

# **AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR**

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The Struggle for True Independence

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For African-American men and women, the onset of war presented them with a choice: which side – American or English – gave them the better chance at freedom? Slaves who had listened for years as their masters complained about English attempts to take away their “liberty” were now ready to claim their own right to freedom. Between 1775 and 1783, tens of thousands of black Americans, slave and free, would choose sides in the war.

## Key Vocabulary:

*quota* - certain number

*emancipate* - set free

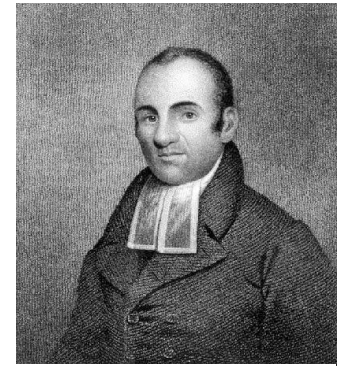
*integrated* - racially mixed

*booty* - valuable goods, taken in war or by theft

*reprisal* - act of retaliation

## Blacks Need Not Apply

Many free black men eagerly took up the American cause, fighting bravely in the early confrontations with the British. Free blacks in New England, such as Lemuel Haynes, served at the battles of **Lexington and Concord** and **Bunker Hill**, and were part of the militia forces that were organized into the new Continental Army. In fact, nearly 150 black militiamen stood their ground against British assaults at the Battle of Bunker Hill.



*Lemuel Haynes*

After Washington assumed command of the Continental Army, however, official American government policy turned against black soldiers. Despite their proven bravery against the British, Congress and General Washington were initially opposed to the use of African Americans, whether free or slave, as soldiers in the Continental Army.

There were two main reasons for this new policy. First, for many whites, particularly slave-owners, there was a great fear of armed slave revolts. As the thinking went, training blacks how to use weapons and then arming them increased the likelihood of such revolts. To these whites, the prospect of armed slave revolts was more threatening than British soldiers.

Secondly, Congress needed support from the South – particularly Virginia, the most populated and wealthiest colony – if all the colonies were to win their independence from England. Opposition to blacks in the army was strongest in the South, where most slaves were held. As a result, in November of 1775 General Washington issued an order that all blacks, slave or free, were to be excluded from the Continental Army.

## The Need for Manpower

However, the realities of war soon forced Washington and Congress to change the policy. The army was always short of men, as fewer and fewer white recruits signed up. By January 1777, Washington reversed himself and re-opened the Continental Army to free blacks. By 1778, continued manpower problems led Washington and the Continental Congress to open the door to slaves as well.

In the Revolutionary War, each state was responsible for supplying a **quota** of soldiers for the Continental Army. This was typically done by signing up volunteers or by drafting soldiers. After the first year of the war, however, every state had trouble meeting its quota (as assigned by the Continental

Congress) of soldiers for the army. Consequently, most states turned first to free blacks, and then to slaves, to make up the difference. States with a large number of free blacks, such as Virginia, were happy to draft them into the army – as the thinking went, not only did they fulfill the quota, but each black death saved a white one. As Virginia’s revolutionary governor, Thomas Nelson put it, “*It was thought that they could best be spared.*”

*"The Negro can take the field instead of his master, and therefore no regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance, and among them are able-bodied and strong fellows."*  
**Hessian Officer**

Slaves could become soldiers in a number of ways. Several states allowed slave-owners who had been drafted to put up a slave as a substitute – that is, the slave fought in place of the master. In these cases, masters typically promised to free these slaves if they survived the war. Sometimes, runaway slaves claimed to be free and volunteered to fight simply for the job. Although no state officially permitted runaway slaves to sign up on their own, the need for soldiers was so pressing that usually few questions were asked.

**Rhode Island** and **Massachusetts** went even further - they bought slaves willing to become soldiers directly from their owners and **emancipated** them. In 1778, with Washington’s approval, Rhode Island formed an entire regiment of such recently purchased slaves.

Between 1778 and 1783, 250 such former slaves served in the **1st Rhode Island Regiment**. The regiment fought in several battles, including the victory at Yorktown in 1781. A French observer wrote that the 1st Rhode Island Regiment was, “*the most neatly dressed, the best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers*” he had ever seen.

In fact, the regiment was so impressive in its fighting ability that it was hand-picked to attack the British defensive strongholds that led to the victory at Yorktown. Unfortunately, by the end of the war only one-third of these former slaves who had enlisted survived to enjoy their freedom as civilians.



**1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment**

**Many Roles.** Most African-American soldiers were privates, although a few rose to command small groups of men. In addition to serving in the army, African Americans with experience working on ships and at seaports also served in the small Continental Navy. Black soldiers served in every major battle of the war, mostly in **integrated** units (it would be the last time black and white American soldiers would fight together until 1950). Overall, it is estimated that more than 5,000 African-Americans fought on the American side during the war.

### **Slaves as Bounties**

Not all states were willing to use slaves in the fight for independence, however. As the war spread into the South, Congress offered to pay Georgia and South Carolina slave owners \$1,000 for able-bodied male slaves. The slaves would receive no pay as soldiers, but would be given \$50 and their freedom at the end of the war if they served "*well and faithfully.*" Both states flatly refused the offer. South Carolina’s legislature was so offended by the idea of arming and freeing any slaves that they threatened to surrender to the British and quit the revolution if the plan were approved. In the face of such opposition, Congress

quietly withdrew the offer.

Rather than enlist black men to fight for America's freedom, South Carolina instead offered slaves as **bounties** to white men who agreed to serve in the Continental Army. The legislature promised each white volunteer a slave between the age of 10 and 40, to be taken from a Loyalist slave owner. In 1780, Virginia also approved a bounty plan. Virginia's plan was more like a tax: every large slave owner would have to give up one male slave for every 20 slaves that he owned. These slaves would then be given to white recruits as bounties for enlisting.

### **Fighting for the British**

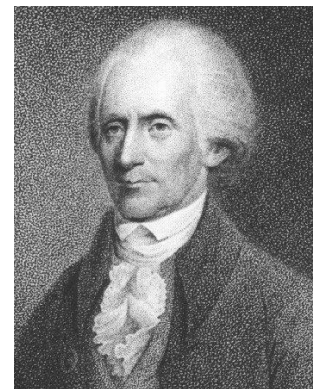
Many white Americans saw the hypocrisy of owning human slaves while complaining that England was taking away their freedom. Some revolutionaries, such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine, publicly acknowledged the inconsistency between claiming their right to liberty while at the same time owning slaves.

*"It would be useless for us to denounce the servitude to which the Parliament of Great Britain wishes to reduce us, while we continue to keep our fellow creatures in slavery just because their color is different from ours."*  
**Benjamin Rush**

Nevertheless, in the years leading up to the war little was done to end slavery in the colonies. On the other hand, slavery in England was illegal. It was clear to most slaves, therefore, where their best chance at freedom lay.

Even before shots were fired at Lexington, many slaves looked to the English to help free them from bondage. In the fall of 1774, with Massachusetts under British military control, a number of Boston's slaves sent a petition to General Gage offering to fight for the British against the colonists in exchange for their freedom (Gage never responded).

Once the war began, the British adopted several policies which encouraged slaves to run away from their masters and join the British cause. The first came in 1775, when Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, the **Earl of Dunmore**, issued the "**Dunmore Proclamation**," which offered immediate freedom for slaves who enlisted to fight for the British. Thousands flocked to his call.



**Lord Dunmore**

Southern slave-owners, who at the time were not necessarily in favor of independence, were outraged at Dunmore's successful attempt to incite their slaves to rise up against them. While Dunmore's Proclamation offered hope to slaves, it also turned many white Southerners against the English.

By the summer of 1776, at least 800 escaped slaves were carrying muskets and wearing the garb of Lord Dunmore's "**Ethiopian Regiment**," with the words "Liberty to Slaves" on their coats. Most, however, died of disease (smallpox) without firing a single shot, and the regiment was soon dissolved. Despite the collapse of the Ethiopian Regiment, Dunmore's Proclamation inspired thousands of black slaves to run away to British lines. To African-Americans, he was known as the "African Hero."

Another British policy also motivated slaves to run away from their American masters. General Clinton ordered that any slave who ran away from an American rebel to the British would be given freedom and protection. On the other hand, any slave who remained with his or her American rebel master and was then captured by English troops would be immediately sold into slavery in the West

Indies.

Not surprisingly, slaves voted with their feet as to which side offered them the greater promise of freedom. Wherever the British army moved, slaves ran away from their masters and headed to the British lines to claim their freedom. Washington, Jefferson, and most of the revolution's southern leaders lost slaves to the English. Even in the northern states, where slavery was less oppressive than in the South, slaves often bolted at the first opportunity.

Many of the slaves who escaped carried weapons stolen from their masters and rode their masters' horses to the British lines. Once with the English, they served as scouts, spies, and laborers, digging latrines and ditches, and helping to build defensive fortifications. Many practiced the skills they had learned on the plantation and served as blacksmiths, wagon builders, butchers, and, of course, as servants to British officers. In some cases, escaped slaves were given weapons and formed into companies of armed volunteers. For example, near the end of the war, about 700 former slaves fought alongside British soldiers during the evacuation of Charleston.



*Henry Clinton*

Escaped slaves also served with the Hessians, who faced manpower shortages just like the Americans and the British. While most former slaves served the Hessians as laborers or servants, some put on Hessian uniforms and fought as well.

Not all British action was favorable to slaves. Since the English did not want to offend Loyalists, any slave running away from a Loyalist owner was returned to his or her master. Loyalists who themselves ran away to the British for protection were permitted to keep their slaves. Furthermore, some slaves who had escaped from Patriot owners were kept and sold by British officers looking to make a profit from the war.

### **After the War**

The fate of the runaway slaves varied considerably. Many were re-captured by Americans, and either returned to their masters or treated as war **booty** and sold back into slavery. After Washington's victory at Yorktown, he posted soldiers on the beach to prevent escaped slaves who had been with the British from fleeing. While he allowed all free blacks to leave, he ordered that all former slaves be held and returned to their masters. In desperation, many swam out after the English ships which were to return their troops to England, grabbing on to the rowboats which were ferrying the soldiers to the ships, rather than be returned to bondage.

*"[the end of the war] filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our old masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New York."*  
**Boston King, escaped slave**

Within days of the British surrender at Yorktown, local slave owners hired American soldiers as bounty hunters to hunt for escaped slaves still hiding in the woods. Private Joseph Martin was among those who accepted the employment as a slave-catcher. Congress actually created a government office – the **Commissioner for Claims for Negroes** – to help slave owners get back their runaway slaves. Indeed, after the war, several "founding fathers," such as **Washington** and **Jefferson**, spent considerable time and effort trying to recover their own runaway slaves.

Not all runaway slaves were returned to bondage, however. English officers generally refused to return thousands of former slaves who had been offered freedom in exchange for helping the English, or who faced **reprisals** from their former masters. Thousands of black men, women and children who were with the British at the end of the war ultimately escaped with the English to be resettled in Nova Scotia, Canada.

In the 1790s, a group of several hundred former slaves left Nova Scotia to begin the British colony of **Sierra Leone** in West Africa. Included in this group were several men and women who had been born in Africa, then captured and sold into slavery in the Americas, and were now returning to their homeland.

A few former slaves even returned to Germany with the Hessians. Many also returned to Europe with America's French allies; like their English enemies, the French also refused American requests to return these runaways.

For the slaves of Loyalists who left with the English, however, freedom remained only a dream. Most remained the property of their Loyalist owners, and when their owners relocated to Jamaica or eastern Florida, their slaves once again returned to the fields.



*Location of Sierra Leone*

### **Some Progress**

The Revolution did bring some change for some American blacks, although nothing approaching full equality. In the North, the courageous military service of African-Americans and the revolutionary spirit brought slavery to an end.

In 1777, Vermont became the first state to adopt a constitution that outlawed slavery (of course, there were very few slaves in Vermont). Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1780, and the rest of New England soon followed. The middle states of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey adopted policies of gradual emancipation from 1780 to 1804 (Delaware would remain a slave state until the Civil War).

In the South, however, little changed. In Virginia, some slaves who had fought for their masters were set free by them. Many more, however, were returned to slavery, despite their owners' promises of freedom. Such behavior even shocked the slave-owning Virginia legislature, which passed a law requiring that all slaves offered freedom in exchange for fighting be freed (although only a handful of slaves were actually freed under the law).

*"I would never have drawn my sword in the cause of America if I could have conceived thereby that I was founding a land of slavery."*  
**Marquis de Lafayette**

While many southern leaders, such as Jefferson and Washington, talked about how they wished that slavery would end, they seemed incapable of actually making it happen. It would take another 80 years and more bloodshed to finally end slavery in America.

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