

African Americans in the Revolutionary War

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From the first shots of the American Revolutionary War until the ultimate victory at Yorktown, black men significantly contributed to securing independence for the United States from Great Britain. On March 5, 1770, Crispus Attucks, an escaped slave, was at the center of what became known as the Boston Massacre that fanned the flames of revolution. Once the rebellion began, Prince Estabrook, another African American, was one of the first to fall on Lexington Green in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775. Other black men fought to defend nearby Concord Bridge later in the day.

At least a dozen black men fought at the Battle of Bunker and Breeds Hill the following June 17. Cuff Whittenmore was cited for “fighting bravely” and allowed to keep a sword he captured from a British officer. Another black soldier, Peter Salem, a veteran of the Battle of Concord Bridge, killed yet another senior British officer in the fight. Later, fourteen American officers signed a document recognizing Salem Poor for being “a brave and gallant soldier.” In the famous painting of the battle by John Trumbull, two African Americans are included in the scene.



From the time of the arrival of the first black slaves to the American colonies in 1619, they were welcomed into the ranks of local militias to counter the threat from Native Americans. This practice remained, especially in the northern colonies, for more than a century and a half, only changing when General George Washington, a Virginia slave

owner, took command of the newly formed Continental Army near Boston on July 3, 1775. Washington and his fellow rebels saw no need for the enlistment of blacks, slave or free. A few may have seen the irony in enlisting slaves to fight for freedom. Some slave owners did not want to risk their valuable property in combat or perhaps have slaves freed for service. Still others, especially in the South, where blacks outnumbered whites, feared the potential consequences of arming African Americans. Massachusetts took first action, issuing a resolution that proclaimed, “no slaves be permitted into this army upon any consideration whatsoever.”

On July 10, Washington posted an order directing, “You are not to enlist any stroller, negro, or vagabond.” Washington and other officials did not want blacks in their ranks, and did not see the Revolution as a vehicle to end slavery even though they were seeking independence for themselves. While the Declaration of Independence began with “all men are created equal,” there is no evidence that its author, Thomas Jefferson, or any of its signers had any intention of ending slavery in America. Jefferson, a slave owner, did include a clause condemning the British King George III for interfering with colonial law prohibiting the future importation of slaves, but even that was deleted in the final draft after opposition from representatives from Georgia and South Carolina.

While Washington made efforts to keep blacks out of his ranks, the British were not reluctant to have them. Seeking to exploit American prejudices and to bolster their own ranks that were operating far from home, many British commanders welcomed escaped slaves into their camps. On November 7, 1775, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore and

the Royal Governor of the colony of Virginia, issued a proclamation that read, "I do hereby declare all indentured servants, Negroes or others free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty's troops, as soon as you may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to proper dignity." Slaves immediately began to risk the dangers of flight from bondage with a yearning for freedom. Within a month, Lord Dunmore organized more than 300 escaped slaves into what he called his "Ethiopian Regiment," complete with uniforms emblazoned with the slogan "Liberty to Slaves."

Over the next five months, more than 30,000 former slaves rallied to Dunmore's promise of freedom. Some, like the Ethiopian Regiment, took up places in the front lines, while others worked in the rear as wagon masters, cooks, and laborers. Others assumed more unusual jobs. Bill Richmond, described as a "man of color," served as the hangman when the rebel spy Nathan Hale was executed in New York City in 1776.

Knowing that many slaves were joining the British and facing personnel shortages of his own, Washington reconsidered his policy of exclusion. On December 30, 1775, he issued orders allowing the enlistment of free blacks but continued his ban on the recruitment of slaves. Washington's subordinates welcomed this policy and many went so far as to ignore the second part and enlist black soldiers with no concern for their status of "free" or "slave."

Setbacks on the battlefield in 1776 forced the rebels to take even further action. When the members of the Continental Congress asked the states in September to provide an additional eighty-eight battalions to

reinforce the army and another sixteen battalions three months later, they suggested that the states could fill their quotas “by draft, from their militias, or in any other way.” Field commanders interpreted the “in any other way” as an authorization to recruit African Americans. The mid-Atlantic and northern states began to accept blacks, slave and free, into integrated ranks. The southern states remained reluctant to arm and serve with black soldiers but did recruit them for support roles. All blacks were promised freedom for their service and their owners were promised compensation for the loss of their property.

For the remainder of the war, blacks served alongside whites while in pursuit of liberty and independence. In the 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, artist Emanuel Leutze shows a black soldier at Washington’s side in their boat as they crossed the river to earn a much-needed victory at Trenton, New Jersey, on December 26, 1776.



The British recognized the presence and effectiveness of the black soldiers in the Continental Army. On October 23, 1777, a Hessian officer wrote of his rebel opponents saying, “No regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes, in abundance, and among them are able-bodied, strong, brave fellows.”

African Americans contributed to the Revolution in the Navy as well. Because of the hazards of the sea, fishing and merchant vessels were always short of crewmen and did not pay any attention to the color of a sailor’s skin if he was willing to serve. The newly formed US Navy and state vessels continued this tradition. At no time were blacks barred from service on warships during the Revolution. The US Marine Corps, in its infancy, also welcomed black recruits and at least thirteen served on US ships.

Blacks also served in the ranks of the allies of the American rebels. Six hundred of the 3,500 French troops who fought to retake Savannah, Georgia, in the fall of 1779 were black freemen and slaves recruited in France’s Caribbean colonies. The Spanish governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Galvez, also employed black soldiers in his campaign against the British in the Mississippi Valley and along the Gulf Coast.

It is impossible to determine an exact count of the number of blacks who served in the American Revolution. Enlistment records, when preserved—or kept at all—rarely note a soldier’s race. From what information that is available, it appears that about 5,000 of the 300,000 men who joined the ranks of the Continental Army and Navy and state militias were African American—or about one in sixty, or 2 percent of the total. This number is not totally revealing because blacks enlisted

for the duration while whites enlisted for shorter periods. Since the rebels never had more than 35,000 soldiers in the field at any one time, it is likely that at times blacks composed 10 percent of the ranks.



Though prejudice and discrimination did not evaporate with the first shots at Lexington and Concord Bridge, black servicemen in the war certainly experienced a marked increase in equality throughout the Revolution. Ultimately, as in every armed conflict, soldiers in the trenches and sailors and marines in the forecandle judged men by their performance under fire and in camp rather than the color of their skin as they fought for their country's liberty, their unit's pride, and their mutual survival.

January 9th 1784 5164
 This is to certify that the bearer hereof Romeo
 Smith is a freeman, and has served three
 years in the Army of the United States of America.
 Any person going to attempt to circumvent
 or detain him at all places will ^{incur} the
 force of the ^{penalties} of the Law and the
 indignation of Heaven.
 Given at West Point
 This 9th January 1784
 Wm M. General

Blacks who fought on both sides did indeed secure their freedom. Those in the US military were freed and those who joined Lord Dunmore were evacuated as free men to Nova Scotia, the British West Indies, and the newly established African colony of Sierra Leone. Several northern states abolished human servitude in the postwar years, including Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. A few other states initiated measures to slowly eliminate slavery, but the majority of the former colonies continued the practice. In fact, the number of black slaves in the United States increased sevenfold from 500,000 to 3.5 million in the three-quarters of a century from the end of the Revolution until their emancipation during and after the American Civil War. It would not be until the Korean War of the 1950s that African Americans were again permitted to serve in integrated units.

In the years after the Revolution, blacks received little credit for their participation and support. It was not until September 16, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, that one of the earliest and best summaries of

their service appeared in an article entitled “Negro Soldiers in the Revolution” in the *Army and Navy Journal*: “The record is clear that from the beginning to the conclusion of the war of the Revolution, Negroes served in the Continental Armies with intelligence, courage, and steadfastness, and that important results in several instances are directly traceable to their good conduct.”