slavery for others.