

**STRATEGY
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**BLACKS IN THE INTEGRATED ARMY
OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION:
(FOR LIFE LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS).**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Many, who study the history of our Army, focus on a period in the mid-twentieth century as the time when the Army was integrated. The focal point is the signing of Presidential Executive Order 981 in 1948 by Harry S. Truman. Though commonly held as pivotal point in the era of the modern Army this is a historical misconception. This line of thought overlooks and dilutes the historical involvement of integrated units in the American Revolutionary War. Blacks have been involved in fighting this nation's wars, before there was a standing national army. This project will provide insights on the presence of Blacks in the Army of the Revolutionary War period. It will examine the political climate of the period that first denied then allowed Blacks to enter the Army. It will cover elements of how Blacks came to serve, the number who served and characterize their service. It will also provide some information on the three so called Black units that served during this period.

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I do hereby affirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in the defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color or national origin.

—Presidential Executive Order 8802, 1941.

Many times in the history of this country factual events have been overlooked because of late official acknowledgement. Such is the case of truthfully representing the period in which the Army of the United States was integrated. We have heard of the famed 54th Massachusetts' Regiment of the Civil War, the Buffalo Soldiers of the Western Frontier, the Tuskegee Airmen and the 555th Parachute Infantry. Often these units are identified as key first in the history of Blacks in the United States Army. Actually, the Black man's service to our nation's military is older than the Army as a national organization.

The legacy of noble and brave service to this country had its origin long before the ideas were conceived to form any of the units mentioned above. Additionally, historians give much attention to 1940's as the period when the military was officially integrated. This is due, in part, to President Harry S. Truman signing of Executive Order

9981. This order, unlike Executive Order 8802, called for the specific integration of the armed forces of the country. Executive Order 9981 put forth the following:

Whereas it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense...and as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Services, it is hereby ordered as follows: It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regards to race, color, religion or national origin.¹

However, Blacks have served this Nation in its wars even before a national army existed. "Blacks were used to fight in the French and Indian War because of manpower shortages."² In the French and Indian War colonies in both the North and South used blacks to fight. "In Granville County, North Carolina in 1754, a muster of Colonel William Eaton's company listed five Negroes and two mulattos, a muster of Captain John Glover's company listed three Negroes and that of Captain Osborn Jeffrey's listed five."³ Black soldiers were used extensively in Virginia, New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Connecticut. In the case of Virginia, General Edward Braddock stated, "There are here a number of mulattos and free Negroes of whom I shall make bat men, whom the province are to furnish with

pay and frocks."⁴ Despite the prohibitive laws in effect, Blacks were enlisted for military service and served well.

The opportunity to serve was not always a welcomed one. From the very beginnings of this nation, Blacks have endeavored to serve but been denied. Many overcame the obstacles and served with honor and distinction. In the early 1700's, the colony of South Carolina enacted provisions for the use of slaves in defense of its boundaries. In an act of the General Assembly of the Province of South Carolina, adopted in 1703, the following declaration was made.

Whereas it is necessary...have the assistance of our trusty slaves to assist us against our enemies...it is therefore enacted that if any slave shall in actual invasion kill or take one or more of our enemies and the same shall be proved by any white person...shall at the charge of the public have and enjoy his freedom.⁵

Many other such provisions were made throughout the colonies and record of several such provisions is located in Table 1. These acts were taken even though Blacks were still held in slavery.

The institution of slavery scared the conscious of this nation during its embryonic stage. From 1619, when the first Africans were introduced into America as slaves, the struggle began to gain back the freedom and humanity they lost during the transformation. The American Revolution

CHRONOLOGY OF ISSUES PERTAINING TO BLACK SERVICE TO THE NATION BEFORE AND DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD.

1. Act of the General Assembly of the Province of South Carolina, 23 December 1703. Masters may arm slaves in the event of invasion of the province's borders. Act of the Assembly of South Carolina, 4 November 1704, sets up procedures for arming slaves in case of an emergency.
2. Act of the General court of Massachusetts 12 June 1707 made free blacks liable for military service.
3. Act of the Assembly of the province of South Carolina, 24 April 1708; call for the enlisting of trusty slaves as may be thoroughly serviceable in time of alarm.
4. Act of the Assembly of the Province of South Carolina an act for better regulation of the militia, 13 June 1747, revived the practice of granting freedom for certain deeds of heroism performed by slaves serving in the wartime militia.
5. Act of the Assembly of Virginia, 9 May 1723, allowed Blacks to serve as trumpeters, drummers or pioneers in case of invasion. This was a key action because up to this point Virginia had disallowed blacks to serve or bear arms.
6. Act passed by the General Assembly of the Province of New Jersey: An act to encourage the enlistment of five hundred Freemen of native well affected Indians, 28 June 1746.
7. Act of the General Assembly of the province of North Carolina: An act for establishing a militia in this Province, 3 November 1766...made all freemen and servants between the ages of 16 and 60 eligible for service.
8. 23 October 1775, General George Washington involved in a conference on the discussion of Negro enlistment.
9. 24 October 1775, General John Thomas sends a letter to John Adams noting the presence of Blacks in the forces at Boston.

10. 20 November 1775, The Provincial Congress of South Carolina approves the employment of slaves as pioneers and laborers in the militia.
11. 1 December 1775, Salem Poor receives a certificate of service at Charlestown, Massachusetts and is described as a brave and gallant black soldier.
12. 30 December 1775, General George Washington orders recruiting officers to reenlist free Negroes.
13. 14 March 1776, Lord Stirling to the President of Congress, with regulations and the selected orders for the defense of New York, directs the employment of Negro men in the defense of New York.
14. 5 May 1777, Act of the General Assembly of Virginia: An act for the more speedily completing quotas allows that only those Blacks with certificates of freedom may enlist in the Continental or Virginia forces.
15. 28 November 1780, James Madison suggests the enlistment of Blacks in a letter to Joseph Jones in the Philadelphia legislature.
16. 2 January 1778, General Washington approves Rhode Islands plan to raise an all Black unit.
17. 24 August 1778, The Returns of Negroes in the Army list a total of 775 men.

TABLE 1. These are but a few of the documents that attest to the presence of Blacks in the nation's military before and during the American Revolution. The full body of the documents can be found in Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents by Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty.

and the climate leading up to it were magnetic events that immediately attracted slaves and Black freedmen with slogans of liberty, freedom and the pursuit of happiness. The institution of slavery was a strong impediment to the downtrodden who sought to enter a war that called for freedom and independence for all men. Against resistance and hardships Blacks were among the Patriots who fought for the colonies on the road to gaining national independence. It would seem that the declaration made in South Carolina would have set the stage for the use of slaves in a conflict to protect or gain sovereignty. This was not the case. The politics of the era had changed from 1703 to 1775. This was due in part to fear of arming the slaves and the impact of independence on the institution of slavery. The fears were based on the fact that many slaves had taken aggressive actions to win their freedom, in the form of revolts, uprisings and mass runaways. Blacks overcame the many difficult obstacles placed before them, in pursuit of freedom and its promises. If this meant a requirement to serve in the military then that they would do.

**BLACK STRUGGLE FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF
HAPPINESS**

In his book, Democratic Ideals and the Reality, Halford Mackinder, argues that, on a very basic level, the

one thing that the ordinary man wants from his government is freedom. In defining that freedom, he asserts that "more modern democracy lays stress not merely on freedom to take opportunity but on the equality of opportunity itself."⁶

It can be argued that the pursuit of equality of opportunity was an element that was fundamental to colonial motivations to coalesce and seek independence. "Many people in the original colonies wanted to be granted the same freedoms afforded a British citizen."⁷ Independence was not the original pursuit of the people. The main issues that led to the decision to fight for total independence were taxation, lack of representation and the deprivation of full liberty and freedom. These were mainly political issues, a simple question of governmental form.

This was not the case for the slaves in the colonies. Theirs was a plight of total deprivation of liberty and freedom. In truth, the slave's hope of rising from his position of servitude to obtain liberty, justice and independence was the personification of what the Revolutionary War represented. Blacks both bound and free, sought any method necessary to win back the humanity robbed from them by the institution of slavery. The Revolutionary War, preceded by the cries of patriotism, fueled the flames

of freedom for Blacks who understood what was happening around them. At this time, not all Blacks were slaves but the movement towards freedom and independence inspired both freeman and slave. One of the best-known Blacks who was caught up in the spirited cries for liberty and justice was Crispus Attucks. "He is heralded by some as the first to die in the name of the American Revolutionary cause. He was killed in the Boston Massacre of 1770."⁸ He was a runaway slave who had gained his freedom and had the courage to stand up for justice for others.

The spirit of patriotism and the promises of independence drew the white colonists to take up the revolutionary cause. Blacks saw and heard their ultimate destiny in the actions and declarations of the revolutionary period. Those bound in slavery envisioned a land that would be changed; a land where freedom was possible for every man for to them this was the meaning of the words being spoken. On the surface, the pursuits of both Blacks and whites seemed the same, but they were not. The white patriot was in pursuit of a principle. The slave and free Blacks were in pursuit of a better way of life; a life that freed them from bondage and the humiliation of slavery. Some Blacks confronted those who denied them

freedom with arguments that were very similar to the contents of the Declaration of Independence.

"For the sake of justice, humanity and the rights of mankind restore our freedom. The God of nature gave us life and freedom upon the terms of the most perfect equality with other men; that freedom is an inherent right of the human species not to be surrendered but by consent for the sake of social life, that private or public tyranny or slavery are alike detestable to the minds conscious of the equal dignity of human nature"⁹

To overcome the denial of their basic freedoms, Blacks would turn to use of mass petitions as a method of gaining the freedom and liberty called for by the colonists. In 1773, a group of slaves from Boston made a petition that fully expressed their plight during the early movement towards revolution. They made the following petition to the governor and the general court of the Boston provinces. Their letter began:

"The humble petition of many slaves living in the town of Boston and other towns in the province...who have had every day of their lives imbittered(sic) with this this most intollerable(sic) reflection, that let their behavior be what it will nor their children to all generations, shall ever be able to do or to possess and enjoy any thing, no not even life itself, but in a manner as beast that perish. We have no property! We have no wives! No children! We have no city! No Country!"¹⁰

Blacks would continue to assail the consciousness of the patriots and founders of this nation with the dilemma posed

by the call for freedom on one hand and the complete denial on another.

The founders had to deal with this dilemma as they framed and voted to approve the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration, first posed by Thomas Jefferson, contained a passage that reflected agreement with the petitions of Blacks or at least voiced the same aversion to slavery. In that passage Jefferson stated:

He (King George) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur death in their transportation. This piratical(sic) warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN(sic) should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce."¹¹

This passage was not a part of the final declaration reflecting the politics of the era and the ever-changing attitudes of some on the issue of slavery. Georgia and South Carolina opposed the passage for obvious reasons. These two colonies were in favor of slavery as an institution and did not want to endanger its continuance. Several northern colonies opposed it because of their ports made great profit from slave ships. " Many historians and critics have understandably concluded that the elimination

of this passage offers adequate proof that the American Black, unlike his white counterpart, was never meant to share in the fruits of independence and equality in his adopted homeland."¹² Omission of the passage satisfied all delegates and the Declaration of Independence was approved.

One year after the Declaration of Independence was approved Blacks were still crying out for the promises it made. In 1777, Blacks in Boston made this appeal to the Council and House of Representatives,

"they cannot but express their astonishment that it has never bin(sic) considered that every principle from which America has acted in the cours(sic) their unhappy deficulties(sic) with Great Britain pleads stronger than a thousand arguments in favours(sic) of your petitioner"¹³

This petition, like many others, was ignored but the fires of freedom was burning hot and Blacks would not let it be extinguished. They had a deep rooted belief in the promises made in many of the new nation's founding documents and the prevailing patriotic cries for liberty. Theirs was a belief worth dying for; and many were more than willing to do just that yet they were denied even that dignity.

PROHIBITION TO SERVE

A young emerging nation felt economically and politically oppressed and rebelled while at the same time subjecting a large number of its populace to the atrocities

of slavery. This contradiction had great impact on how manpower was utilized in the colonial struggle. A major obstacle to overcome for Blacks seeking to serve in the Revolutionary struggle was the attitude fostered by the acceptance of slavery.

Many free Blacks were serving in the militia of many of the colonies before the Revolutionary War began. As a result it would seem that their service in the war would not be a major issue. This was not the case. The cries of freedom and liberty brought on by the revolution had sparked many slave uprisings and mass runaways. This caused great concern for many in the slave holding areas since, at the time slaves outnumbered whites in several locations.

The idea of arming Blacks was met with mixed emotions. Some feared that once armed, blacks would turn their weapons on those who armed them. Others believed that slaves were well suited to serve during time of war and should be utilized. This is reflected in John C. Miller's book, Triumph of Freedom: 1775-1873. He wrote "Indeed it was no doubt true in many instances that a Negro slave inured to fatigue and hardened and disciplined by slavery made a better soldier than his white master."¹⁴

The decision to allow Blacks to serve was a very complex issue for colonial leaders during the build up to the American Revolutionary War. This was in part due to the differing attitudes about Blacks in each of the colonies. The men of the frontier and leaders in the north were more inclined to tolerance. The leaders from the south were intolerant on the matter. When a decision was made, it usually allowed for compromise and met the political attitude of each group. 'As a result there was no fixed policy governing the recruitment of blacks to meet Continental Army quotas.'¹⁵ The issue of whether or not to allow Blacks to serve began before the war and would last until it end.

In October 1774, a formal suggestion was made in the first Provincial Congress dealing with the emancipation of slaves. The suggestion stated, 'while we are attempting to free ourselves from our present embarrassments and preserve ourselves from slavery that we take into consideration the circumstance of the Negro slaves.'¹⁶ The issue of slave emancipation was one that the Southern colonies refused to compromise on and settlement was not to come for another one hundred years. The question still remained on utilization of Blacks in support of wartime efforts. As the nation move closer to war, the need to transform militia

forces already containing Blacks into a national force. It was not until 1775 that the decision was made to consider and form a standing national army.

It was recognized that aside from militia forces to fight the war the colonies needed a more regional force. The force would be comprised of regiments that would draw from the militia for recruitment. When the force called the New England Army was formed it contained Black freemen in its ranks. The force consisted of 26 infantry regiments from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut. "Its strength was 99 field grade officers, 866 company grade officers, 144 staff officers and 18,538 enlisted, but the force was still short 2,500 men."¹⁷ The shortage of manpower proved to be one of the reasons for relaxing the restriction preventing Blacks, more specifically slaves from serving in the Army. Forming the New England Army in the first months of the war was the first phase of organizing the military to military struggle with England.

In May 1775, the Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia and reluctantly moved to assume direction of the military forces representing each colony. To transform the colonial forces into a Continental force, a proposal was made for the Continental Congress to raise an Army.

During this same time, John Hancock was involved in a committee examining the use of Blacks in the war effort.

"The resolution which came from the committee is regarded as one of the most significant documents of the period."¹⁸

The resolution firmly addressed the use of Blacks both free and slave. It stated:

Resolved, That it is the opinion of this Committee, as the contest now between great Britain and the Colonies respects the liberties and privileges of the latter, which the Colonies are determined to maintain, that the admission of any persons, as soldier, into the army now raising, but only such as are freemen, will be inconsistent with the principles that are to be supported and reflect dishonor on this Colony and that no slaves be admitted into this army upon any consideration whatever."¹⁹

When this resolution was made, Black freemen had already been fighting against the British. In April 1775, when the shot was fired heard around the world, Black patriots were there fighting and dying in the battle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Before its birth as a national force the army was on the battlefield as a racially integrated fighting force. When the Patriots gathered at Lexington and Concord Blacks were represented in the ranks. They fought and were wounded during service at this historic event in April 1775. A Lexington slave name Prince Easterbrooks, a Negro man, as he was described, was listed among the wounded from

this battle. He would go on to serve in almost every major campaign in the war.'²⁰ At least one Black is on record as losing his life in this early battle. "Caesar Brown of Westford, Massachusetts was there and killed in action"²¹²⁹

When the British launched their attack to destroy the military supplies at Concord, Blacks were there armed and ready. There were Blacks at the Battle of Bunker Hill and they, along with the other Patriots there, held their fire until they could see the whites of the advancing enemy's eyes. "To name a few who were present who witnessed the firing of the shot heard around the world, there were Barzillai Lew, Pomp Fisk, Prince Hall, Titus Colburn, Cuff Hayes, Caesar Dickerson, Cato Tufts Caesar Weatherbee, Seymour Burr, Grant Cooper, Charlestown Eads, Sampson Talbert, Cuff Whitemore, Caesar Basom, Salem Poor and Peter Salem."²² It is also possible that some slaves were present providing domestic services. All of these men served well and made good accounts of themselves, many serving throughout the length of the war.

There are stories that provide insight into the quality of the service of the Black men who served. Cuff Whitemore while fighting at the Battle of Bunker Hill received praise. Samuel Swett the earliest chronicler of the battle said of him, 'Whittemore(sic) fought bravely during the

redoubt. He received a ball through his hat but continued fighting though wounded to the last, until compelled to retreat.'²³

Probably the best known Black to fight at the Battle of Bunker Hill was Peter Salem. An eyewitness to the battle immortalized Salem in a painting. 'John Trumbull a painter witnessed the battle from across the harbor and painted his recollection in 1786. His painting depicted Salem grasping a musket still preserved at the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown.'²⁴ The feat Salem is credited with, that gained him fame at the battle, was killing Major Pitcairne a British officer. Pitcairne was rallying the dispersed British forces when Salem took aim on him and shot him through the head. For his feat, 'a contribution was made in the army for Salem and he was presented to General Washington as having slain Pitcirne. He was officially commended by the State of Massachusetts as a brave and gallant soldier.'²⁵ Blacks had shown that they were as much a patriot as any other member of the colonial forces.

Another hero of Bunker Hill was Salem Poor. His efforts on that eventful day earned him very high praise. Colonel William Prescott submitted a petition in his honor to the general court of Massachusetts suggesting that the

Continental Congress bestow honors on Poor. His petition read,

"The subscribers begg(sic) leave to report to your Honble(sic). House (Which Wee(sic) do in justice to the caractwer(sic) of so brave a Man) that under Our Own observation, Wee(sic) declare that A Negro Man called Salem Poor of Col. Fryes Regiment. Capt. Ames. Company in the late Battle at Charleston, behaved like an experienced Officer, as Well as an Excellent Soldier, to Set forth Paticulars of his conduct would be Tedious, Wee(sic) Would Only begg(sic) leave to say in the Person of this sd.(sic) Negro Centers a Brave & gallant soldier."²⁶

There is no record that Poor ever received a reward and he went on to serve at Valley Forge and White Plains.

The issue of Blacks serving in the newly forming Army was still not clear. While this issue was put aside for future discussion, the Continental Congress on 14 June 1775 established the American Continental Army. In so doing, the Congress had raised a racially integrated Army. George Washington was placed in command of the Army; thus making him the first American army general to command a racially integrated force in combat. The racial composition of the Army drew immediate attention at the highest level.

"When George Washington took command of the Army on 3 May 1775, recruiting officers were given instructions prohibiting the enlistment of any Negroes or vagabonds."²⁷

At this time there were many Blacks serving in the ranks of the newly established army.

In a council of war convened on October 8, 1775, with General Washington, Major General Ward, Lee and Putnam; Brigadier Generals Thomas, Spencer, Heath, Sullivan, Greene and Gates the question of Negro employment in the war was addressed. " It was agreed unanimously to reject all slaves and by a great majority to reject Negroes all together".²⁸ Manpower and recruiting shortages would change this ruling.

Black freemen already fighting for the Revolutionary cause were angered by the decision to curtail their tours of duty and remove them from service. "When Washington learned of their dissatisfaction with his decision and along with fears that the Black colonial soldier now discharged from the Colonial Army would not hesitate to join forces with the British, he cancelled his decision to bar Blacks from serving."²⁹ In a letter to the President of Congress General Washington announced his change of position on having Blacks serving in the Continental Army. He wrote,

"It has been represented to me that the free Negroes who have served in this Army are very much dissatisfied at being discarded. As it is to be apprehended that they may seek employment in the Ministerial army, I have given license for their being

inlisted(sic). If this is disapproved of by Congress, I will put a stop to it."³⁰

"This decision lead to the reenlistment of the Blacks who had previously served and supposedly excluded all others but reality did not mirror the policies in place."³¹ The disgruntled attitudes of discharged free Black men was not the only reason Washington moved to reverse his decision.

Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia proclaimed to give freedom to all slaves who would rebel and join the British forces. Since the ultimate goal of the slave was to gain freedom, this proclamation met with great response. Washington described the success of Dunmore's plan, "as growing as a snowball rolling"³² This was probably the most pressing reason why Washington reversed his decision of excluding Blacks from service in the army. Washington's policy change had strategic, military and political importance. Later in the war, Blacks would be needed to meet recruitment quotas by several of the colonies

Through all of this Blacks still served. In the wake of ever changing attitudes and a general policy to exclude them from service, manpower shortages outweighed the reluctance to arm Blacks to fight for independence. Some states enacted laws to meet their manpower shortages. "For example New York in 1776 permitted a man who had been

drafted to offer substitutes for themselves in the form of able bodied men white or Negro. This lead some slaveholders to offer their slaves as soldiers with the slaves reward being his freedom."³³ Some slaves chose to use that option. 'In one such case, Jack Anthony described as a slave for life served as a substitute for his master Eli Dibble and his son.'³⁴

The presence of policies similar to this almost assured that Blacks were a part of the army on the battlefield during the revolution. "In nearly every province a few Blacks were found among the ranks of the army."³⁵ Blacks performed every kind of duty available. 'Blacks were used everywhere as substitutes in the draft. Most Blacks who were armed to fight came from the North. South Carolina and Georgia never permitted the enlistment of Negroes but employed them as auxiliaries to spy, dig, build drive wagons and to do general help behind the lines.'³⁶ Whether fighting in the combat arms or providing combat service support Blacks served the revolutionary cause.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL

Driven by the promises of liberty justice and happiness for all men, Blacks both free and slave, saw the

Revolutionary War as a path to freedom. This path led them to fight on both sides in the war. The promise of freedom was the motivating force for the slave and the ideals of liberty and justice for all inspired the freeman. "Free Blacks were motivated by desires for adventure, high sounding ideals, conviction of the justice of the Patriot cause and the possibility of bounty, all attitudes that were common also to whites."³⁷ So despite the laws and attitudes present, Blacks found ways to serve.

'Some who served came as replacements for Americans who shunned service in the war. The work was perhaps limited but to serve held the promise of legal freedom after the war.'³⁸ Most free Blacks served along side whites as rank and file soldiers, while slaves were used in more subdued roles. Slaves served as cooks, orderlies and other semi-domestic duties.

As a result when the war began, many Black men stood as proud Patriots in pursuit of a new nation's independence, which held promises for a bright future for them. Blacks served in many battles of the war and accomplished feats that were heroic in nature. When Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776, Black patriots were with him. "There in the same boat with Washington was Prince Whipple. Oliver Cromwell also crossed the river enroute to attack the

British and their Hessian mercenaries in Trenton, New Jersey."³⁹

"In 1777, Jack Sission In Newport, Rhode Island facilitated the capture of General Richard Prescott."⁴⁰ He allegedly assisted by breaking a door down with his head. "A Negro woman named Deborah Gannett served as a regular soldier in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment for 17 months in 1778."⁴¹ Another Black patriot who served with distinction was Jordan Freeman. "Jordan Freeman is commemorated for slaying Major William Montgomery with a spear at the Battle of Groton Heights, Connecticut, in 1781. A slave called James Armistead served as a double agent, spying for the Marquis de Lafayette during the Yorktown campaign."⁴²

The individual exploits of the Black man's contribution to the revolutionary cause are well noted. "Blacks fought in virtually every battle from Lexington and Concord through the end of the war."⁴³ These men fought along side white patriots bearing arms and providing provisions. Blacks not only performed in as individual in racially integrated units, but there were several so called Black units that formed and fought during the war.

BLACK UNITS

Records show that there were a few units identified as Black units during the war. There appears to have been more but no records exist to substantiate that as a fact. Several references mention Black Patriot units of Massachusetts. "There were units from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and a unit that came from Haiti."⁴⁴ The Bucks of America was a unique unit from Massachusetts.

Little is know of this unit which is a great loss to history. "What makes this unit so unique is that, unlike the other units that had white leaders, the Bucks of America was led by a Black officer. Colonel Middleton led his unit to a record of highly praised service."⁴⁵ The unit was recognized for its service by John Hancock, who presented the unit with a banner. Black historian William C. Nell recorded this fact in 1855. He wrote,

"At the end of the Revolutionary war, John Hancock presented the colored company, called the 'Bucks of America' with an appropriate banner, bearing his initials, as a tribute to their courage and devotion throughout the struggle. The 'Bucks,' under the command of Colonel Middleton, were invited to collation in a neighboring town and en route were requested to halt in front of the Hancock Mansion, in Beacon Street, where the Governor and his son united in the above presentation."⁴⁶

The banner presented was made of silk and depicted the picture of a pine tree and a stag buck deer over a scroll that read "The Bucks of America." It also contained the initials J.H. and G.W.

Another Black Massachusetts unit mention was called the Protectors. "The 'Protectors' was an association of colored men who guarded the property of Boston merchants during the revolution."⁴⁷

The contributions made by Blacks to the American Revolutionary War were not limited to those by Blacks in the American colonies. Blacks serving in the military forces of France also provided support. "A Black Unit from Haiti known as the Volunteer Chasseurs was a brigade of a French seaborne expedition which supported General Lincoln in Georgia in 1779."⁴⁸ The unit was made up of 545 Negroes and mulattos. The primary role of this unit, as part of the war, was to evict the British from Savannah, Georgia as part of a Franco-American army effort. "The unit was part of a larger force which contained 2,979 Europeans."⁴⁹ In battle, the Black unit is credited with preventing the annihilation of the allied force.

Probably the best-known and recorded unit of the revolutionary era was the so called Black regiment of Rhode Island. This unit came into being because of Rhode

Island's inability to meet recruiting goals. "In February 1778, the General Assembly of Rhode Island passed a precedent breaking law permitting slaves to join the Continental Army."⁵⁰ The law allowed that every able bodied Negro, mulatto or Indian man slave in the state may enlist in the either of its battalions. A slave who enlisted was promised the same rewards as whites.

Rhode Island made its decision at a time when the structure of the army seemed to be crumbling. Thousands of men were deserting, some retreated from battle and enlistment was very difficult. Conditions had led Washington to make comments such as, "Are these the men with whom I am to defend America? Good God have I got troop such as those?"⁵¹ He wrote the President of Congress and farther stated, "I had no doubt in my mind of defending this place , nor should I have yet, if the men would just do their duty, but this I despair."⁵² Washington saw American success in the war beginning to vanish. He fully recognized the utility of employing slaves as a part of his fighting force. 'He as a result gave support to a request by J.M. Varnum to enlist a battalion of slave fight for the revolutionary cause.'⁵³ This action was received favorably by Washington who saw the strength of his force drop due to desertion. "Out of 9,000 troops counting the sick, starved

and half naked available in December 1777, 3,000 had deserted by March 1778."⁵⁴ Rhode Island at this time was pressed to recruit enough men to fill units requested by the Continental Congress.

'In the September of 1777, the state had one half of its available men under arms. Recruitment was difficult because the state had no money to pay bounties and those already in service had not been paid for several months.'⁵⁵ This was an embarrassing time for the leaders of the era who had not wanted to allow slaves to serve, but times were desperate. To salvage some dignity the men who passed the law in Rhode Island left this passage for history.

"The wisest, the freest, and bravest Nations in times (sic) of emergency have liberated their slaves and enlisted them as soldiers to fight in defense of their Country"⁵⁶

With the law passed slaves were immediately recruited and many answered the call of freedom. The total number who came to serve in the unit is a debated. The range is given from upward to 350 to a low of 140. 'Quarles listed the strength as 120 colored soldiers of whom 30 were freemen.'⁵⁷

The unit was recruit by Colonel Christopher Greene who also provided its training. The test of fire for the Black regiment came at the Battle of Rhode Island. General Lafayette called this battle, "the best fought action of

the war."⁵⁸ The regiment was assigned to what was to become the hottest part of the American defensive lines. 'The unit distinguished itself with valor in repelling the attacks of the Hessian force that came against it.'⁵⁹ The units first impression on the battlefield was a lasting one for it when on to serve till the end of the war with the same valor and gallantry of its first battle. The unit saw action at Red Banks, Points Bridge and Yorktown. In 1781, the Marquis de Chastellux while traveling in Connecticut made this note in his journal. " At the ferry crossing I met with a detachment of the Rhode Island regiment...The majority of the enlisted men are Negroes or mulattos; but they are strong, robust men and those I saw made a very good appearance."⁶⁰ This was not the only recognition of this nature directed towards unit.

"When the victorious American army passed in review at Yorktown during the following July (1782) Baron von Closen an aide-de-camp to general Rochambeau remarked that "Three quarters of the Rhode Islande regiment consists of Negroes and that the regiment is the most neatly dressed, the best under arms and the most precise in its maneuvers."⁶¹

'After five years of service the Black Regiment was disbanded at Saratoga, New York on June 13, 1783.'⁶² The war was over and the country was focused on becoming an independent nation. It cannot be argued that Blacks did not

provided a valuable service to the nation during the war for independence. By statistic, we can seek to quantify that contribution. John Greenleaf Whittier provides a thought provoking summation on the contributions made by Blacks, during the American Revolution. Whittier while speaking at an Independence Day celebration in 1847 said,

"When we see a whole nation doing honors to the memories of one class of its defenders, to the total neglect of another class, who had the misfortune to be darker complexion, we cannot forego the satisfaction of inviting notice to certain historical facts, which for the last half century have been quietly elbowed aside...Of the services and sufferings of the colored soldiers of the Revolution, no attempt has been made to preserve a record. They have had no historian. With here and there an exception, they all passed away, and only some faint tradition of their campaigns under Washington, and Greene and Lafayette and other cruising under Decatur, and Barry, lingers among their descendants. Yet enough is known to show that the free colored men of the United States bore their full proportion of the sacrifices and the trial of the Revolutionary War."⁶³

SERVICE STATISTICS

Short enlistment was noted as an element that may have prolonged the length of the Revolutionary War. 'The normal enlistment was one to three month, even though the Continental Congress in 1777 called for a period of three years.'⁶⁴ The following was revealed by Lorenza Greene in one of his studies.

"A total of 395,858 men enlisted, yet the maximum strength of the American Army in the field never exceeded 35,000 at one time. Had even half of

the enlisted men been available regularly, the Americans should have overwhelmed the British, for according to a recent military historian, the latter never had more than 42,000 soldiers in America."⁶⁵

The enlistment times for Blacks and whites differed significantly. "Many whites served a normal enlistment of three to six months while Blacks served an average of four to five years."⁶⁶

In regards to the total strength of the Blacks who served during the Revolutionary War, the figures can easily be disputed. 'A commonly quoted number is 5,000. This represented about one Black for every sixty whites.'⁶⁷ This does not account for those who served as slaves providing domestic service as cooks, wagoneers, pioneers and other combat service support related tasks. Also adding to the difficulty of establishing a definite number was that no differentiation was made in regards to color in many of the early manning reports. Some historians have sought out men of color by the names reflected in historical records. Benjamin Quarles used this method. He states that in his research, "If the first or last name of a person was Negro, he was not likely to be white and although there were certain names largely confined to Negroes, I have not assumed that persons with such names were necessarily colored"⁶⁸ Some of the names commonly taken by Blacks were

names such as Africa, Black, Liberty, Freeman and Freedom or some variation of those names. On reviewing the data in Robert Greene's book, Black Courage 1775-1783 Documentation of Black Participation in the American Revolution, nearly 60 individuals are listed that used these names.

CONCLUSION

Surrounded by and hearing the call for freedom, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, during the Revolutionary War period, the Black man was drawn into a war that held great promise for his future. No doubt that Blacks both free and slave were in the ranks of the Army of the American Revolution during the entire period of the war. Early in the conflict Freeman were allowed to serve and fight but the utilization of slaves as combatants was very contentious. As the war progressed manpower shortages eventually led to relaxed policies for enlisting slaves to fight. History has been remiss in fully documenting the efforts of Blacks in support of the American Revolution. The record is clear that Blacks served against the protest of some leaders during the war. They served as individuals providing gallant and brave service along side whites and race did not in some places matter. The Black units that formed distinguished themselves in battle.

All Blacks serving had in mind the principles of freedom and justice as a consequence of their service. The service provided was not necessarily for patriotic principle. It was in many cases as described by Quarles. He described the black man's role in the revolution as follows:

"can best be understood by realizing that his loyalty was not to a place nor a people, but to a principle. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those unalienable rights of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken. Whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American or British, could count on a ready response from the blacks."⁶⁹

In reflection on the service of the many blacks who served during the revolution whether free or slave, Harriet Beecher Stowe has the most worthwhile words. She said,

" We are to reflect upon them as far more magnanimous, because they served a nation which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals, and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake. It was not for their own land they fought, not even for a land which adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. Bravery under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit."⁷⁰

The proud legacy passed on by the Blacks who fought in the American Revolution should serve as an inspiration for Blacks serving today. Much has been gained but the struggle can never end until it is realized that all men are created equal. In pursuit of life, liberty and

happiness the struggle continues for us all here and abroad. It is amazing how a nation formed by those fleeing persecution could become a society supporting the subjugation of others. Actions are now underway to compensate for the oversights of history. In October 1996, President William Jefferson Clinton signed documents showing his support for the construction of a monument to the Blacks who fought, during the American Revolutionary War.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Harry A. Ploski and James Williams, Reference Library of Black America, New York, p.156.

² Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the America Revolution, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1961, p.8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵ Morris J. McGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, Blacks in the United States Armed Forces Basic Documents, Wilmington, p. 3.

⁶ Halford J. Mackinder, Democratic Ideals and Reality, Washington, DC, p. 132.

⁷ Africans in America, Public Broadcast Service, WGBH Boston, February 1999, Episode 2.

⁸ Sidney Kaplan, The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, New York, 1973, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁰ Kaplan, p. 27.

¹¹ Ploski and Williams, p. 111.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Herbert Aptheker, The Negro in the American Revolution, New York, 1940, p. 9.

¹⁴ John C. Miller, Triumph of Freedom: 1775-1878, Boston, 1948, p. 150.

¹⁵ Macgregor and Nalty, p. 45.

¹⁶ George H. Moore, Historical Notes on the Employment of Negroes in the American Army of the Revolution, New York, 1862, p. 4.

- ¹⁷ Robert K. Wright, The Continental Army, Washington, DC, 1983, p. 19.
- ¹⁸ Moore, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Kaplan, p. 15.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Aptheker, p. 37 and Kaplan, p. 15-19.
- ²³ Kaplan, p. 18.
- ²⁴ Wallace Brown, Negroes and the American Revolution, History Today, p. 557.
- ²⁵ Ibid. More information on this event can also be found in Kaplan page 15-19.
- ²⁶ Kaplan, p. 19.
- ²⁷ Moore, p. 7.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 5.
- ²⁹ Aptheker, p. 30.
- ³⁰ MacGregor and Nalty, p. 73. This source lists the entire body of Washington's letter to the Congress.
- ³¹ Aptheker, p. 33.
- ³³ Aptheker, p. 31.
- ³⁴ Robert E. Greene, Black Courage 1775-1783, The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1984, p. 65.
- ³⁶ Brown, p. 557.
- ³⁷ Richard L. Blanco, The American Revolution: An Encyclopedia 1775-1783, Vol. #1 A-L, New York, Garland Publishing ,Inc., 1993, p. 126.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ploski and Williams, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Quarles, p. 73.

⁴² Ibid. More can be found on individual contributions in Kaplan page 17-19.

⁴⁴ Brown, p. 558, More detail on three of these units can be found in Kaplan, p. 55-59.

⁴⁵ Aptheker, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, p. 57

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 59. Quarles also provides an interesting characterization of this unit's performance on page 82-83.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lorenza J. Greene, Some Observations on the Black Regiment of Rhode Island, Journal of Negro History, April 1952, p. 145. This is a primary source of information on this regiment.

⁵¹ Russell F. Weigley, The American Way of War: History Of the United States Military Strategy and Policy, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973, p. 10.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ MacGregor and Nalty, p. 120-126, This reference contains the record of Varnum's request to Washington to use slaves, Washington's letter seeking support for the request and the proceedings of the Rhode Island General Assembly.

⁵⁴ Lorenza J. Greene, p. 145.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 152.

⁵⁷ Quarles, p. 81, Lorenza Greene, p. 164, gives a more elaboration on determining the number of Blacks who responded to the call to form the Black Regiment.

⁵⁸ Kaplan, p. 55.

⁵⁹ Moore, p. 19.

⁶⁰ Kaplan, p. 56.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 57.

⁶² Lorenza Greene, p. 171.

⁶³ Kaplan, p. 41.

⁶⁴ Robert Greene, p. 2. Lorenza Greene, p. 146, also provides this data.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Brown, p. 558. Also found in Robert Greene, p. 2.

⁶⁸ Robert Greene, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Kaplan, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

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