

# Absolutely Free

The 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment  
also known as the Black Regiment



Watercolor by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine DeVerger

A Lesson Plan Created by Smith's Castle

# Absolutely Free

## Introduction

The Black Regiment was created on February 14, 1778, when the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the Act Allowing the Enslaved to Enlist. Previously, free men of color had at times been allowed to enlist, including many that eventually became part of the Black Regiment. The main inducement for enslaved men of color to enlist into the Continental Army was the promise of freedom.

Although known as the Black Regiment due to the predominance of men of African descent that made up the unit, many men of Indigenous descent and mixed races also were members of the regiment. The unit remained intact as a segregated regiment of men of color, led by white officers, for less than two years. Eventually the members of the Black Regiment were integrated into a unit made up of men of all races.

## RIDE Social Studies Standards

SS4.4.2 Rhode Island participation in the American Revolution

Connection to the following Rhode Island Anchor Standards:

CG.RL Rules and Laws, CG.RR Rights and Responsibilities, H.CC Change/Continuity, H.HP Historical Perspectives, H.IG Individuals/Groups, G.WST The World in Spatial Terms, E.SA Scarcity/Abundance

Guiding questions for instruction:

What was the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment and how did participation affect enslaved and free Black and Indigenous Rhode Islanders?

Explain the formation of and recruitment for the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment (e.g., enslaved Black Rhode Islanders, free Black and Indigenous men), and analyze the reasons men decided to join the Regiment (e.g., promise of freedom after the war for enslaved soldiers, belief in the ideals of the Revolution).

Notes for educators:

This lesson plan is divided into two parts to allow it to be used in two sittings when necessary. The use of all the documents gives a better understanding of the various aspects of the Black Regiment. A separate file is attached with images that can be reproduced for the classroom.

Absolutely Free (Part 1)  
Document #1  
The Rhode Island Regiment



"Brave Men as Ever Fought" by Don Troiani

Document #1 Introductory Questions

What do you think is taking place in this picture?

Do you recognize the insignia on the men's hats? Where have you seen it?

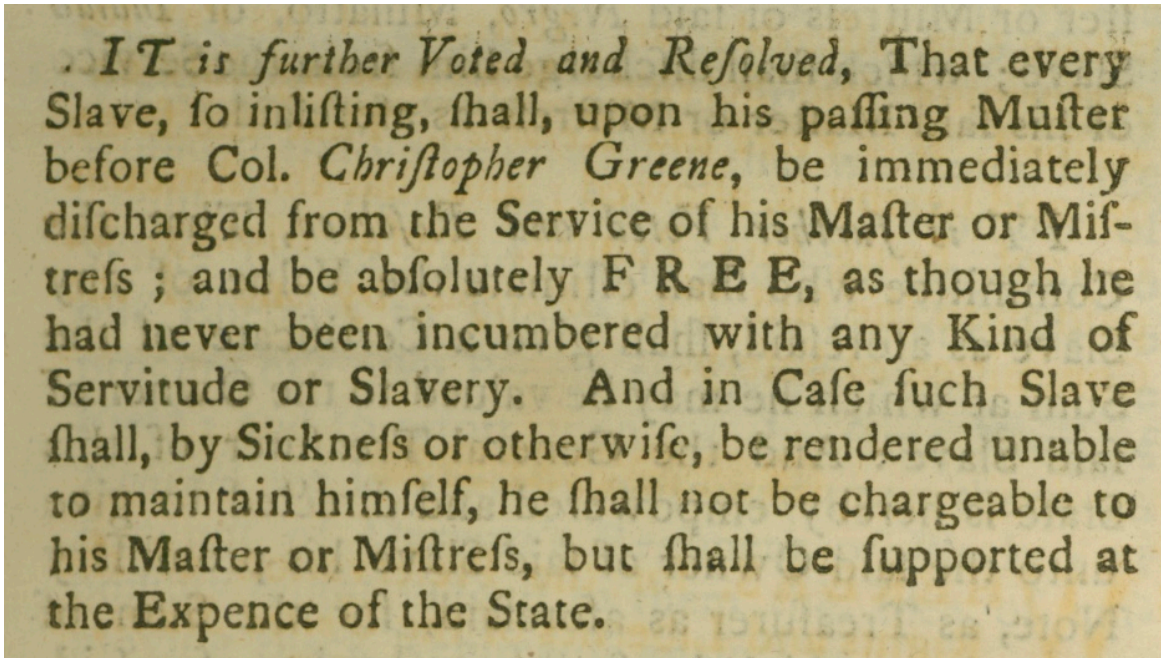
What event in America's history was taking place when this scene was happening?

Why do you think so many people are watching this event?

## Absolutely Free (Part 1)

### Document #2

#### Text from the Act to Allow the Enslaved to Enlist



*IT is further Voted and Resolved, That every Slave, so inlisting, shall, upon his passing Muster before Col. Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the Service of his Master or Mistress; and be absolutely F R E E, as though he had never been incumbered 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 Expence of the State.*

#### Document #2 Transcribed in Contemporary English

It is voted on and passed by the General Assembly that every enslaved man that enlists and is inspected by Colonel Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the Service of his Master or Mistress; and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been held in any Kind of Servitude or Slavery. And in Case the enslaved man becomes sick or wounded, and is unable to take care of himself, his Master or Mistress is not responsible for his care, but he shall be supported by the State of Rhode Island.

#### Document #2 Questions

What were the enslaved men promised if they enlisted in the Army?

How long did they have to wait to receive their "reward" for enlisting?

Were the enslavers of these men male or female?

Who would take care of the soldiers if they became sick or wounded during the war?

Absolutely Free (Part 1)  
Document #3  
General Treasurer's Accounting List

1778

*State of Rhode Island & Providence Plantations*

*An Account of the Negro Slaves imported into the Continental Plantations to whom they did belong, with the Valuation of such Slaves, and Notes given*

Month	Slave Name	Owner	Valuation	Notes
March 6	One Negro named <i>John</i> (Price)	belonging to William Price of East Greenwich	valued at £120	for which gave my Note with 6% Int. £120
6	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 2. 120
6	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £100	Providence d. 3. 100
Feb 25	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 4. 120
	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 5. 120
Mar 31	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 6. 120
Apr 2	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 7. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 8. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 9. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 10. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 11. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 12. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 13. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 14. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 15. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 16. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 17. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 18. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 19. 120
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3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 23. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 24. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 25. 120
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3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 28. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 29. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 30. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 31. 120
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3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 53. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 54. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 55. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 56. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 57. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 58. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 59. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 60. 120
3	<i>John</i>	Slave to James Bush	valued at £120	Providence d. 61. 120

## Absolutely Free (Part1)

### Document #3 Transcribed Selected Entries

<b>Enslaved Recruit</b>	<b>Enslaver's Name</b>	<b>Town</b>	<b>Value</b>
York Champlin	Rob Champlin	South Kingstown	120£
Boston Willbour	John Willbour	Little Compton	110£
John Burroughs	William Burroughs	Newport	110£
Primus Brown	Gideon Brown	Johnston	120£
Isaac Rodman	Daniel Rodman	South Kingstown	120£
Britain Saltonstall	Dudley Saltonstall	Westerly	105£
James Clark	Gideon Clark	South Kingstown	120£
Mintus Gardner	Henry Gardner	South Kingstown	110£
Moses Updike	Lodowick Updike	North Kingstown	93£
Caesar Updike	Lodowick Updike	North Kingstown	120£
Prince Randall	Henry Randall	Cranston	120£
Rutter Gardner	Nicholas Gardner	Exeter	30£
Thomas Nichols	Benjamin Nichols	Warwick	120£
Cesar Rose	John Rose	South Kingstown	120£

The Accounting list and this chart include several of the enslaved men that enlisted into the army. The chart shows the name of the enslaved man that enlisted, their enslaver, the town where they lived, and the amount of money paid to the enslaver. The enslaver was paid money by the state when his/her enslaved man enlisted. The majority of the recruits came from what is now Washington County (AKA South County) where dozens of plantations utilized enslaved laborers. Enslaved people did not generally have last names. One purpose in giving the enslaved recruits last names was to identify the men more easily. Many of the men shared the same first name. The men were given the last name of their enslaver to keep track of who was to be compensated for the loss of their "property."

## Absolutely Free (Part 2)

### Document #3 Questions

Which town provided the largest number of recruits?

Why might that town have had a significant number of enslaved men?

Why do you think the enslaved men took the same last name of their enslaver?

What was the highest amount paid to an enslaver?

Why do you think one of the enslaved men would have been valued at only 30£?

# Absolutely Free (Part 2)

## Document #4

### July 1778 Muster Roll

Muster Roll of Detachment from the 1st Rhode Island Battalion Commanded by Col. Charles Greene in service of the United States for the 11th of June 1778

Commissioned  
 Capt. Thom. Arnold March 21 1777 Mounted about  
 Capt. Jm. Wallen June 11 1777  
 Lt. Jm. Arnold Feb. 11 1777  
 Lt. Jm. Johnston do 11 1777  
 En. Daniel Edginghaff do 11 1777 to Guard

No.	Rank	Name	Remarks	No.	Rank	Name	Remarks
1	W. M. High	1	Sick Valley Forge	1	Jam. Grayson	1	1
2	Gr. Lippin	1	Jamaica	2	Nich. Spink	1	1
3	Red Lewis	1		3	J. Th. Fisher	1	1
4				4	Jam. Morye	1	1
5				5			
6				6			
7				7			
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Comd. by James July 10 1778  
 Mustered them Capt. Thom. Arnold Detachment as specified in the above Roll  
 D. Bradford

This is a muster roll from July 10, 1778. Nearly all of the 55 men of color listed on the roll were free men of color that enlisted the year before enslaved men were allowed to enlist. The following month, this company joined the formerly enslaved men in forming the Black Regiment. On paper the regiment totaled around 175 men of color, roughly 125 formerly enslaved men and 60 free men.

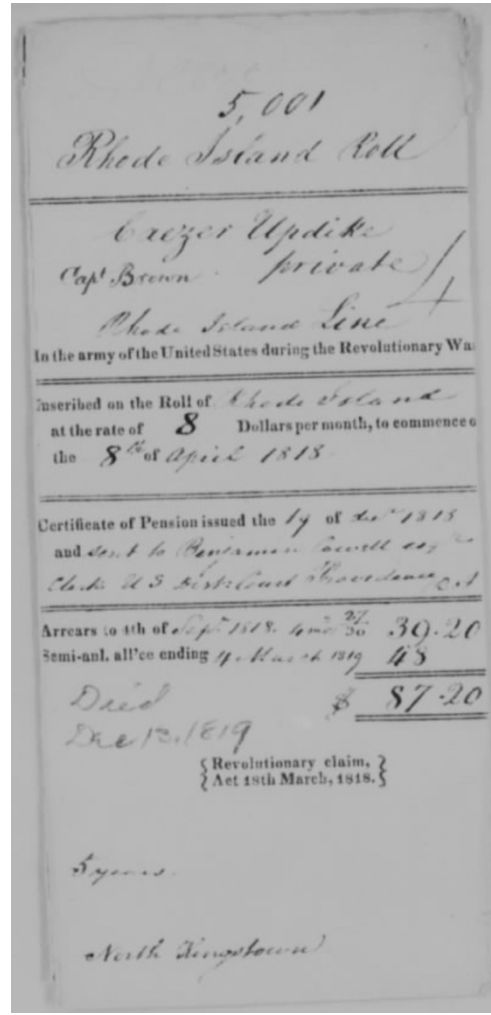
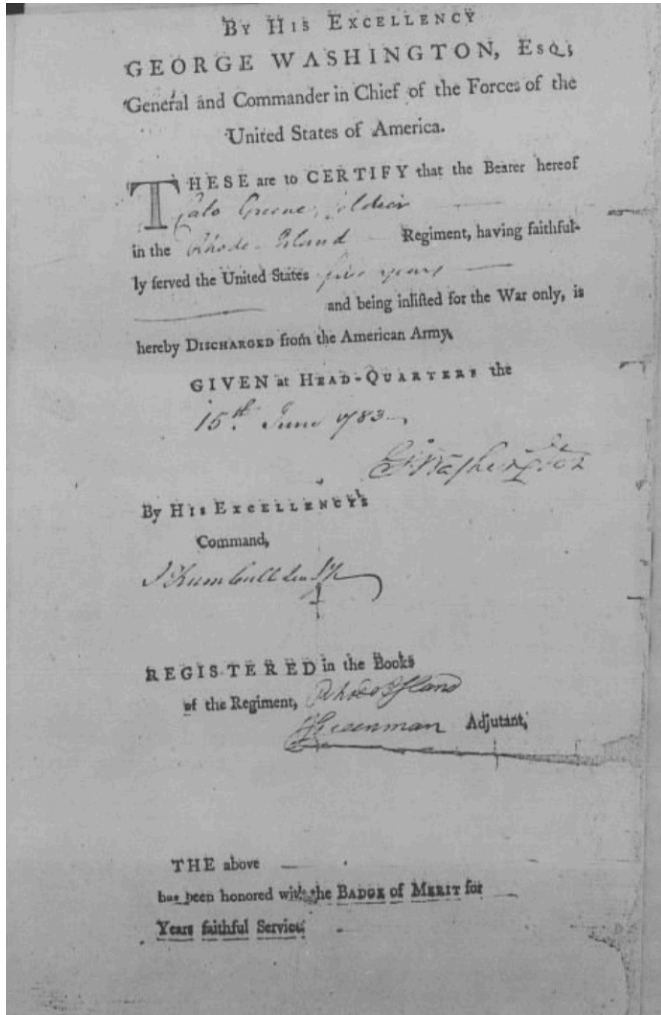
Discuss the reasons that the free men might have enlisted, and how that differed from the enslaved men's reasons for enlisting.

Would you have enlisted if you were a free man? Why or why not?

All of the men of color were privates and all of the officers were white. Was that a fair system?



# Absolutely Free Documents #6 & #7 After the War



Document #6 is the discharge certificate for Cato Greene and it is signed by George Washington. Cato Greene, an enslaved man, enlisted in early 1778 and was discharged on June 15, 1783. He was also given a Badge of Merit for his excellent service to his country. Document #7 is the pension record for Caesar Updike dated April 8, 1818. Only men that were declared invalids were allowed to receive a pension. The war ended in 1783 and the pensions did not begin until 1818. Caesar started receiving his pension in April of 1818 and he died in December of 1819.

## Absolutely Free (Part 2)

### Documents #6 & #7 Questions

How many years did Cato Greene serve in the army?

Do you think that number of years of service was a fair trade for Cato's freedom?

How many years did the veterans have to wait to receive their pensions?

Do you think the veterans were treated properly?

### Closing Question

This lesson is titled "Absolutely Free," why do you think it was given that name?

What was the most important thing you learned about the Black Regiment?