Background – Revolutionary Protests

Slavery was essential to regional and local New England economies. In towns like Salem, enslaved Africans and people of African descent worked next to free white people on ships, farms, in households, at markets, and in several other jobs important to the **economy**. The main purpose for enslavers was to make a profit, no matter what the impact on human beings. Enslavers forced people to work for no money, controlled almost every aspect of life, and usually provided substandard food, clothing, etc.

New England’s economy itself was based on the institution of slavery crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean. Salem trade goods were essential to running large slave plantations in the **West Indies**. These were traded for sugar and molasses, two extremely valuable goods produced in the West Indies and used to make rum in New England. This trade relationship is often called the **Atlantic Triangle Trade** or sometimes the “**business of slavery**.” It created jobs, entire industries, and substantial wealth for many people.

**Colonies** were also like a business, and like any business, their main purpose was to make money. Great Britain wanted its New England colonies to trade with its other British colonies in the West Indies. If they didn’t, New England colonists were supposed to pay extra taxes (or duties) when they imported “foreign” trade goods from other European colonies. But New Englanders easily ignored the law and smuggled in trade goods from French and Dutch colonies. Eventually, Great Britain introduced a stricter law and new taxes on West Indies trade goods – The Sugar Act.

Some people in Salem saw the Sugar Act as a threat to their freedom because it controlled how and who they could trade with. They believed they had a right to conduct their “business” as they saw fit, and if they followed these new rules, they would make a smaller profit. Some colonists saw the law as unjust. They did not believe the men who passed the law represented them or their best interests. And if they did not represent them, they should not have a right to exercise this level of control. In 1764, revolutionary-leader, Samuel Adams, famously declared that taxes without representation reduced colonists to the “miserable state of tributary slaves.”

Colonists began to discuss these issues of freedom and the idea of independence from British rule. They discussed it privately in their homes and openly in the streets, in taverns, and almost every other space people gathered. Some shared their opinions in newspapers and on large public signs. And in almost every place white colonists gathered to talk, enslaved people were there to listen. As time progressed, enslaved Africans found ways to gather and collectively consider their own right to independence.

The question for all became how to take back their freedom. Some colonists violently protested the Sugar Act and other British laws to follow. Tarring and feathering British officials who enforced the law became common in New England. This included British Customs agents who reported colonists for ignoring tax laws.

Enslaved people also considered how they could resist unjust laws to claim their independence. As more and more colonists took action, asserting their rights, so too did enslaved Africans.

Enslaved Africans knew freedom before arriving in the Americas and hated being enslaved. In all places and times, enslaved people fought for their freedom and resisted bondage. Fights for freedom did not begin in the Revolutionary-era. But the heated discussions and protests for freedom and independence from Great Britain fueled the resistance of enslaved people. One of the most powerful forms of protest became **self-emancipation**. This included courageous escapes, violent rebellions, and even suing enslavers in court for freedom. All of these challenged the institution of slavery and could result in harsh and violent punishment. But just like colonial protests, these were strategic decisions to regain control and revolutionary acts to claim liberty.

***Vocabulary***

* **Economy**: a region's wealth and resources, including the goods and services people produce and consume.
* **West Indies**: also known as the Caribbean, a region of the Americas made up of several islands. European colonies have included Spanish, English, French, and Dutch colonies.
* **Atlantic Triangle Trade / “business of slavery**”: this economy was based on the kidnapping of people from Africa, who then produced trade goods on slave plantations in the Americas, which were bought and sold across the Atlantic Ocean.
* **Colony**: an area under control of another country (usually by some force or coercion) and occupied by settlers from the controlling country. In what is now the United Sates, indigenous land was controlled by Great Britain, a country across the Atlantic Ocean.
* **Self-emancipation**: an enslaved person freeing themself from slavery, rather than someone else being the one to free them.