

## **Lesson Plan: Understanding Liberty and the American Revolution Using The Lorenzo Cultural Center's *Chasing Liberty* Exhibit**

### **Lesson Title:**

*Chasing Liberty: How Ideas Sparked a Revolution*

### **Time Needed:**

1–2 class periods (45–60 minutes each)

### **Lesson Objectives**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. **Explain how Enlightenment ideas influenced the colonists' fight for independence.**
2. **Identify key events leading to the Revolutionary War** (e.g., Stamp Act, Boston Tea Party).
3. **Describe the purpose of the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of liberty and equality.**
4. **Recognize the role of writers, printers, and activists** in spreading revolutionary ideas.
5. **Make connections between past and present struggles for rights and equality.**

### **Materials Needed**

- Excerpts or teacher-selected passages from *Chasing Liberty*
- Chart paper or digital whiteboard
- Student notebooks
- Timeline cards (optional)

### **Vocabulary**

- Enlightenment
- Liberty
- Revolution
- Rights
- Protest
- Democracy
- Militia
- Abolition
- Segregation
- Equality

## Lesson Procedure

### 1. Opening Activity

#### Do Now Question:

What does the word “liberty” mean to you? Write 2–3 sentences.

#### Discussion:

Invite students to share definitions. Introduce the idea that liberty has meant different things throughout history.

---

### 2. Mini-Lesson: Key Ideas from *Chasing Liberty*

Using teacher-selected excerpt(s), provide a guided read-aloud focusing on:

#### A. Enlightenment Ideas

- Thinkers like **John Locke** believed people had natural rights (“life, liberty, property”).
- Colonists studied these ideas and used them to challenge British rule.

#### B. Events Leading to the Revolution

Create a class timeline while reviewing:

- Pontiac’s War
- Stamp Act
- Boston Massacre
- Boston Tea Party
- First Continental Congress
- Drafting the Declaration of Independence

#### C. The Power of Writing and Printing

- Writers such as **Franklin, Adams, Paine, and Jefferson** spread ideas through pamphlets and newspapers.

#### D. Liberty Expands Over Time

Connect the document to later movements:

- Abolition of slavery
- Civil Rights Movement
- Women’s suffrage

### **3. Guided Practice**

#### **Activity Options (Choose One or Rotate Stations):**

##### **A. Cause & Effect Chart**

Students complete a chart showing how events (Stamp Act, Tea Act, etc.) caused colonists to protest.

##### **B. Revolutionary Writers Role-Play**

Groups pretend to be writers convincing colonists why change is needed.

##### **C. Liberty Timeline Sort**

Students receive timeline cards and arrange them in order from pre-Revolution to modern rights movements.

### **4. Independent Practice**

Choose one writing prompt:

1. **Explain how ideas from the Enlightenment influenced Thomas Jefferson.**
2. **Choose an event that helped lead to the Revolution and describe why it was important.**
3. **Write a short letter as if you were a colonist reacting to the Stamp Act or Boston Tea Party.**
4. **Explain how the idea “all men are created equal” has changed over time.**

### **5. Closing Activity**

*Name one idea from the Revolutionary era that still matters in America today. Explain why.*

## **Differentiation**

#### **For Struggling Readers**

- Provide highlighted excerpts
- Use sentence frames (“One cause of the Revolution was...”)
- Pair students for reading

#### **For Advanced Students**

- Have them compare Enlightenment ideas with the Declaration
- Encourage deeper research into writers like Paine or Wheatley

## Excerpts from the Lorenzo Cultural Center's *Chasing Liberty* exhibit

### **\*for classroom use only**

*Chasing Liberty* commemorates the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The impact of this event sent ripples throughout our nation's history. Examine the conditions of people before, during, and after the Revolutionary Era to reflect on how the ideals and actions of the era shaped the course of life for all people.

#### **The Age of Enlightenment Sets the Stage for Protest**

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and many of America's Founding Fathers studied, read, and wrote about new philosophies and perspectives years before they came together to pen our founding documents. European science, politics, and philosophy were vastly reorganized as part of the Age of Enlightenment. The Age, which began in the 1600s, gave thinkers new ways of understanding the world. They began to challenge original ideas of authority and instead turned toward human rights and rational change. John Locke, one of the foremost Enlightenment thinkers, highlighted the idea of individual liberties.

Locke identified "life, liberty, and property" as individual inalienable rights, believing that men are naturally free and equal. It's assumed that by "men," Locke meant "people." Locke explicitly included women in this perspective, claiming women have the right to property and equal authority over their children- a progressive view for the period.

Struggles of control between American colonists and the British government were taking shape well before the quill of the Founding Fathers hit the parchment. As the colonists began to fight for their rights, moments of protest took form:

**1763- Pontiac's War-** The War launched when a group of Native Americans decided to fight against British Rule in the Great Lakes region after the French and Indian War. Many nations joined together to drive out British forces from the region.

**1764- HMS St. John Attack-** When Britain passed the Sugar Act in 1764, which increased taxes on sugar for the colonies, they sent several Royal Navy warships to the Rhode Island region to help enforce the tax. Among the ships was the HMS St. John. Settlers were outraged by increasing taxation and these monitoring efforts, and that same year, a group of residents fired on the ship in one of the first violent confrontations of the American Revolution.

**1765- Stamp Act-** In 1765, the British Government imposed yet another tax on American colonists, requiring printed materials to be produced on stamped paper from London. These funds would be used to maintain British military troops stationed in the colonies. Colonial assemblies strongly opposed the act with protests and petitions, and the Stamp Act Congress was the first major joint colonial response to British rule.

#### **Jefferson Fights for the Colonies**

Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers were deeply influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, with an emphasis on liberty and equality as natural human rights. They used these ideas to argue that under the control of King George III, American colonists were being denied the basic rights that British citizens

enjoyed. In 1774, Jefferson utilized his studies to write “A Summary View of the Rights of British America.” In it, he accused King George III of illegally controlling Virginia’s political decisions.

As the sparks of revolution flickered throughout the colonies, it became clear that Jefferson was not alone in his stance on liberty and human rights:

**1770- Boston Massacre-** In March of 1770, nine British soldiers shot into a crowd in response to verbal harassment. The incidents only further heightened tensions across the colonies. Paul Revere captured the violence of the Boston Massacre in his engraving, which he later printed and sold.

**1773- Boston Tea Party-** The Sons of Liberty activists boarded a ship in the Boston Harbor, which was carrying a large shipment of East India Company Tea. They proceeded to throw 342 chests of tea into the Boston Harbor in protest of the Tea Act, leading to the further imposition of taxes on the people of the colonies.

**1774 – Formation of the First Continental Congress-** In response to the Intolerable Acts, which ended local self-government in Massachusetts, and to other British control acts, colonists convened the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774.

Following years of unrest in the colonies, Jefferson put his studies in writing in 1776 as he wrote the Declaration of Independence. In it, he stated the intent of a new American nation. Americans were described as a self-governing people, committed to the principles of liberty and equality, despite the circumstances of British tyranny.

### **Liberties Beyond the Revolutionary Era**

The Declaration of Independence paved the way for the nation’s Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The Constitution, adopted in 1788, spelled out how the federal government and its power would be divided, ensuring that power would not be held in only one branch. Its purpose was to protect the people from an overreaching government. The Bill of Rights, adopted in 1791, was the document of the first ten amendments made to the Constitution. These amendments spell out American citizens’ rights and liberties in relation to the federal government, again, to protect citizens.

The abolition movement, starting during the Age of Enlightenment, gained traction with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. During the Enlightenment, Quakers headed the anti-slavery movement by stating that the institution of slavery was a violation of the “rights of man.” Northern states abolished the institution of slavery by 1804, but Southern states relied so heavily on slavery that it was still practiced well into the mid-to-late 1800s. The South wanted to secede from the Union to continue the institution and expansion of slavery, which was a driving factor behind the Civil War. The Civil War was followed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, legislation that first recognized African Americans as citizens and gave African American men the right to vote, respectively.

Beginning in the 1950s, the push to end racial segregation and discrimination rose in the United States. Black Americans suffered through Jim Crow-era laws throughout the late 1800s and much of the 1900s. Taking off in the 1950s, Black activists began to inspire legal change. Calling upon the Declaration of Independence’s claim that “all men are created equal,” activists pushed to end racial segregation in education, housing, employment, voting laws, and more. Between the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, almost all Jim Crow laws were legally abolished.

The women’s rights movement started in America in the 1800s. Initially, women fought for suffrage (the right to vote). At the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton presented the Declaration of Sentiments

for activists to sign. The document was modeled after the Declaration of Independence, but Stanton made her and other activists' demands clear, as she wrote that "all men and women are created equal." Many women's rights activists wanted to eliminate sex-based discrimination in all facets of society, and they believed the first step to having equal footing would be through voting and other political arenas.

The sort of individual liberties that the Founding Fathers were fighting to maintain appear throughout American history, from political struggles to written legislation.

### **Revolutionary Writers**

Written documents were significant in the creation of the United States, even before the thought of creating a new nation crossed the colonists' minds. The role of writers in the pre-revolution era helped highlight the spaces where the Crown was overstepping its bounds.

Many of our Founding Fathers spent the years prior to the American Revolutionary War writing about the state of the colonies and their relationship with the Crown.

Benjamin Franklin developed *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, where he often wrote satire to oppose the British Crown and Parliament. His annual publication, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, did the same. While he did not write all *The Pennsylvania Gazette's* essays critical of Britain, he endorsed those ideas through his own writings and by spreading them across the Thirteen Colonies. In 1754, Benjamin Franklin penned the Albany Plan of Union for the Albany Congress. In the document, Franklin proposed the creation of a unified government amongst the colonies. The Plan did not fully satisfy the colonies or Parliament, and it was rejected by both sides.

John Adams, second president of the United States of America, also publicly opposed the Stamp Act of 1765. Adams wrote a letter, named the "Braintree Instructions," to explain how the Act violated two fundamental rights of free men. He also wrote opposition articles for the *Boston Gazette*.

Samuel Adams opposed Britain's taxation of the Thirteen Colonies. He wrote the Massachusetts Circular Letter in conjunction with James Otis Jr. In the Letter, Adams and Otis Jr. argued against the Townshend Acts and their unconstitutionality. One of the results of this letter was the Boston Massacre in 1770.

Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States, wrote a few documents before 1776. Among them is *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which could be considered the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, as it served as a persuasive essay to separate the colonies from Great Britain.

### **Lifelong Writing**

In the years following the American Revolution, writing did not stop. The shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation were made even more obvious during the conflict of Shay's Rebellion, an uprising borne out of protest to debt collection. In 1787, delegates convened to discuss alternatives to the Articles. And so, the United States Constitution was born.

Written by James Madison, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and delegates from twelve of the thirteen states, the U.S. Constitution served as the latest guidelines for the nation. However, it took some convincing for all Americans to get behind the new document. In 1787, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote the Federalist Papers, a series of 85 essays in support of the newly proposed U.S. Constitution.

The list of Revolutionary Era writers is long, and many who played important roles throughout the war continued their work long after the nation earned victory in 1783. Mercy Otis Warren, a talented poet, playwright, and historian, is one example of a lifelong author. In fact, she documented important pieces of the era as they happened around her. Her work, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, was one of the first and most comprehensive histories of the Revolutionary Era. In addition to documenting the people and events of the time, she also used her work to assert her personal political positions.

### **The Fight Continues**

Ideas about what freedom means and to whom it applies continued developing after the American Revolution was won, as well. Although initial oppositions to slavery, like the 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery, occurred before the American Revolution, it took until after the signing of the Declaration of Independence for the Abolitionist Movement to really take off. Efforts to end the institution of slavery were made in the 1700s, but due to the lack of clarity within legal documents, enslavers found ways to continue the practice. The Constitution included several provisions which accommodated slavery, while avoiding the use of the word. In 1780, Pennsylvania became the first state to move toward gradual abolition. The state's approach was to prohibit importation of enslaved people, but only the slaves of masters who failed to register them with the state were freed. Other states, like Massachusetts, were more radical in their approach. A monumental court case from 1783 ruled that all people, even those who were enslaved, had a constitutional right to liberty. Enslaved people across the nation continued their fight for their rights for years in post-Revolutionary America. The impacts of the mistreatment of marginalized communities carried on through the more modern struggles for Civil Rights, Indigenous Rights, and women's rights as well.

### **Conclusion**

The history of the United States is storied and complex. Our Founding Fathers set out to forge a new path of democracy and liberty. The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our nation's founding is a reminder of their successes and an opportunity to examine how we can continue to *chase* 'a more perfect union.' The impacts of the events of the Revolutionary Era trickled down to all people and shaped a nation that we still fight to uphold today.



Explore *Chasing Liberty* from March 2 - May 2, 2026 at the Lorenzo Cultural Center

[www.lorenzoculturalcenter.com](http://www.lorenzoculturalcenter.com)