

# Life Story: Peggy Gwynn

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"Artist's rendering of Peggy Gwynn." Slavery in New York Curriculum Guide (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2005).

The little we know about Peggy Gwynn's life begins in 1775, at the outbreak of the American Revolution. The American Revolution was a time when British colonists in America fought against the control of the British government. These colonists wanted to run their own government in the American colonies. Peggy was an enslaved person living on the plantation of a man named Mr. Crammon in Virginia. She likely worked in the production of tobacco or other cash crops.

The Patriot leaders of the Continental Congress were colonists dedicated to the idea of a new American government. They came together to determine the course of the war. In their meetings, they fought bitterly over what to do about the question of slavery. Some argued that it was useless for the Patriots to fight against the oppression of the English government without undoing the oppression that slavery imposed on enslaved people. Others refused to support any independence movement if the practice of slavery was threatened.

The English colonial government saw this disagreement as a weakness, and tried to use it against the Americans. On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the British governor of the Virginia colony, issued a proclamation promising freedom to any enslaved person belonging to a Patriot who escaped and joined the British cause. Dunmore hoped the proclamation would cause Patriots to lose their enslaved workers. Such a loss would hurt the Patriots' ability to produce the supplies they needed to

fight the war. Other British war leaders issued similar proclamations as the war dragged on.

Peggy was one of the estimated 20,000 enslaved people who took this opportunity to emancipate themselves. She made her way to New York City, which was the base of English operations during the war. She became a member of a quickly growing Black community of self-emancipated people in the city. All of them hoped to earn their freedom by helping the British win the war. The men became soldiers or laborers in the British Army. Women like Peggy were cooks or laundresses.

Life for self-emancipated people was not easy. A quarter of New York was burned down in a fire in 1776 and the living conditions for even the wealthiest New Yorkers were terrible. The British colonial government did not have the resources to properly support the self-emancipated people. As a result, there was not always enough food, and many of them lived in makeshift tents in the burned-out parts of the city. There were no records that kept track of which self-emancipated people were supporting the British cause.

Even so, Peggy had more personal freedom than she had ever had before. She could demand payment for her work. She could go to a tavern with friends, dance, and listen to fiddle music. At some point during the war, Peggy met and married another self-emancipated person who was working for the British.

Eventually, the British lost the war. The Treaty of Paris, the agreement signed by both sides when the war was over, required that all escaped enslaved people be returned to their original masters. But British commander Sir Guy Carleton was determined to honor the promises made to the thousands of self-emancipated Blacks. He promised to provide any self-emancipated person with papers that granted their freedom as well as transportation away from America. American slaveowners were furious. George Washington himself came to argue with Carleton about the situation. Carleton compromised, and said he would only free Blacks who could prove they had been in New York City before the first peace treaty was signed on November 30, 1782. This meant every self-emancipated person had to have their case reviewed by a British clerk. The clerk would determine if they were eligible for freedom.

Peggy submitted her petition for freedom directly to Sir Carleton. She explained that she had come to New York with the King's troops, and requested that she be allowed to leave the city with her husband. But she was not able to provide concrete evidence of when she arrived in the city. She and her husband simply begged that Sir Carleton help her keep her hard-earned freedom.

Peggy's petition did not sway the British. She was returned to a life in slavery under Mr. Crammon in Virginia. Her husband sailed to freedom without her.

# Vocabulary

## determine

verb

definition: to decide or settle finally and without question.

*We determined a date for the wedding.*

Spanish: determinar, definir, fijar

forms: determined, determines, determining

## oppression

noun

definition: harsh, unfair, burdensome acts or demands by a government or other authority.

*His reign was characterized by cruelty and oppression.*

## petition

noun

definition: a formal, written request by many people that is made to a person in authority.

*Many parents signed the petition asking the school board to lower taxes.*

Spanish: petición, demanda

**1. Before you start reading...**

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
<b>determine</b>				
<b>oppression</b>				
<b>petition</b>				

**2. Word Matcher**

Every word has other words that have similar meanings or even the exact same meaning (these are called synonyms!). Draw a line from each similar word or synonym to the vocabulary word that it matches!

judge

resolve

fix

domination

**determine**

**oppression**

**petition**

tyranny

request

appeal

complaint

**3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...**

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
<b>determine</b>				
<b>oppression</b>				
<b>petition</b>				

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was Peggy Gwynn doing before the American Revolution?

- A. She was petitioning for freedom with Sir Carleton.
- B. She was dancing and listening to fiddle music.
- C. She was marrying another self-emancipated person.
- D. She was an enslaved person living on a plantation.

2. What caused Peggy to escape from enslavement during the American Revolution?

- A. She wanted to marry someone who was self-emancipated so she also had to be emancipated.
- B. The British governor promised freedom to enslaved people who escaped and joined the British cause.
- C. She had heard that Sir Carleton used to be enslaved and was looking to help enslaved people.
- D. She disagreed with the American government and wanted to help the British government win the war.

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

"Life for self-emancipated people was not easy. A quarter of New York was burned down in a fire in 1776 and the living conditions for even the wealthiest New Yorkers were terrible. The British colonial government did not have the resources to properly support the self-emancipated people. As a result, there was not always enough food, and many of them lived in makeshift tents in the burned-out parts of the city. There were no records that kept track of which self-emancipated people were supporting the British cause.

Even so, Peggy had more personal freedom than she had ever had before. She could demand payment for her work. She could go to a tavern with friends, dance, and listen to fiddle music."

What conclusion can you draw from this evidence?

- A. Peggy was not able to enjoy freedom because her job was difficult.
- B. Freedom under poor living conditions was still better than enslavement.
- C. The British Army did not accept help from self-emancipated people.
- D. The wealthiest New Yorkers helped rebuild New York after the fire.

4. Though Peggy returned to slavery, Sir Carleton went out of his way to help many enslaved people. What evidence from the text supports this?
- A. Sir Carleton used his power to grant freedom to all of the enslaved people in the American colonies.
  - B. Sir Carleton paid many plantation owners for enslaved people and then granted them freedom.
  - C. Sir Carleton went against the Treaty of Paris and kept his promise to free many self-emancipated Black people.
  - D. Sir Carleton was the captain of the ship that helped transport self-emancipated people away from America.
5. What is the main idea of this text?
- A. Mr. Crammon was a cash crop plantation owner in Virginia during the American Revolution and he granted freedom to many of his slaves, including one named Peggy Gwynn.
  - B. During the American Revolution, leaders of the American colonies argued that it didn't make sense to fight against oppression from the English government while they oppressed enslaved people at home.
  - C. During the time that Peggy Gwynn was granted freedom, she helped the British fight in the American Revolution, was paid for her work, and went to the tavern with her friends.
  - D. Peggy Gwynn was an enslaved person who emancipated herself during the American Revolution to join the British cause, but had to return to slavery once the British lost the war.