Teacher Background: What Happened After Dunmore’s Proclamation?

The Response of the Rebels:
The Continental Congress recommended that Virginia resist Dunmore; it was advised that warships be sent to destroy the Governor’s fleet. Local Virginians wrote letters to the Virginia Gazette that slaves should be warned that Dunmore would only take the fit, male slaves; others would be returned to their masters. Also, the English by their policies had contributed more than anyone to the slave policies and should not be trusted. Patrols were set up to catch escaping slaves so that they could be returned.

The Response of the Loyalists:
The Loyalists encouraged slaves or rebels to leave. They were content in the knowledge that a British victory would ensure that their “property” would be safe. Slaves of Loyalists who sought freedom with Dunmore, were returned to their masters.

The Response of Slaves:
Numbers are difficult to verify. At the Battle of Great Bridge, Dunmore reportedly had 600 soldiers, half of whom were black. He reportedly armed and outfitted the soldiers as quickly as they came to his attention. He named his recruits “Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment” and had the slogan “Liberty to Slaves” stitched across their uniforms. After accepting defeat at Great Bridge (where blacks fought on both sides), Dunmore retreated to his ships and continued to train his new recruits.

What happened?
Dunmore’s call for slave-colonists to fight for the King was one of the most successful attempts to get Americans fighting for the British cause. His successes caused fear among the rebels. The long, hot Virginia summer may have been his undoing. On board the crowded ships, smallpox arrived. By the time Dunmore retreated in the spring of 1776, the corps may have dwindled to as few as 150. However, Dunmore became a hero among black slaves dreaming of freedom – they even named their children after him. A few of the blacks who fought for the British were actually taken to free colonies in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone following the war. Some of the black men who fought for the American side were rewarded with their freedom as well. But, by the time the American Revolution ended, slaves all over Virginia had come to realize that the talk of liberty and freedom applied only to the white men.