



Battles for Freedom: Griffin & White

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What meanings did the fight for freedom have for different people during the Revolution?

Standards

Social Studies

(6-8): I.1.3, I.1.4, I.1.10 (9-12): I.1.2, I.1.3, I.1.4
8.B.1.1, AH.B.1.6, AH.B.1.7
8.C&G.1, AH.C&G.1.2, AH.C&G.1.3, AH.C&G.1.4
8.E.1.3, AH.E.1.4, AH.E.1.5
8.H.1, 8.H.2.2, 8.H.2.3, AH.H.1.3, AH.H.3.2, AH.H.3.3, AH.H.3.4

English Language Arts

RI.6-12.1, RI.6-12.2, RI.6-8&11-12.3, RI.6-12.4, RI.8-10.6, RI.8.8, RI.6-12.9, RI.6-12.10
SL.6-12.1, SL.6-12.4, SL.8.5
L.6-12.1, L.8-10.4, L.8-10.6

Visual Arts

I.V.1.3, I.V.1.4
6-8CX.1.2, B.CX.1.2, I.CX.1.1, P.CX.1.1, A.CX.1.1, A.CX.2.2

Standards for extension options

(6-12) I.1.1, I.1.2, I.1.5, I.1.6, I.1.7, AH.H.3.2
L.6-12.2, L.6-8.3, RI.9-10.5, RI.7-12.9, W.6-12.1, W.6-12.2, W.6-12.3, W.6-12.5, SL.6-8.5

Objectives

- Analyze the unique stories of two enslaved men who became free based on actions during the Revolutionary War as presented in original documents

- Design an appropriate memorial with historical accuracy

Lesson Contents

Patriot calls for liberty and freedom during the Revolutionary Period were at odds with the system of slavery upon which North Carolina's cash crop economy depended. An early act of the new state's General Assembly was to prevent emancipation of enslaved people. Exceptions needed to be approved by county courts. The cases of John Jasper White, later known as "Currituck Jack," and Edward "Ned" Griffin involved physical battles during the Revolutionary War and legal battles afterward to gain freedom.

Ned Griffin of Edgecombe County enlisted as a soldier in the Continental Line in 1781. His enslaver, William Griffin, sold him to William Kitchen to take Kitchen's place in the draft. Part of his enlistment agreement was that if he completed his tour of duty, he would be free man. After the war, Ned returned to Tarboro, but Kitchen betrayed their agreement and quickly sold him to another enslaver. In response, Griffin petitioned the courts for his freedom with help from his military officers, other witnesses to his enlistment agreement, and William Griffin, his former enslaver. Edward's petition reached the North Carolina General Assembly in 1784. In response, the Assembly passed "An Act for Enfranchising Ned Griffin, Late the Property of William Kitchen," concluding, "Ned Griffin... shall forever hereafter be in every respect...a freeman;... and he is hereby enfranchised and forever delivered and discharged from the yoke of slavery."

In 1780, a schooner (a ship with multiple masts) named *Polly* and owned by Henry White of Currituck headed out to break the British Blockade with a crew of three—Henry White's son Caleb White, Caleb's brother-in-law Samuel Jasper, and Jack—a man White enslaved. The *Polly* was soon captured by five British privateers, who chained the *Polly's* crew. Jack convinced his captors that he was loyal to Great Britain and could help them. Once freed from chains, he assisted his crew mates in fighting to recapture the ship. Though wounded, the crew then sailed to Annapolis, MD, and turned the British sailors over to the Continental Congress.

After more than a decade of Samuel Jasper's efforts to emancipate Jack, the North Carolina General Assembly granted the request in 1792 and added the story of his loyalty and heroism to the session records. Jack named himself John Jasper White, was a respected community member, and later owned his own ship, married, and had two children.

Primary Sources

"An Act to prevent domestic Insurrections, and for other Purposes," *Acts of Assembly of the State of North Carolina*, April 1777, p. 17, State publications collection, State Library of N.C.,

digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/acts-of-assembly-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-1777-april/3691851?item=4230227.

Senate Bill to give Ned Griffin his Freedom, General Assembly Session Records, May 15, April-June 1784, box 3, State Archives of N.C., digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/may-15-senate-bill-to-give-ned-griffin-his-freedom-petition-and-messages-only/688550.

“An Act for Enfranchising Ned Griffin, Late the Property of William Kitchen,” *Acts of Assembly of the State of North Carolina*, April 1784, pp. 86-87. State Publications collection, State Library of N.C., digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/acts-of-assembly-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-1784-april/3691864?item=4230595.

Petitions Concerning Emancipation, General Assembly Session Records, Nov. 1792-Jan. 1793, box 3, State Archives of N.C., digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/session-of-november-1792-january-1793-petitions-concerning-emancipation/648126?item=648133.

Secondary Source

Thomas E. Baker, *The Monuments at Guilford Courthouse* (Greensboro: Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, 1979), npshistory.com/publications/guco/monuments.pdf.

Assignment Options

(files on thumb drive)

- **Glossary**
- **Background: Ned Griffin and John Jasper White**
- **Activity: Transcribing the Griffin Petition**
- **Activity: Selections & Questions-John Jasper White**
- **Memorial Examples**
- **Activity: Design a Memorial**
- **Exit tickets**

Supplies

- Projector (optional)
- Basic art supplies like crayons or colored pencils

Lesson Preparation

- There are many options with this lesson. Please review all materials to choose the options that are best suited for you and your students.
- Print or project the **Glossary** for student reference during the lesson. Consider creating your own vocabulary exercise with some of the more relevant words.
- Plan to project slides and lead discussion with background information or print **Background: Ned Griffin and John Jasper White** as a double-sided worksheet for individual students or pairs. Note: the slide/discussion option may be more appropriate for upper levels.
- For Ned Griffin's story: images of Ned Griffin's original petition and supporting documents are included for a possible transcription activity. Print the necessary copies of **Activity: Transcribing the Griffin Petition** for a jigsaw activity.
 - There are 7 parts to Ned Griffin's story. Some of these are longer and have been divided into multiple pages, all with images of the original documents and reflection/discussion questions for as many as 11 sections to transcribe and discuss.
 - If it's preferable to skip transcribing, print even pages only for reflection/discussion.
- For John Jasper White's story: images of Samuel Jasper's original petition are included for a possible transcription activity with **Activity: Selections & Questions**.
 - The petition and account of February 1780 have been divided into 3 parts, some with multiple pages. All 3 parts have reflection/discussion questions included. Decide whether to do a jigsaw activity or to have students work through the full document individually or in pairs/small groups.
 - If it's preferable to skip transcribing, print the 3 **Activity: Selection & Questions** pages.
- If desired, print **Activity: Document Analysis**, found in the **Cross-Lesson Activities** folder, for individual students or small groups to work through each document. Each will need 2 copies—1 for a Ned Griffin document and 1 for a section of the petition related to John Jasper White.
- Choose whether to share the **Memorial Examples** via the slides or handouts. If printing, make several double-sided copies to share within small groups.
- Decide whether to print copies of **Activity: Design a Memorial** or to have students create their designs on poster board or another medium and prepare the necessary art supplies.
- If using **Exit Tickets**, options are for student choices or to use if lesson extends multiple days. Print single-sided 7 sheets for 28 students and cut into quarters.

Connecting to Background Knowledge

(5 minutes)

Lead a brief discussion about the term “meritorious service.” Discuss the definition, “an action deserving of honor.” Ask: *What would qualify as “meritorious service” to you?*

Procedure

Introduction

(15-20 minutes)

- Distribute **Background: Ned Griffin and John Jasper White** or project slides to lead a class discussion. If using the worksheet, allow time for students to complete the “Quick Fact Check.” Note: this worksheet summarizes both men’s stories and could work better as a conclusion after the activities.
- Refer to **A Compleat Map of North-Carolina from an actual Survey**.
Ask students to find:
 - locations relevant to Ned Griffin
 - locations relevant to John Jasper White
 - New Bern, where the General Assembly met to consider these petitions in 1784/1792

Activity 1: Ned Griffin’s Story

(30 minutes)

- Move students into pairs or small groups and distribute **Activity: Transcribing the Griffin Petition**. Give students time to read their assigned document sections and discuss the questions.
- Facilitate discussion with groups presenting central points from their document sections to the rest of the class. Discuss any questions students have and possible answers as a class. Wrap up so all understand what happened to Griffin, the agency he showed, who worked against him, and who supported his quest for freedom.

Activity 2: John Jasper White’s Story

(20 minutes)

- Move students into pairs or small groups and distribute **Activity: Selections & Questions – John Jasper White**. Give students time to read their assigned document section and discuss the questions.
- Facilitate discussion with groups presenting central points from their document sections to the rest of the class. Multiple groups may be reading identical sections, and if so, one can present the summary of that section and the other can present more analysis based on **Activity: Document Analysis** responses and the reflection/discussion questions. Discuss

any questions students have and possible answers as a class. Wrap up so all understand what happened to White, the agency he showed, who worked against him, and who supported his quest for freedom.

Activity 3: Design a Memorial

(30 – 45 minutes)

- Ask: *What is a memorial? What is a tribute?* Student answers will vary but should include that a memorial is an object intended to preserve memory and that a tribute is something created to show respect or honor.
- Facilitate discussion about the purpose and various elements of tributes and memorials. Project or hold up the **Memorial Examples** images. If choosing to use the printed images, distribute copies to groups. Additional information about each memorial is included on the back for your use.
 - Ask the students to examine each picture for information about the setting, size, building materials, shape, symbolism involved, and what it means. Look also for where words might be included in the memorial and what form they might take.
 - Discuss the effectiveness of these elements. Ask questions about what aspect of each memorial students like and why. Discuss what they feel conveys a story or makes a statement and why.
- Move students into pairs or small groups to design their own tributes or memorials to the story they studied about Ned Griffin or John Jasper White. Distribute **Activity: Design a Memorial** student page and/or necessary art supplies. When they are finished, ask each student or group to share their ideas with the rest of the class.

Exit Tickets

(5 minutes)

- *Imagine that you are Ned's lawyer. How would you share the General Assembly's decision with Ned? Write a text he might send.*
- *Where in Jack's story did he have choices? Why do you think he made the choices he did?*

Modifications

- Student pages could be shared with students needing to take notes individually, with vision issues, or who have issues focusing (even if the slides are being used collectively).
- Students could be paired with a higher-achieving or differently behaving student for extra support.

- Assign students extension activities if they finish early or are high-achieving and need more challenging or independent work. These can be done independently or collaboratively.
- For more elaborate end products of **Activity: Design a Memorial** project, consider giving students more time, larger paper, and/or a wider variety of art supplies. For example, some students could use air-dry clay to make a simple mock-up of their design. Consider allowing students to take their **memorial project** home overnight to engage students with artistic talent.

Extension Activities

- Pretend that you were given the opportunity to interview one of these men. Create a list of eight to ten creative questions you would ask.
- Consider the life experiences of these men. What advice might they give to the next generation? Choose one of them and write out what he might say.
- Advocate for the memorial you designed. Write a persuasive letter to convince others to sponsor or create the memorial. Which organization or person would you try to convince?
- Mum Bett, also known as Elizabeth Freeman, engaged a lawyer and successfully filed a lawsuit for her freedom in Massachusetts in 1781. Read more about her story, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/elizabeth-freeman>, then compare and contrast her journey to freedom with that of Ned Griffin's.
- Write an essay (~ 3 paragraphs) comparing and contrasting these men's journey to freedom with that of the colonies. How are they similar? How are they different?
- John Jasper White's time on board the *Polly* is detailed and full of action. Transform his story from written accounts into a short graphic novel. Consider color, words, and font carefully.
- Choose one of the example memorials or another memorial. Research the history of it and write one or more paragraphs to add to the NCpedia entry. Why was this memorial built? What message is it intended to send? How has it been significant for the local community or visitors? Find many examples here, docsouth.unc.edu/commland/explore/timemap/.

- Are there any memorials in your town? Try visiting them. Analyze the memorials individually in terms of elements and significance, then look at them collectively. What kinds of stories has your area focused on preserving? What types of stories are missing? Are there parts of history that you want to see shared through a memorial? Note that cemeteries are filled with memorials to individual lives and trophy cases at school can also be analyzed.

Recommended Resources

State Archives of N.C., *History for All the People* weblog

- “John Jasper White, a.k.a. ‘Currituck Jack’,”
ncarchives.wpcomstaging.com/2026/02/24/documenting-a250-with-the-state-archives-john-jasper-white-a-k-a-currituck-jack/
- “Ned Griffin’s Battles for Freedom,” parts 1 & 2,
ncarchives.wpcomstaging.com/2026/02/24/documenting-a250-with-the-state-archives-john-jasper-white-a-k-a-currituck-jack/;
ncarchives.wpcomstaging.com/2026/02/13/documenting-a250-with-the-state-archives-ned-griffins-battles-for-freedom-part-2/

“Griffin, Edward ‘Ned’,” *NCPedia*, ncpedia.org/biography/griffin-edward-ned.

“Monuments and Memorials are Conversation Starters,” *Facing History and Ourselves*,
facinghistory.org/ideas-week/monuments-memorials-are-conversation-starters.

America 250 NC, “Sculpting History: The Untold Story of Currituck Jack,”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alVldpa3M7g>, 1.5 minutes.