

Museum shows that ideals of the Revolution belong to many generations

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

04.21.17

PHILADELPHIA, Pennsylvania — In the Museum of the American Revolution there is a tableau that tells the story of a woman named Mumbet. The tableau is right next to a display of the Declaration of Independence. Mumbet was an enslaved black woman in Massachusetts. Upon hearing the declaration read aloud, she announced that its proclamation that "all men are created equal" should also include her.

In response, her master hit her with a frying pan. In 1781, Mumbet sued him and won her freedom in court. She changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman and became a nurse. She was the first enslaved person to win a freedom lawsuit in the state of Massachusetts. Mumbet's case was referred to when another enslaved person, Quock Walker, sued for his freedom later that year. Slavery was soon prohibited in Massachusetts.

This story reminds us of something important about the struggle for our nation's liberty. It is that 400,000 African-Americans who lived in slavery in 1776 also longed to be free.

Such stories are found throughout the museum, which opens Wednesday in Philadelphia. The opening coincides with the 242nd anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord, the first battles in Massachusetts that kicked off the Revolutionary War in 1775. They became famously known as the "shot heard 'round the world." This clear-eyed view of the country's turning points is an intentional departure from the whitewashed story America has often told itself and the world.

Ideas That Are Still Meaningful Today

Instead, the museum seeks to show visitors that the Revolution was a set of ideas to aspire to. These ideas were founded on equality, individual rights and freedom. The ideas remain meaningful today, said museum president Michael Quinn.

"These ideas rallied people from all walks of life, and they took those ideas to heart," Quinn said. "What unifies us as a people is our shared common commitment to these ideas."

At several points throughout the museum, visitors are forced to confront the contradictions of the high-minded ideals of the framers of the Constitution and the realities of their time. Those realities included slavery and the treatment of women as second-class citizens. Slavery, for example, continued to expand for nearly another century after the Revolutionary War ended. Women argued for their liberty at the start of America. However, they would have to fight for suffrage, or the right to vote, for well over a century. American women did not get the right to vote until 1920.

This museum has a message. That is, that the ideals of the American Revolution are not only those of the founding fathers long revered by our country. They also belong to the founding generation of Americans who first heard them. They also belong to the generations that have come since.

Expanding The Scope Of The Story

"For over two centuries, if you said the words 'founders of this country,' the image that would pop into most people's minds would be a white man," said Scott Stephenson, vice president of collections, exhibitions and programming. "Increasingly, we at museums have realized we have got to tell a broader story."

One exhibit features the story of the Oneida Indians, one of the first allies to support the newly formed America. The Oneida fought and died alongside the colonist soldiers. Also on display is the active role of African-Americans, enslaved and free, in the war. There were black soldiers fighting with both the Continental and British armies. These blacks were patriots also fighting for their own freedom.

Many enslaved blacks joined the colonist armies, motivated by the possibility of becoming free citizens after the revolution. Yet, some enslaved blacks ran from their patriot masters to join the British armies, in exchange for British promises of freedom.

Various Paths To Freedom Are On Display

Historical interpretations conjured from diaries and letters of the lives of five men and women who took various routes to freedom during the war are presented in an interactive digital presentation. In paintings, dioramas and exhibits, the stories

of figures including poet Phillis Wheatley and William Lee, servant to General George Washington, challenge the idea of who could claim the title of "revolutionary." Wheatley, a black enslaved woman living in Boston, was the first published African-American female poet.

Visitors are asked to consider the question, "Freedom for whom?" said Adrienne Whaley, the museum's manager for school programs.

"The struggle to become free predates the Revolution, and it continues after the war is over," she said. "The promise of America is defined by the ways in which we treat these people."

Using evidence from the text, explain how this article changes or expands your understanding of the American Revolution: