

James
Forten

Fighting for Freedom

Many African Americans played important roles in the American Revolution. Some, like James Forten, a sailmaker from Philadelphia, fought at sea. Others served as soldiers or spies, or smuggled food through British lines. In all, more than 5000 black soldiers, both free and enslaved men, risked their lives for America's independence. Many fought to gain their own freedom as well.



This painting is widely believed to be a portrait of James Forten (1766–1842). After the Revolution, Forten was **influential** in the fight to free slaves.

WALTER DEAN MYERS

NOW IS
YOUR
TIME!

The African-American
Struggle for Freedom



California
Standards

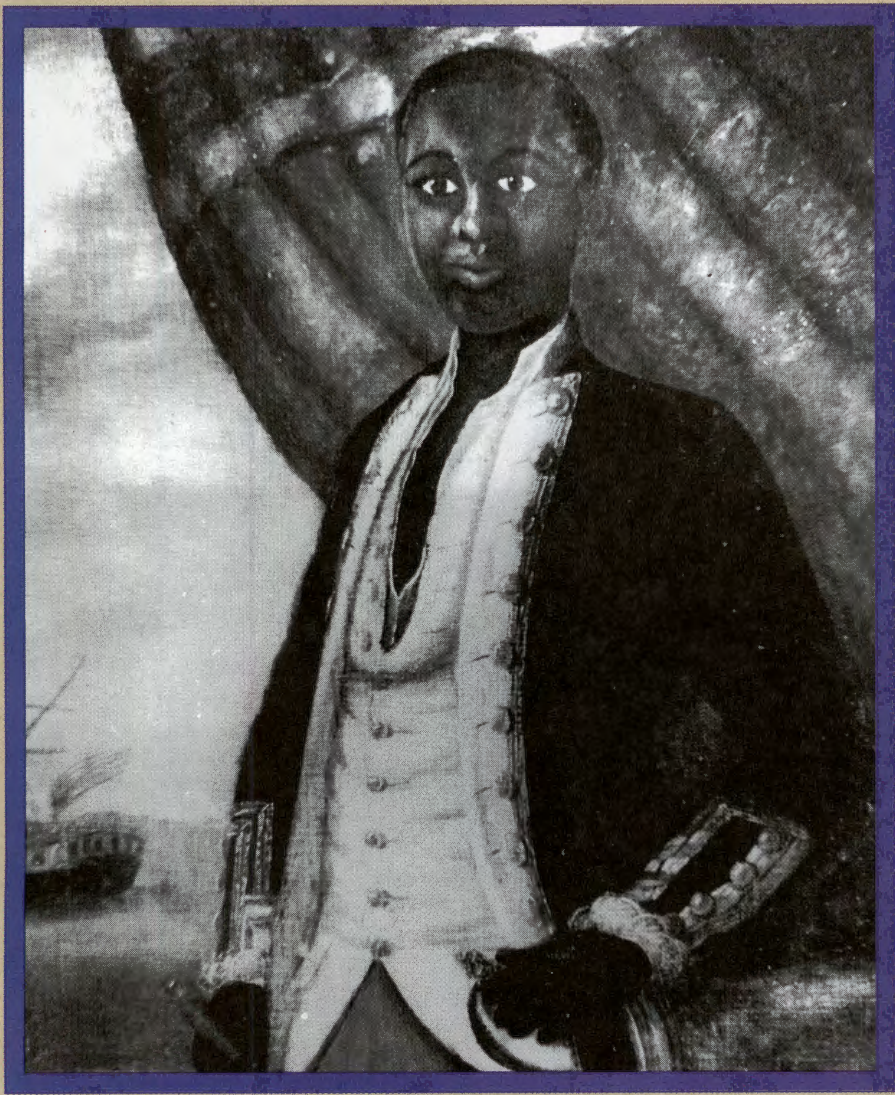
Standards to Achieve

Reading

- Understand synonyms/ antonyms (R1.3)
- Use roots and affixes (R1.4)
- Use order to analyze text (R2.2)
- Discern main ideas (R2.3)
- Facts, inferences, opinions (R2.5)



◀ This Philadelphia school, which James Forten attended, was founded by Quakers, who were **abolitionists**. They wanted to get rid of slavery and **assisted** African Americans in getting an education and finding good jobs.



◀ Hundreds of African American men served in the Continental navy. The sailor in this 1779 portrait may have been on the crew of a **privateer**, a private ship used in naval **conflict**. James Forten also served on a privateer.

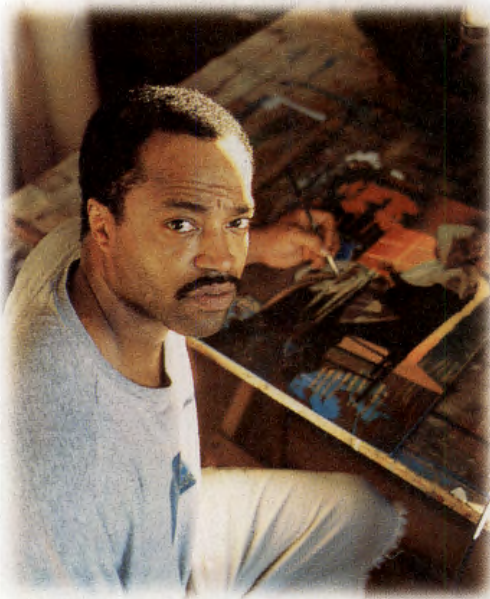
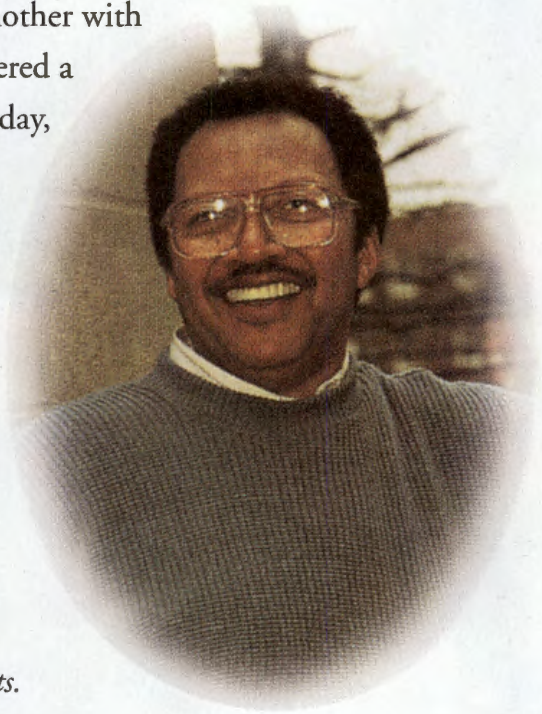
By 1778, Rhode Island and Massachusetts each had an African American army unit. The Patriot leader John Hancock presented this flag to the Massachusetts troop in honor of its bravery. ▼



Meet the Author **Walter Dean Myers**

Growing up in New York City, Walter Dean Myers read and wrote constantly, filling one notebook after another with stories and poems. In his twenties, Myers entered a contest for picture book writers. He won. Today, he has published more than thirty-five books for children and young adults. *Now Is Your Time* describes the important roles that African Americans played in our nation's history. "History has made me an African American," says Myers. "What we understand of our history is what we understand of ourselves."

Myers's novels about young people include *Me, Mop, and the Moondance Kid*, and *Mop, Moondance, and the Nagasaki Knights*.



Meet the Illustrator

Leonard Jenkins

Leonard Jenkins was born in Chicago, Illinois. By the time he was in high school, he was exhibiting his paintings and selling them to admirers.

Jenkins believes that talent and hard work are essential for an artist. But he adds, "Your art must go beyond how well you can paint. It has to go to the soul."

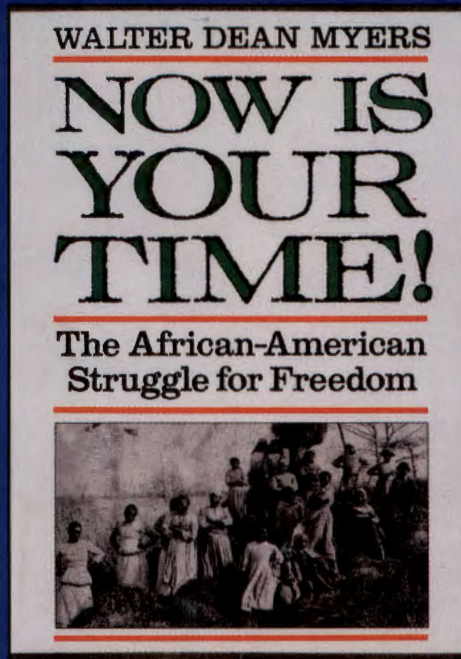
Internet



Find out more about Walter Dean Myers and Leonard Jenkins at Education Place. www.eduplace.com/kids

JAMES FORTEN

From Now Is Your Time



By Walter Dean Myers

Selection illustrated by Leonard Jenkins

Strategy Focus

James Forten served on a ship during the Revolution. As you read, think of **questions** to discuss with classmates about his experiences.



It was early morning on Tuesday, September 2, 1766, in the city of Philadelphia. The roads into the city were already filling with farmers bringing in produce to sell. Windows in the city were coming alive with the glow of lamplight. Small factory owners trudged through the winding streets to small shops. Printers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, candle makers, bakers — all began the business of the day. For Philadelphia was indeed a city of business.

As day broke over the harbor, the masts of the ships loomed against the gray skies. The ships rocked at their moorings as if they, too, were ready for the new day.

Hundreds of free men of African descent lived in Philadelphia. The city



was the home of a number of noted abolitionists — people who wanted to abolish, or do away with, the practice of slavery — including the Quakers, a powerful and influential religious group. More important was the fact that Africans could find work in Philadelphia.

Many of the Africans worked the docks, loading and unloading the ships that brought products to the colonies from all over the world. Others were tradesmen and seamstresses, cooks, barbers, and common laborers. All along the eastern seaboard, from Baltimore to New England, free Africans worked on boats, hauling loads, carrying passengers, and fishing. Many opened restaurants. Others bought their own boats and tried their luck on the brisk waterfronts.

Thomas Forten, a free African, was employed by Robert Bridges, a sail-maker in Philadelphia. Sail making was a profitable but difficult job. Sewing the coarse cloth was brutal on the hands. The heavy thread had to be waxed and handled with dexterity. A person trying to break the thread with his hands could see it cut through his flesh like a knife. But Forten appreciated his job. It paid reasonably well and the work was steady.

Forten helped in all aspects of sail making and assisted in installing the sails on the ships the firm serviced. With the income from his work he had purchased his wife's freedom. Now, on this early Tuesday morning, a new baby was due. The baby, born later that day, was James Forten.

Young James Forten's early life was not that different from that of other poor children living in Philadelphia. He played marbles and blindman's bluff, and he raced in the streets. When he was old enough, he would go down to the docks to see the ships.

Sometimes James went to the shop where his father worked and did odd jobs. Bridges liked him and let him work as much as he could, but he also encouraged Thomas Forten to make sure that his son learned to read and write.

The Fortens sent their son to the small school that had been created for African children by a Quaker, Anthony Benezet. He believed that the only way the Africans would ever take a meaningful place in the colonies would be through education.

Thomas Forten was working on a ship when he fell to his death. James Forten was only seven at the time. His mother was devastated, but still insisted that her son continue school. He did so for two more years, after which he took a job working in a small store.

What James wanted to do was to go to sea. He was fourteen in 1781 when his mother finally relented and gave her permission. America was fighting for its freedom, and James Forten would be fighting, too.





He knew about the difficulties between the British and the American colonists. He had seen first British soldiers and then American soldiers marching through the streets of Philadelphia. Among the American soldiers were men of color.

A black child in Philadelphia in the 1700's had to be careful. There were stories of free Africans being kidnapped and sold into slavery. He had seen the captives on the ships. They looked like him: the same dark skin, the same wide nose; but there was a sadness about them that both touched his heart and frightened him. He had seen Africans in chains being



marched through the streets, on their way to the South. He never forgot the sight of his people in bondage, or accepted it as natural that black people should be slaves.

But the black soldiers Forten saw were something special. Marching with muskets on their shoulders, they seemed taller and blacker than any men he had ever seen. And there were African sailors, too. He knew some of these men. They had been fishermen and haulers before the conflict with Great Britain; now they worked on privateers and navy ships. Sometimes he heard talk about naval battles, and he tried to imagine what they must have been like.

In the summer of 1781, James Forten signed onto the privateer *Royal Louis*, commanded by Stephen Decatur, Sr. The colonies had few ships of their own to fight against the powerful British navy and issued "letters of marque" to private parties. These allowed the ships, under the flag of the United States, to attack British ships and to profit from the sale of any vessel captured.

The *Royal Louis* sailed out of Philadelphia in August and was quickly engaged by the British vessel *Active*, a heavy armed brig sent from England to protect its trade ships.

The *Royal Louis's* guns were loaded with gunpowder that was tamped down by an assistant gunner. Then the cannonball was put into the barrel and pushed against the powder. Then the powder would be ignited. The powder had to be kept belowdecks in case of a hit by an enemy ship.

Forten's job was to carry the powder from below to the guns. Up and down the stairs he raced with the powder as shots from the British ship whistled overhead. There were large holes in the sails and men screaming as they were hit with grapeshot that splintered the sides of the ship. The smell of gunpowder filled the air as Captain Decatur turned his ship to keep his broadside guns trained on the *Active*. Sailors all about Forten were falling, some dying even as others cried for more powder.

Again he went belowdecks, knowing that if a shot ripped through to the powder kegs, or if any of the burning planks fell down into the hold, he would be killed instantly in the explosion. Up he came again with as much powder as he could carry.

After what must have seemed forever with the two ships tacking about each other like angry cats, the *Active* lowered its flag. It had surrendered!

Decatur brought his ship into Philadelphia, its guns still trained on the limping *Active*.

The crowd on the dock cheered wildly as they recognized the American flag on the *Royal Louis*. On board the victorious ship James Forten had mixed feelings as he saw so many of his comrades wounded, some mortally.

The *Royal Louis* turned its prisoners over to military authorities. On the 27th of September, the *Active* was sold; the proceeds were split among the owners of the *Royal Louis* and the crew.





The sailors with the worst wounds were sent off to be cared for. The others, their own wounds treated, were soon about the business of repairing the ship. Forten must have been excited. Once the fear of the battle had subsided and the wounded were taken off, it was easy to think about the dangerous encounter in terms of adventure. And they had won.

The missing crew was replaced. The ship was checked carefully by its captain and found to be in fine fighting condition. The crew carried more ammunition aboard, more powder, and fresh provisions. Once more they sailed for open waters.

On the 16th of October, 1781, they sighted a ship, recognized it as British, and made for it instantly. As they neared, a second ship was spotted, and then a third. Decatur turned to escape the trap, but it was already too late. The three British ships, the *Amphyon*, the *Nymph*, and the sloop *Pomona*, closed in. It was soon clear that the *Royal Louis* had two choices: to surrender or to be sunk.

The *Royal Louis* lowered its flag. It had surrendered, and its crew were now prisoners. Forten was terrified. He had heard the stories of the British sending captured Africans to the West Indies to be sold into slavery. He

knew the *Pomona* had sailed back and forth from the colonies to the island of Barbados, where many Africans already languished in bondage. It was a time for dread.

James was taken aboard the *Amphyon* with others from his crew. On board the British ship Captain Beasley inspected the prisoners. There were several boys among the American crew, and he separated them from the older men.

Captain Beasley's son looked over the boys who had been captured. Many of them were younger than he was. Although still prisoners, the boys were given more freedom than the men, and Beasley's son saw the Americans playing marbles. He joined in the game, and it was during this playing that he befriended Forten.

The result of this tentative friendship was that Captain Beasley did not, as he might have done, send Forten to a ship bound for the West Indies and slavery. Instead he was treated as a regular prisoner of war and sent to the prison ship the *Jersey*.





Dark and forbidding, the *Jersey* was a sixty-gunner anchored off Long Island, in New York. It had been too old to use in the war and had been refitted first as a hospital ship and then as a ship for prisoners. The port-holes had been sealed and twenty-inch squares carved into her sides. Across these squares iron bars were placed.

The captain of the *Jersey* greeted the prisoners with a sneer. All were searched under the watchful eyes of British marines. The wounded were unattended, the sick ignored. The pitiful cries of other prisoners came from belowdecks. A few pale, sickly prisoners, covered with sores, were huddled around a water cask. Then came the cry that some would hear for months, others for years.

“Down, Rebels, down!”

They were rebels against the king, to be despised, perhaps to be hanged. Traitors, they were being called, not soldiers of America. James was pushed into a line on deck. The line shuffled toward the water cask, where each man could fill a canteen with a pint of water. Then they were pushed roughly belowdecks.

The hold of the ship was dark. What little light there was came from the small squares along the hull. The air was dank as men relieved themselves where they lay. Some of the prisoners were moaning. Others manned pumps to remove the water from the bottom of the boat.

Sleep was hard coming, and James wasn't sure if he wouldn't still be sold into slavery. Beasley's son had liked him, he remembered, and the boy had offered to persuade his father to take James to England. It would have been better than the hold of the *Jersey*.

In the morning the first thing the crew did was to check to see how many prisoners had died during the night. Many of the prisoners were sick with yellow fever. For these death would be just a matter of time.

Forten later claimed that the game of marbles with Beasley's son had saved him from a life of slavery in the West Indies. But on November 1, two weeks after the capture of the *Royal Louis*, the news reached New York that Brigadier General Charles Cornwallis, commander of the British army in Virginia, had surrendered to George Washington. Washington had strongly protested the British practice of sending prisoners to the West Indies. It was probably the news of his victory, more than the game of marbles, that saved the young sailor.

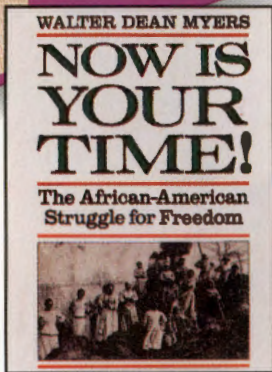
James Forten was not a hero. He did not single-handedly defeat the British, or sink a ship. But he fought, like so many other Africans, for the freedom of America, and he fought well. He was only one of thousands of Africans who helped to create the country known as the United States of America.

In Philadelphia, after the war, James Forten became an apprentice to the man his father had worked for, Robert Bridges. Like his father, James was a hard worker. Eventually he would run the business for Robert Bridges, and by 1798 he owned it. At its height the business employed forty workers, both black and white. Forten became one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia. He married and raised a family, passing on to them the values of hard work he had learned from his father. Forten made several major contributions to the sail-making business, among them a method of handling the huge sails in a shop, which allowed sails to be repaired much faster and saved precious time for ship owners. In the coming years he would use his great wealth to support both antislavery groups and the right of women to vote — at a time when over 90 percent of all Africans in America were still in a state of enslavement.

James Forten became one of the most influential of the African abolitionists. He spent much of his life pleading for the freedom of his people in the country his people had helped to create.



Responding



Think About the Selection

1. We remember James Forten more for his life after the American Revolution than for his role during the war. Use the selection to discuss whether this statement is true or false.
2. Do you think James Forten was treated fairly when he was a prisoner? How do you think prisoners of war should be treated?
3. After the British ship, the *Active*, surrendered, James Forten had "mixed feelings" about the victory. Why? Describe the feelings he may have had.
4. James Forten and Captain Beasley's son shared an interest in playing marbles. What interests do you have that might help build a friendship?
5. Choose one of the events that helped shape James Forten's life. What do you think he learned from this experience?
6. Walter Dean Myers writes that James Forten was "not a hero." Do you agree or disagree? Explain why. What do you think it means to be a hero?
7. **Connecting/Comparing** Many people, both Patriots and Tories, risked their lives during the American Revolution. Compare the dangers that Paul Revere, Katie Gray, and James Forten each faced during the war.



Persuading

Write a Dialogue

What do you think James Forten said to persuade his mother to let him go to sea? What might she have said in reply? Write a dialogue between Forten and his mother that shows how each feels.

Tips

- Be sure that each character states his or her opinion clearly and backs it up with strong reasons.
- Use correct punctuation and capitalization.



Social Studies

Create a Pamphlet

Based on what you have read about Philadelphia in this selection, create a pamphlet that tells about the city's strong points in 1781. Try to persuade people to move to the city.



Viewing

Write a Caption

Look back at the illustrations in the selection. Choose one that you find interesting or exciting. Then write a caption that provides a short explanation of what is happening in the illustration.



Internet

Take an Online Quiz

In this theme, *Voices of the Revolution*, you read about people who helped create the United States. Take our online quiz at Education-Place to see what you remember. www.eduplace.com/kids

**Skill: How to
Follow Directions**

- 1 Read through the directions, noting **materials** needed and the sequence of steps. Pay special attention to **order words** such as *first*, *next*, *then*, *after*, or *finally*. Study pictures or diagrams, if provided.
- 2 **Gather** the materials. **Reread** the steps, one at a time, and **follow** each in sequence.
- 3 If you don't understand a step, **reread** the directions. **Check** diagrams again.

California
Standards

**Standards to
Achieve**

Reading

- **Understand text features (R2.1)**
- **Use order to analyze text (R2.2)**

Games of Young America

When James Forten and Captain Beasley's son played marbles on the deck of the British ship *Amphyon*, they were taking part in a game that has been popular for more than 2000 years.

Many games from the time of the American Revolution are still with us, such as tag, leap frog, and hide-and-seek. Other games have changed only slightly. Jackstraws, quoits, and the game battledore and shuttlecock are known today as pick-up sticks, horseshoes, and badminton.

Most colonial games relied on simple objects found at home. One of the most popular games of the revolutionary period, hoop-rolling, used the wood or metal hoops that held barrels together.

The games described here would look very familiar to James Forten and his friends. When you play them you will be keeping alive traditions that are hundreds of years old.



Marbles, or "Ring Taw"

As you will discover, hitting the marbles in the circle requires practice and skill!

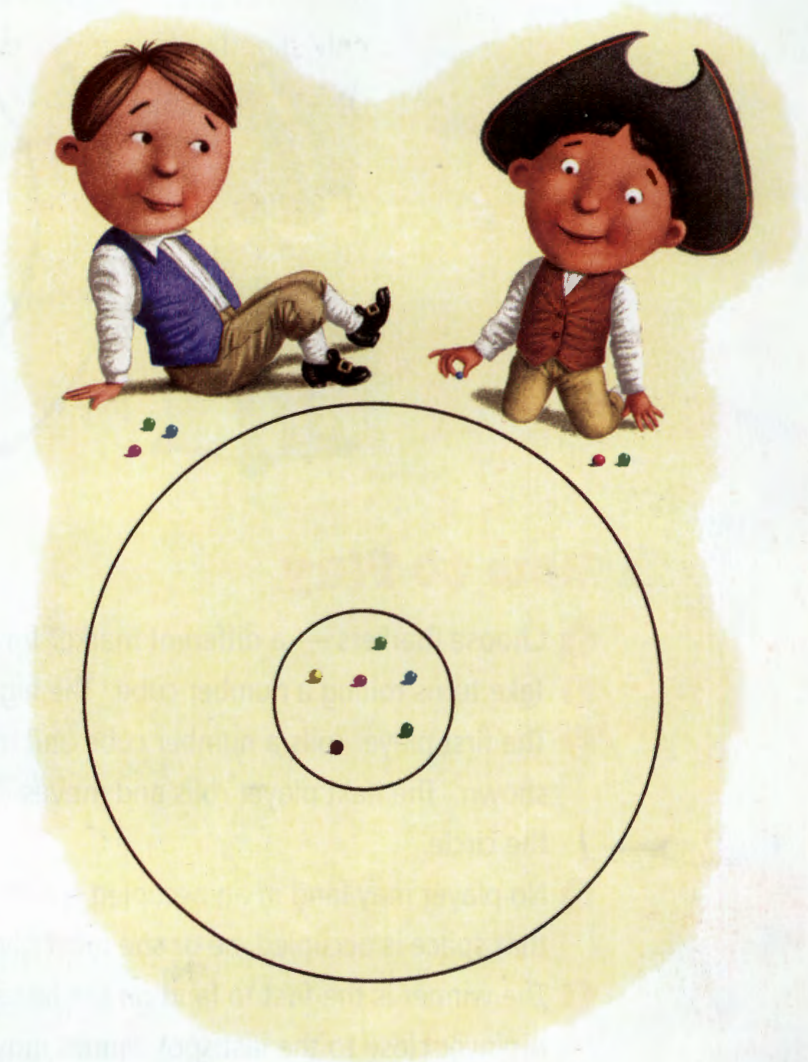
Players: 2 to 5

Materials: 6 marbles or cranberries per player

Object of the Game: To win marbles belonging to other players

How to Play

- 1 Draw a circle, three feet in diameter, on a level surface.
- 2 Draw another circle, one foot in diameter, in the center of the first circle.
- 3 Place marbles inside the smaller circle, five marbles for each player. Save the sixth marble as the "shooter."
- 4 To choose the first player, take turns shooting from the outside circle. To shoot, cradle the marble in one hand and release it with a fast flick of the thumb. The player whose shooter lands closest to the inside circle has the first turn.
- 5 Take turns trying to shoot marbles out of the inside circle. Players keep all the marbles they shoot out. A turn ends when a player misses.
- 6 Play until all the marbles have been shot from the circle. The player with the most marbles is the winner.



Snail

In the 1700s, children often scratched the pattern for this game in the dirt with a stick.

Players: 2 to 4

Materials: Number cube; up to four different kinds of markers (beans or buttons); a game board, as shown.

Object of the Game: To be the first player to arrive at the center of the spiral.



How to Play

- 1 Choose markers — a different marker for each player.
- 2 Take turns rolling a number cube. The highest number goes first.
- 3 The first player rolls a number cube and moves the number of spaces shown. The next player rolls and moves. Take turns to the left around the circle.
- 4 No player may land in an occupied space. If a player rolls a three and that space is occupied, he or she must give up that turn.
- 5 The winner is the first to land on the last spot in the center of the spiral. A player close to the last spot cannot move if he or she rolls a number higher than the remaining spaces.

Eleven Men's Morris

This game may remind you of tic-tac-toe.

Players: 2

Materials: Two different kinds of markers such as beans or pennies; eleven markers for each player. A game board, as shown, copied on paper or poster board.

Object of the Game: To make the most rows of three markers in a line and remove opponent's markers from the board.

How to Play

- 1 Choose markers. Decide who goes first.
- 2 Take turns putting down one marker at a time, always placing markers at a point where lines cross or meet. Markers can be placed horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. Three markers in a straight line make a row. When a player makes a row, he or she can remove the opponent's marker if it is not already part of a row.
- 3 When all the markers have been placed on the board, continue to try to make rows by moving a marker in any direction to the next vacant point.
- 4 The game ends when one player has only two markers left, or when no one can make another move. The player with more markers left on the board wins.



✓ Writing a Personal Response

Some tests ask you to choose one of two topics and write a personal response to it. Here is a sample. Use the tips when you write this kind of answer.

Tips

- Read the directions carefully. Look for key words that tell you what to write about.
- Decide which topic you'll write about.
- Plan your response before you begin to write. Think about the topic and list supporting reasons and examples.
- After you have finished writing, proofread for errors.

Write one or two paragraphs about one of the topics below.

- In the theme *Voices of the Revolution*, you learned about different trades or jobs. What trade do you think you might have wanted to learn during the time of the American Revolution? Why?
- In *Katie's Trunk*, you saw the American Revolution from the Tory side. Which side would you have supported during the Revolution, the Tories or the Patriots? Why?

Now look at a good answer that one student wrote, and the features that make this a good response.

In the Revolution I would have supported the Patriots. Even though the British paid for the colonists' trip over, I don't think the British had the right to do the things that they did that led up to the Revolutionary War.

The British taxed everything and had soldiers on patrol. It's not as if the British were supplying the colonists with essential living products, such as food and water. If the British had done that then the colonists would not have gotten mad. The British were basically saying we're not going to help you survive, but we're still going to rule and tax you.

The response focuses on the topic throughout.

Details support the answer.

The writer uses vivid and exact words.

There are few grammar, spelling, capitalization, or punctuation errors.

