

2

Whose Revolution?

When he became an adult, James worked as a clerk for William Armistead, his former playmate. Still enslaved, James kept track of William's many business dealings. As he worked, James eavesdropped on lively conversations between William and the people with whom he did business. The men took no notice of James as they argued about the price of tobacco or whether there would be a bumper crop that year.

James did not know it then, but his knack for listening in on others' conversations while going unnoticed would come in handy one day.

Soon, those conversations turned from farming to politics. The men spoke of tensions between the thirteen colonies and England, the mother country. These tensions kept building. King George III began imposing new tax laws on the colonies.

James kept up with the news and gossip as the colonists became angrier and angrier with each new law. They refused to pay the taxes. They boycotted British goods. They destroyed British property. They tarred and feathered customs officers sent by the king.

The actions of the colonists convinced George III that he needed to send troops to the colonies to maintain order. In 1768, he sent four thousand red-coated soldiers to Boston, a city located in the northern colony of Massachusetts. The Bostonians resented the presence of the Redcoats. To add to their displeasure, the people of Boston were forced to provide the British soldiers with food and public places where they could take shelter.

Although the Massachusetts colony was the center of the clash between the British and the colonists, all thirteen colonies were forced to pay taxes and submit to laws they felt were unjust.

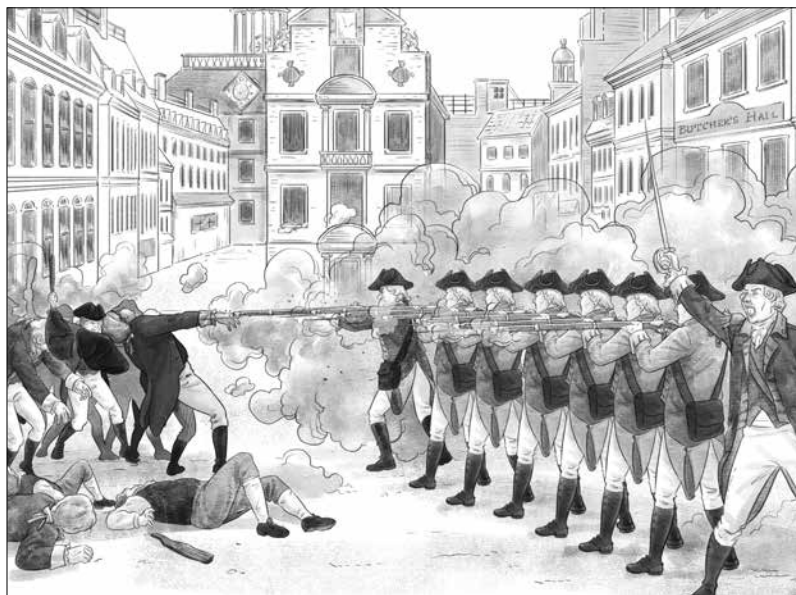
James listened as William and his peers got into heated debates about taxes and the presence of British troops in Boston. He wondered what this dispute between white colonists and their mother country could mean for himself and his fellow enslaved people.

James even heard rumors that the colonies might

boycotted: refused to buy

break away from Great Britain—that they might join together and create a new nation. To James, that brought to mind a question: could people who wanted freedom for themselves continue to enslave other people?

James learned that on March 5, 1770, a rowdy group of colonists had thrown snowballs, shells, and coal at some British soldiers. The crowd taunted the soldiers, calling them “lobsterbacks” because of their bright red, long-tailed jackets, daring them to shoot. In the confusion, one of the soldiers was struck, and whether by accident or on purpose, he discharged his musket. Other soldiers then fired their guns too. Five members of the crowd were shot and killed. This incident became known as the Boston Massacre.



This was followed by the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773. This was not a real tea party. Instead, a group of colonists disguised themselves as Native Americans and dumped British tea into the Boston Harbor rather than pay taxes on it.

On April 19, 1775, minutemen, or citizens who were ready to do battle on short notice, fought the British at the Battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. Those battles marked the beginning of the American Revolution.

When the revolution began, James was twenty-seven years old and still determined to be free. He, like other black colonists, wondered what this war would mean for them. Would it lead to freedom?

In June 1775, the Continental Congress decided to bring together under one leader all the militias and volunteer soldiers fighting the British. Because of his military experience, the Congress chose the Virginian George Washington to be the commander in chief of the new Continental army.

So far, the fighting had yet to reach the southern colonies. True, Virginians were boycotting British goods, but would they take up arms against the mightiest military in the world? Then, on October 26, 1775, the war reached the South. British and Continental soldiers exchanged gunfire at Hampton, Virginia. The Battle of

Hampton lasted less than a day, but it brought the war within fifty miles of James's home.

Now Virginians would have to choose a side. Neighbors argued with neighbors. Families were torn apart.

Would they be Loyalists and declare their allegiance to the king?

"We are Englishmen!" some colonists shouted.

Or would they be Patriots and root for independence?

"We are Americans!" insisted others.

James had only one question: which side would offer freedom to black people?