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Fighting for liberty in an unequal society: African American military service in the American Revolution and the path towards citizenship

Jason G. Storey

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Fighting for Liberty in an Unequal Society:
African American Military Service in the American Revolution and the Path towards Citizenship

by

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June 15, 2016
Ypsilanti, Michigan
Dedicated to the strongest person I know: My Mother.
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Since the colonization of the New World, Africans and African Americans have played a pivotal role in armed conflicts. Military service for enslaved and free black men often converted into additional liberties, including manumission and a rise in social status. Despite opportunities to gain freedom and additional rights, only a select few received such chances. Blacks that did serve were still considered to be inferior and of a lower social status than their white counterparts. With the arrival of American Revolution, a new found importance was given to the service of black soldiers, and more than 5,000 black men served in the Continental Army alone. Those that took up arms for the United States or Britain were elevated closer to citizenship than black soldiers in any previous conflict. In this thesis, I ask why African American military service in the Continental Army led to citizenship. I argue that the radical change in society ushered in by the Revolution and its republican ideals combined with the colonists’ beliefs of the virtue of citizen-soldiers. The change in the status of African Americans was furthered by the competition between Britain and the United States to arm the most slaves fastest, the large-scale intermingling of the black and white population of the colonies, and the heroic acts accomplished by black soldiers. All aspects combined to produce a change in how blacks were viewed in society and as citizens. After the Revolution, thousands of African Americans emerged with their freedom and had secured greater economic stability, material possessions, and additional liberties including voting rights.
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Introduction:

“Unfortunately, the question of the effects of war on slavery has not received the detailed study it deserves.”¹

As the bell chimed 2 p.m., the rain poured down onto a throng of five to six thousand citizens. Among them was a group of African Americans who had joined the march to the Federal Plain of Providence, Rhode Island. For them, no amount of rain could deter the importance of the many festivities that were scheduled to take place. As the sun rose earlier that morning, it was marked by the firing of thirteen cannons as well as various sermons and orations in commemoration of the day’s significance. The citizens of not only Rhode Island but of many neighboring states came to take part in the celebration of the newly ratified Constitution and the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1788).

After a huge feast that included two oxen, ham, and wine, the festivities ended with one more discharge of thirteen cannons from Federal Hill by the United Company of the Train of Artillery under Colonel Daniel Tillinghast and was accompanied by a mix of cheers and toasts by those present. In one of the first publicized forms of both celebration and political action, a group of African Americans in attendance had their toasts published in a local newspaper, *The United Chronicle*. Among the many toasts in the name of peace, economic prosperity, and to the end of slavery, they also toasted “his Excellency General Washington,” “The brave Officers and Soldiers of the late American Army,” and “The Memory of the Heroes who have fallen in Defense of American liberty.”

Black Americans of the new nation had every reason to look back and give toasts to the occasion. Many African Americans had participated and bled in the American Revolution, won their freedom, or made gains towards citizenship. The Revolution, for both free and enslaved black Americans, was largely a struggle for citizenship. Inspired by man’s internal quest for freedom and

equality and newly armed with the rhetoric spun from the Imperial Crisis, both free and slave African Americans made the war between the colonists and Great Britain their own. Making use of the disruption the war delivered to the institution of slavery and society, blacks from all backgrounds fought in the American Revolution for both the Patriots and the Crown while others made use of the chaos to flee outright. By the end of the Revolution, an estimated number of 25,000 to 100,000 slaves had found freedom.²

The goal of this research is to address specifically why African American military service in the Continental Army led to citizenship. The meaning of citizenship varies by location and has continued to change over time. In Revolutionary America, the common usage was to describe someone that engaged in an active state of political participation and community involvement as well as denote one’s national affiliation.³ The Revolution ushered in a radical change in society, and according to the contemporary South Carolina physician and historian, David Ramsay, “People [were] changed from subjects to citizens (and) the difference is immense.”⁴

From an early point in American history, those without full rights of citizenship have had to struggle in diverse ways to overcome the notion of their inability to fulfill the legal capacity to warrant their inclusion. From the introduction of slavery into the thirteen colonies, African Americans individually and collectively have attempted to change their legal and civic status to attain the greater inclusion and protection that citizenship offered. Black soldiers in the American Revolution were no different. Through their participation in the Continental Army, they were carrying out the highest of all civic rituals and a long-standing requisite for social advancement and citizenship, service in the armed forces. Serving in the Continental Army allowed black men the opportunity to better their immediate

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⁴ David Ramsay, A Dissertation on the Manner of Acquiring the Character and Privileges of a Citizen of the United States (Charleston, 1789), 3.
situation, to improve their standing in society, and to demonstrate their willingness to fight for the cause when others wouldn’t. The symbolic action of taking arms under the same cause asserted their share in the mutual values of patriotism, sacrifice, and citizenship.

African Americans that served in the Revolutionary struggle not only proved their usefulness in military roles, but for the first time on a large scale in American history, they also shared a sense of comradery with the white ruling class. Together, they fought for the same cause, shared personal ties and connections, and generated new sympathy for the plight of the black population by exposing the inequities they suffered in respect to the white population. The concern for the inequalities between whites and blacks was further amplified under the colonists’ own struggle for independence against their mother country.

Many blacks saw their military service as proof of loyalty and grounds for receiving full citizenship benefits. A large portion of African Americans who had enlisted were already free and were not forced into the service but chose to enlist. As David Brion Davis points out in his book, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770 – 1823*, as black soldiers fought for freedom and citizenship, it was not simply a task of taking advantage of the system but an immensely personal conflict. They knew that if captured, they would not be treated as prisoners of war like their white compatriots and would be sold into slavery. Their willing service earned them the appropriate name bestowed upon them by historian Robert Ewell Greene as the “Black Defenders of the Spirit of 76.” In return for their participation, they earned glory on the battlefield, received honors and a newfound respect, reaped the reward of freedom from enslavement, and gained rights as citizens.

The service of African Americans in the military is a clear rationale for grants of citizenship and

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7 Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 75.
voting rights to black veterans long before women and those that did not serve. Black soldiers received unique opportunities, as their military membership offered avenues towards citizenship. In an 1832 letter by the freed black educator and Revolutionary War veteran John Chavis to presidential hopeful Willie Person Mangum, he noted, “I am black, I am [a] free born American and a revolutionary soldier and therefore ought not to be thrown entirely out of the scale of notice.” War service converted into social capital. Blacks would enjoy the benefits of the newly created eleven free states in the North, as well as the swelling numbers of free men in the South, numbering up to 100,000 by 1810. The constitutions of Delaware, Maryland, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts allowed black citizens full privileges and voting rights. Constitution signer Rufus King declared that in New York, “a citizen of color was entitled to all the privileges of a citizen. . . . [and] entitled to vote.”

American towns such as Baltimore for the first time had more blacks than whites voting in elections, and when the proposed US Constitution was placed before citizens in 1787 and 1788, it was ratified by both black and white voters in a number of states. Additionally, blacks in many early states had not only the right to vote but also the right to hold office.

On top of the new voting and governmental participation rights, African Americans during and after the Revolution engaged in an increased use of the court system (which had significant results in their favor), received freedom, government pensions, and land in return for their service, a very important aspect of citizenship in early America. While most Americans today would see this as an undesirable effect of citizenship, many black citizens also began to pay taxes for the first time.

There were also numerous instances (as witnessed during the celebration of the ratification of the new

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12 The Constitutions of the Several Independent States of America (Boston: Norman and Bowen, 1785), 5, 8, 58, 78, 92, 104 and Rufus King, The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King, Charles R. King, editor (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1900), 404.
constitution) of African Americans who had served in the Revolution displaying great pride and patriotism towards their nation, another very important symbolic aspect of citizenship.

While some would argue that these changes could be explained solely on the influence of Revolutionary ideals, they are falling into the same error that historian Ian K. Steele warns. Steele argues that sometimes historians take such a narrow approach to the study of minorities that they overpass the interactions and assimilation that occurred which are of equal importance. This process was very active in the war effort. For the first time, a sizable number of blacks served with whites in integrated units, bridging social boundaries that were not truly penetrated prior. For the first time, prominent American social and political leaders and policy makers would see blacks as equals because they had become acquainted with them over the cause of independence. The letters of George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Laurens, his son John Laurens, and many more prominent white Americans clearly display an evolution of thought on African Americans due to their experiences. John Laurens went as far as to request his father to free their slaves to form an army unit to fight the British. In addition, the Somerset case, along with the pressure of British recruitment under the direction of Lord Dunmore effectively forced the rebels to reevaluate the effectiveness and importance of recruiting. One cannot deny that the policy makers were influenced by the service of blacks alongside them, thereby stimulating change. The service of blacks in the American Revolution would begin a united struggle for citizenship that would lead them from bondage to Yorktown, from Bull Run to the Emancipation Proclamation, from Selma to the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The very same struggle for citizenship and equality still continues today.

The historiography of black Revolutionary service is underdeveloped. The first book published to document the role of African Americans in the War for Independence was The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution written by William C. Nell just before the Civil War in 1855. The work focused on the exploits of a selected few black soldiers during the conflict. A little over a hundred years
later, a resurgence of interest in the topic took place in 1960s, during the Civil Rights movement, where once again the role of African Americans in the Revolution received increased attention. Since then, a variety of works have been published that detail the circumstances under which blacks served, the shifting attitudes towards slavery that occurred, as well as the manumissions that resulted from the conflict.

The foremost historian in the field is Benjamin Quarles, whose work *The Negro in the American Revolution* is considered the primary source of researchers of the field. Quarles in 1961 was one of the first historians to devote extensive attention to the role of African Americans in the Revolution. His research has been a source of information on blacks that served the Patriot’s cause. Other prominent works in the field include David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770 – 1823*, Ira Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, and Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan’s *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*. All cover a large period of African American history with great effectiveness. Davis’s research focused on comparing how Great Britain, United States, and France were forced to reshape their relationship with slavery largely because of political and economic pressures as well as changes in ideals, spurred on by the Enlightenment and Evangelical Revival. Ira Berlin focused on America and covered a longer period to trace the evolution of slavery over its first two centuries, to display the fluidity of the institution, and compare the two forms of society that emerged in America: societies with slaves and slave societies. Christopher Leslie Brown and Philip D. Morgan’s book consisted of a variety of articles by different authors that follows the use of slaves in military service from ancient Greece to the late 1800s. All three works provide details on the history of slavery and early military service.

Gordon S. Wood’s books *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* focus on the changes in early America from a monarchal
subject based society to a republic of citizens. He devotes only a few pages of his books to addressing the situation of African Americans during the period. While brief, however, his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* states that, for over 150 years, from 1619 – 1775, slavery was a relatively unquestioned institutionalized practice in the American colonies, which was seen as a necessary status in a hierarchy of laborers. Consequently, it was rarely criticized, and those that took part in it had little need to defend their position. During the American Revolution, however, a great shift took place that altered the national conscience on slavery in the fledgling republic, changing the public perspective on slavery from regarding it as a routine and expected practice to labeling it as “a peculiar institution.” The Revolution suddenly and dramatically ended the cultural climate that allowed slavery to endure throughout the colonial period without objection. The resulting impact according to Wood changed the ideological and social relationship Americans had with the institution and effectively doomed its continued existence and set into motion the Civil War, ending almost two hundred years of slavery in less than a hundred.\(^\text{13}\)

Additional historical works, for example David Waldstreicher’s *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* as well as Alfred W. Blumrosen & Ruth G. Blumrosen’s *Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies & Sparked the American Revolution*, focused on the founding fathers and congressional aspect of slavery. Waldstreicher argued that the Constitution was a proslavery document created by a majority of slave owners that ensured the institution would survive. The Blumrosens took Waldstreicher’s argument one step further and argued that the Revolution would never have occurred had it not been for slavery because the *Somerset* decision and the threat of British parliament cracking down on slave owners’ rights led the South to join what was at the time a local Boston-based rebellion. In return for Southern aid, the North secured the future of slavery in the new nation.

Lastly, in the book *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American* 

Revolution in Virginia, Woody Holton took the most radical position of the historians mentioned thus far, arguing a neo-Marxist view of the Revolution. According to Holton, the Virginian founders partook in the revolt largely due to their fear of local rebellions from those mentioned in the book’s title, thus giving credit to the lower classes for pushing Virginia towards independence. While Holton’s research offers a unique perspective by emphasizing the importance of the lower classes in starting the Revolution, the goal of this research is not to pinpoint who is responsible. Instead, the focus takes a more critical race theory approach as it attempts to evaluate the contribution and effects of African Americans in a military capacity and the resulting changes in racial law, power, emancipation, and citizenship. Further works of great assistance have been Woody Holton’s Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents, Robert Ewell Greene’s Black Courage 1775 – 1783: Documentation of Black Participation in the American Revolution and Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan’s The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, all which provide important primary resources.

Unfortunately, as Professor Woody Holton notes in his book Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents, “the scarcity of black-authored documents leave historians with little choice but to try to use white-authored documents to learn what they can about African American life in the era of the American Revolution.”

It has been important to utilize the top historians in the field, the words of African Americans when available, and a wide arrange of primary documents found in print. The Library of Congress, The National Archives, State Archives, and various historical societies like that of the Boston Historical Society have proved indispensable.

The following work is broken up into four main chapters. The first chapter serves as a brief history of black military service during the colonial period, before the Revolution. Chapters two and three analyze the role African-Americans played in the war as well as the effect they had. The chapters

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also evaluate African Americans’ reasoning behind the choosing of one side over the other while also identifying the various beliefs, identities, loyalties, and patriotisms of African Americans. The second chapter focuses on the initial reaction to African Americans serving in the war and the pressure put on the colonists by the beginnings of British recruitment of black soldiers. The third chapter analyzes the various paths toward citizenship that opened up via the Patriot Forces. Lastly, chapter four will analyze the results of the conflict on African Americans’ citizenship in the United States, evaluating gains on both a holistic and individual basis as a result of their participation.
Chapter 1: Military Participation and Citizenship in the Colonial Period (1501 – 1763)

“Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war.”

“The military value of blacks would outweigh their worth as slave laborers and help them to escape being treated as racially inferior.”

It is important to evaluate the history of progress and setbacks surrounding black military participation as a process of social advancement during colonial military affairs to understand the path towards citizenship that military participation offered African Americans during the American Revolution. Historians often overshadow the contributions of black soldiers in the colonial period, instead focusing on the periods directly before or after the Civil War. A large variety of historical work on blacks during the colonial period focus on the social and economic studies of slavery, maroon communities, and slave resistance. However, in what John Carrol refers to as a “historical omission,” historians avoid the military history of black participation altogether. Whether defending or attacking a colony throughout the colonial period, the voluntary or forced contributions of blacks in the military as soldiers and mercenaries were significant. Enslaved and free blacks in every colony and almost every conflict, proved their skills, effectiveness, and loyalty through their military service. For many blacks, military service offered one of the only means in which to climb the social ladder. Their participation and experiences would help blacks and society as a whole resolve the long-standing questions of slavery, racism, citizenship, and equality.

The connection between military service and advancement towards citizenship for African Americans did not begin with the American Revolution. Historian Gary A. Donaldson compared the service of blacks in colonial times to the term dubbed in World War II by African American soldiers,

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18 Voelz, *Slave and Soldier*, xiv, xv, xvi, 3, 4.
called the “Double V.” For black soldiers, “Double V” meant that their service would bring victory against the enemy while simultaneously bringing victory at home against racism. The idea of a double victory for African American military service was present since the beginning of American history. An example of the “Double V” occurred in 1775 when Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment (an all-black loyalist regiment) had been promised freedom in exchange for their service. The black soldiers had also inscribed on the front of their uniforms “Liberty to Slaves.”

It is the goal of this chapter to trace the origins of the “Double V” while providing a brief summary of black military participation in the colonial period and its effects on creating paths towards citizenship, an area of study that D.B. Davis agrees “has not received the detailed study it deserves.”

While blacks participated in all corners of the colonial Americas, the main emphasis will be placed on North America, as it will become the staging grounds for the Revolution. The resulting conclusions of colonial military participation only further help to display the importance of armed service as a means of producing freedom, rights, and citizenship and sets the stage for African American participation in the greatest colonial conflict: the American Revolution.

The story of African soldiers in European armies began in the Old World. Africans were considered by many to be superior soldiers. Since ancient times, Africans were used to supplement armies throughout the Mediterranean, especially Ethiopian soldiers who were known for their military abilities. Jack Cardoso claims “A study of African blacks, is a study of basic soldierdom, qualities of which were carried by their countrymen to other lands… the status of warrior was basic to every male.” Stanley M. Elkins agrees that “The typical West African tribesman was a distinctly warlike individual.”

The first modern European to visit West Africa was the Venetian Ca da Mosto in 1454. His opinion of the natives was that “They are extremely bold and fierce, choosing rather to be killed, than to save their lives.

lives by flight… [and that] most slaves were captured in wars with neighboring countries and… civil wars.”

Historian John Thornton believes that the skills of African soldiers and the “striking power of African armies” was a major reason why Europeans did not attempt to conquer Africa for such a long period. Most historians tend to agree on the military background of African slaves; Thornton argues that “military enslavement was by far the most significant method… [and that] rulers were not, for the most part, selling their own subjects but people whom they, at least, regarded as aliens. The fact that many exported slaves were recent captives means that they were drawn from those captured in the course of warfare.” The number of enslaved blacks only increased with the transition to larger armies equipped with firearms. Furthermore, Thornton states, “The most important contributions of the African heritage were the military training that many slaves had, mostly from having served in African armies.”

The Spanish had been exposed to African soldiers early on as Africans fought alongside the Moors in their invasion of Spain. During the invasion thousands of slaves had been used not only as soldiers but also as military messengers and bodyguards. Since the ninth century, Muslim military commanders had utilized black soldiers as mercenaries and mounted archers. Later blacks would fight on both sides of the Spanish struggle to reclaim their country during the Reconquista. Military service was a significant theme of the African diaspora, and since many slaves had served in African armies before their enslavement, as ex-soldiers, they needed little encouragement to serve again. Throughout greater Europe, blacks were also traded as slaves for use as servants, artisans, and laborers. Traditions

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24 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 11.
of slavery carried over to the New World when the Spanish colonization of the Americas began and would remain relatively unchanged until plantation economies took root.26

The story of black military participation and struggle for citizenship rights in the New World began almost as early as European involvement in the hemisphere. Having arrived around 1501 with the Spanish, by 1528, almost a hundred years before the first Africans arrived in the English colonies, there were as many as 10,000 black slaves in New Spain.27 Around 1513, both free and enslaved blacks accompanied the Spanish conquistadors as soldiers and aids as they spread across the Southeast and Southwest of North America in search of riches and mythic locations like the Seven Cities of Gold or the Fountain of Youth. On his legendary conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1519, Hernan Cortez brought with him 300 slaves that assisted his conquistadors in destroying the mighty civilization.28 Many of the blacks that accompanied the conquistadors managed to gain their liberty in the process. Many others even climbed to the same status as the conquistadors themselves and some obtained slaves of their own.29

Without the assistance of Africans used as soldiers, it would have been more difficult for the Spaniards and Portuguese to colonize the Americas.30 In almost every expedition of the conquest period, blacks were used as an instrument of war, and according to Thornton, “Few conquests were accomplished without African participation.”31 William Phillips agrees with Thornton, calling black soldiers “particularly valuable” as they “served as soldiers and occupied an intermediate position between the Spaniards and the indigenous population.”32 It was not long before these men fought their way towards freedom and citizenship as they assisted the conquistadors based in Havana and Mexico

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31 Thornton, Africa and Africans, 140.
City in carving out vast territory, creating settlements and producing profits all in the name of Spain.\textsuperscript{33} Early conquerors’ writings record such exploits, like that of the Spanish conquistador Francisco de Montejo, who wrote from the Yucatan in 1529, making mention of sending “a Negro of his” to subdue a Native American village.\textsuperscript{34}

One of the first slaves to make a name for himself by serving in the military was a man named Estebanico (Esteban) who served on the conquistador Panfilo de Narvaez’s expedition in 1528, which goal was to establish a permanent settlement in western Florida. From the start, the expedition was marked by disaster. Storms pushed the ships off course, forcing them ashore around Tampa Bay. Divided on what to do next, half of the explorers continued by boat to their original destination while the other half including Esteban attempted to do so overland. It would be seven long years before those that decided to go over land were heard from again. Eventually, Esteban and three other survivors were rescued in northern Mexico.

Once safely back in Spanish protection, the survivors spoke of their journey and of encountering the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. Due to his outstanding service on the expedition, Esteban was awarded a commission in the Spanish army and became the first formally recognized black soldier in the Americas. Upon receiving his new commission, the Imperial Viceroy at Mexico City sent Esteban to serve as a guide on a second expedition led by the explorer-priest Fray Marcos to locate the Seven Cities of Gold spoke of by Esteban and the other survivors. After setting out, in an attempt to perhaps bring more glory to himself and a further climb in social status, Esteban abandoned the group and headed off north of Mexico City on his own. In May of 1539, in what is now modern-day Arizona and New Mexico, he arrived in the territory of the pueblo building Hawikuh (a people known today as the Zuni). Unfortunately, Esteban’s story ends with his death after an encounter with the native people.

\textsuperscript{33} Julie Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to the Civil War} (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), xviii, 1, 2.

\textsuperscript{34} R. R Wright, “Negro Companions of the Spanish Explorers,” \textit{American Anthropologist}, 4:24 (1902), 220.
Esteban died without the discovery of riches, glory, or the climb in status he had hoped.\footnote{Donaldson, \textit{History of African}, 3-4.}

Another milestone in colonial black military history is St. Augustine, built by the Spanish in 1565. St. Augustine serves not only as an example of the earliest European settlement in North America but also one of the first instances of military service resulting in grants of freedom. As the colony came under increasing attacks from Native Americans, the Spanish were forced to call upon their slaves to maintain the protection of their settlement. Spanish settlers were called to arm their most trusted slaves, ones they referred to as “secure blacks.”\footnote{Thornton, \textit{Africa and Africans}, 141.} This act signified a moment Historian Lowell J. Ragatz called “the opening of a new epoch in interracial relations.”\footnote{Lowell J. Ragatz, \textit{The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833} (New York: Octagon Books, 1977), 33.} While blacks first aided in the wars against Native Americans led by the conquistadors, their military contributions were never more appreciated than in times of emergency. Slaves added to the military power of the Spanish to fend off the Native Americans or foreign invasions and gave the Spanish colonies an increased chance of successful defense.

During times of crisis, thousands of blacks offered their military assistance to threatened colonies.\footnote{Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 23.} In return for their military assistance, they were awarded their freedom. Black men that were already free also had a reason to fight, as colonial freedom for blacks was not the same freedom offered to whites. It was what historian Julie Winch has referred to as “halfway freedom,” somewhere between slavery and the privileges that whites enjoyed. By fighting, free blacks could earn a chance to enjoy the rights of citizenship naturally awarded to whites, which had to be earned by blacks.\footnote{Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom}, xiv, xv.}

Unbeknown to the Spaniards of the time, their simple act of desperation, allowing their slaves to receive freedom through military service, would become a standard throughout colonial America. One by one, Spanish settlements sooner or later needed reinforcements to protect against raiding natives.
Black soldiers aided the Spanish in quashing the revolt of the Inca Manco that occurred in 1535. The colonists had to accept the reality that slaves called on to defend Spanish lives could not be asked to die for the colonists if they were to remain slaves afterward.

While the manumission of slaves occurred relatively infrequently, it was a common enough practice during wartime that dated back as far as the Peloponnesian and Punic Wars of Europe when a large number of slaves gained their freedom for their courage in battle. Almost all societies that held slaves (not just of African origin) used manumissions at one time or another as a means of motivating slaves to help defend against or attack others. The delicate situation of war and arming those held in society without any given rights did not allow for anything but freedom in return for service. If Spain was to train and place weapons into the hands of slaves and require them to fight and possibly die for the crown only to turn around and deny them freedom for their service, a multitude of negative consequences could ensue. Denial of freedom for service could result in increased chances of a slave rebellion or a change of allegiance in support of Spain’s enemies who might promise the reward of freedom in return. For blacks living in early Spanish colonies, military service led to freedom, which included many of the same rights white colonists received. As a result of the practice, a considerable free black fighting force was created in Florida. They formed several formal military companies complete with black or mixed race officers who had risen through the ranks as they led their men with courage and loyalty into battle against Spain’s enemies.

The Spanish did not only arm blacks against Native Americans. One of the first examples of blacks utilized on both sides of a conflict by two mostly white armies occurred in 1554. The Peruvian conquistador and colonist Francisco Hernandez armed 300 black slaves with pikes and harquebuses in a rebellion attempt. In response to the rebellion, the Royal Army recruited blacks of their own to meet

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40 Voelz, *Slave and Soldier*, 12.
41 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 287-290.
Hernandez on the field. Although his revolt was unsuccessful, he recalled that the slave soldiers under his command “gave good account of themselves in battle.”\textsuperscript{43} As the free black population grew, more and more were called to arms to defend the colonies on land and at sea.\textsuperscript{44} A similar process was used by the Portuguese in their colony of Brazil when blacks were enlisted to fight the Tupinamba and Tapuya natives as well as their European rivals, the Dutch, and French.\textsuperscript{45} The Portuguese stood no chance of defeating the French and Dutch invasions of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries if it was not for arming their blacks.\textsuperscript{46} By the 1600s, black soldiers aided the French, English, and Dutch, who had joined the Spanish in carving out colonial possessions.

The French, who were no more committed to freedom than the Spanish, followed a similar practice when in 1729 they too began to free and arm their slaves to help against attacks on New Orleans led by the Natchez. Here too, slaves would have to rely on their courage to gain their liberty. As raid after raid continued, the black soldiers fought well and the French colonial authorities realized they could not do without them, so they too were organized into military companies with their own black officers. The reward for military service in New France did not only introduce slaves to freedom but in many cases, also made black men significantly wealthy.\textsuperscript{47} Throughout colonial history, the process of rewarding military service for freedom would continue. Freedom for military service was most common in the Caribbean and Brazil, where the white colonist were so outnumbered and vulnerable that slave defenders were key to their survival.\textsuperscript{48}

Before their use by the English in the New World, the English, like the Spanish, had used blacks in military and civilian positions in Africa in an attempt to manage the slave trade. In 1555, John Lok brought five slaves to England to learn to be translators and work for British interests in Africa.

\textsuperscript{43} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 13.
\textsuperscript{44} James M. Lockhart, \textit{Spanish Peru, 1532-1560} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 116.
\textsuperscript{45} Thornton, \textit{Africa and Africans}, 141.
\textsuperscript{46} Nash, \textit{Red, White, and Black}, 180.
\textsuperscript{47} Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{48} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 74.
Throughout the sixteenth century, “Africans were brought to England for training to assist English trading ventures in Africa, a design which was initially successful and which was to continue in a much-altered form well into the nineteenth century.” The first cooperative undertaking between English and Africans in a military capacity was in 1568 when Francis Drake allied with a tribe off the Guinea coast against their enemy. In the process, he obtained over 200 slaves to then sell in America. Only a year before, John Hawkins had tried to buy slaves in Gambia, but a Portuguese sponsored army of 6,000 blacks ambushed the English.49

Slaves would arrive in the English and Dutch colonies in the seventeenth century. The first permanent English colony, Jamestown, received its first Africans in 1619. The Dutch colony of New Amsterdam imported Africans using the Dutch West India Company in 1626. In Salem, Massachusetts Africans would arrive in 1636. From the very start, Native Americans frequently attacked the English and Dutch colonies up and down the Atlantic coast.50 By the seventeenth century, it had become a universal practice that the burden of defense of colonies fell onto its male citizens. A fundamental human right was the security of one’s home, and with that came the basic right of all free citizens to bear arms to defend their home. The right to bear arms was then permanently attached to the “essence of freedom.”51 The arming of black soldiers would bring them into the fold of citizen soldiers. Black soldiers not only protected the colonies that both blacks and whites called home, but they also helped to fulfill the ideals in which the colonists and later revolutionaries would hold so dear.

Despite various laws like the one passed by Virginia in 1639, disallowing free and enslaved blacks to carry arms, when rumors of the possibility of invasion circled, the early English colonies did


not have enough settlers to protect themselves from their European or Native American rivals. In times of need, they called upon black soldiers to fill their ranks. An example of such use occurred in 1670 when South Carolinian Governor John Yeamans used armed slaves to guard his estate against attacking Spanish and Native Americans.\textsuperscript{52} It was more often than not that British regulars were not numerous enough to properly defend colonial holdings, so slaves supplemented the lack of forces. This practice was most common on the frontier, where many colonists lived in remote areas and received little aid from regulars.\textsuperscript{53} Despite the obvious need overall, when compared to the Spanish, French, and Dutch, the English were not as willing to admit blacks into the role of soldier and had no formal black military companies. White colonists were naturally skittish at the thought of arming blacks to fight as soldiers as if it was tempting fate too much. One observer wrote, “the presence of black men in arms posed a constant danger.”\textsuperscript{54} Another colonist in 1741, echoed the fear of blacks on the frontier, “The greater number of blacks, which a frontier has, and the greater the disproportion is between them and her white people, the more danger she is liable to; for those are all secret enemies, and ready to join with her open ones on the first occasion.”\textsuperscript{55} The fear of arming slaves was a common notion, which would inspire the title to Alan Taylor’s book \textit{The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772 – 1832}.

Since the start of the eighteenth century, the right to bear arms had become a right and privilege of English citizens to not only protect themselves but the English constitution itself. With the rise of importance of citizens in arms, came the increasing importance of the formation of militias, which both symbolized and actualized the roles citizens played in the defense of their nation and of their rights, as citizen soldiers. In England as well as America, popular opinion portrayed militia members as fierce citizen soldiers who defended the freedom of England and her colonies. According to a member of

\textsuperscript{53} Donaldson, \textit{History of African}, 3-5.
parliament, “The Militia must and can never be otherwise than for English Liberty, Because else it doth destroy itself.” Likewise, professional soldiers were considered to be a threat to freedom and filled with the worst lot of people. A popular pamphlet of the time labeled professional armies as “inconsistent with a Free Government.” As early as the Magna Carta, kings had promised not to use professional soldiers; however, public opinion began to sway against standing armies largely due to the toll professional armies took on parliament and the people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ambitious kings waged wars with professional armies which amounted to increasingly high civilian casualties, as had occurred in the Thirty Years’ War.

William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* made the connection between the ability for citizens to secure their rights and the bearing of arms:

> But in vain would these rights be declared, ascertained, and protected by the dead letter of the laws, if the constitution had provided no other method to secure their actual enjoyment. It has therefore established certain other auxiliary rights of the subject, which serve principally as outworks or barriers, to protect and maintain inviolate the three great and primary rights, of personal security, personal liberty, and private property.

The colonial Americans believed that militia service was an important responsibility of citizenship that served to defend liberty and order and that one fought for freedom, not for hire. During the French and Indian War (known as the Seven Years’ War outside of America), Governor Thomas Pownall of Massachusetts when addressing the residents of his colony argued that a free society can “depend on no other soldiery but its own citizens for defense.” Governor Pownall continued, explaining that every citizen must consider “it his truest honour to be a soldier-citizen.” Despite the rhetoric of citizen soldiers defending their country and fighting for freedom, the structure of the colonial militia

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itself was often far from egalitarian, and the lowest levels of colonial society, consisting of Indians, African Americans, white servants, and apprentices, usually were not permitted to serve in the militia.

As blacks were not considered full citizens, the colonists of North America were wary of enlisting blacks in the military. John Shy names “free Negroes and mulattoes” as “several classes of men who fell outside the militia structure… [yet] were precisely the men who, if given the chance, were most willing to go to war.”60 When blacks did serve, they were only pressed into service in cases of emergencies, usually to perform tasks as minimal laborers.61

Even though a connection between military service and protection of rights was made, in both England and America militia service was unpopular. Many men tried their best to avoid spending their free time in militia drills and target practice. By 1620, the situation became so problematic that Charles I was forced to close the ale houses on Sundays due to complaints that the militia engaged in “too much bowling and too little shooting.”62 Combat fatalities also led to the inclusion of black soldiers. In 1660 an English officer named Vincent Harlow commented on such needs: “The constant expeditions against the enemy and losses…had reduced the militia to such low numbers that the dangerous expedient of arming negroes had been resorted to.”63 With a lack of willing men and mounting war losses, English colonists would admit blacks as mercenaries and soldiers when situations grew dire, and recruiters became more anxious to fill their quotas, eventually allowing both free and runaway blacks to enlist.64

Runaway and free blacks that chose to enlist perhaps were knowingly aware that the act of defending one’s colony was a requirement of male citizens and therefore required as a precursor to their inclusion. Free blacks used their military service as leverage for further rights of citizenship. The

63 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 111.
64 Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom, 17-18.
militia was advantageous for blacks that were able to enlist, as it was one of the few occupations that offered a promotion for blacks not only economically in the form of payment and pensions but psychologically and socially as well. Because of the many benefits, once in the militia, blacks usually stayed for longer terms than their white counterparts “for the military occupation was one of the few in which Negroids could encounter a degree of acceptance.”

The first century of English colonies especially in the southern colony of South Carolina saw many slaves receive their freedom, however, by no act of the English themselves, rather with the assistance of England’s rival, Spain. As early as 1699, in an attempt to weaken their enemy, the Spanish encouraged English slaves in South Carolina to attempt to escape to Florida. Once in Florida slaves were welcomed and rewarded for their betrayal with freedom. In response to attacks by the Spanish, the English too would recruit runaway slaves to fight for them against the Spanish, who attempted to recapture them. By 1740, the Spanish increased their rewards for slaves that abandoned the English, offering not only freedom but also land if they agreed to join their black military companies. Many took Spain up on this offer and by the hundreds escaped into Florida. Once there, they were encouraged to become soldiers because Spanish knew that if England ever attacked, the slaves who had escaped and received their freedom for doing so would fight even harder to maintain that freedom to avoid being recaptured and punished for what England surely would see as a treasonous betrayal.

The Spanish were not alone in their attempt to try to get slaves to switch allegiances and reward those that did. During Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, both sides of the conflict offered freedom to slaves who switched sides. Switching allegiances appears to have been a large enough concern that in

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65 Voelz, *Slave and Soldier*, 452, 120.
October of 1684, the New York Colonial Assembly threatened “That if any Servant upon pretense of going to the wars against the Enemy to run away from his Master’s service he shall if taken be Grievously punished at the direction of the Governour and Councell.” Slaves that switched sides would sell military information to the enemy. Slaves that had been captured but then escaped would also reveal enemy plans. Captured slaves could be a source of strategic information and acted as unofficial spies, offering up news about enemies’ movements. In 1586, three Spanish slaves escaped from Drake’s ships and informed the Spanish of his plans. By affecting the outcome of a military situation through the offering up of vital information, they also showed their loyalty and desire for freedom or reward by choosing one side over another to offer their services.

In 1654, slaves would once again fight on both sides of a conflict when the English attempted to capture Santo Domingo, which resulted in an English defeat. Abandoning their hopes of Santo Domingo, they then set their eyes on Jamaica. The Spanish-controlled island had a population of 1,500 poor colonists with an equal amount of slaves and maroons. The English once more would use slaves to guide them through the island and assist in fighting the Spanish, however, during the assault, most of the Spanish slaves fled into the mountains to escape their European masters. Some slaves would stay behind and fight alongside their owners despite the knowledge that the British had offered to free any slave that surrendered. Similar instances would occur later in the American Revolution as slaves would stay with their masters even after having been offered freedom by the invading British. When faced with freedom over a lifetime of slavery and then to turn it down, slaves showed their capacity to value loyalty, patriotism, and their ability to identify with the colony to which they belonged or at the very least had hoped their loyalty would result in their former masters manumitting them upon wars end.

The Jamaican campaign is worth noting, as it featured many of the elements that were later seen

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during the American Revolution. The Jamaican campaign saw free and enslaved blacks enlist in the military out of desperation, fight on both sides of a European conflict against a mixed group of blacks and whites, and win their freedom or give their lives for a cause they believed to be as much their own as the Europeans. In Jamaica, blacks and whites would leave behind their conflict with the other race and show a willingness to work together to achieve their individual goals and self-interests, just as the English did not hesitate to make common cause with black slaves to combat the Spaniards. As time would go on, however, colonists of all nations, especially the English with their large slave population would be more unsettled by the idea of arming enslaved and free blacks and would only resort to military cooperation in moments of survival.73 A fear of arming blacks can be seen in the writings of Governor William Mathew of Antigua in 1734, “from among our Negroes [25,000 slaves] we certainly may arm a thousand sturdy faithful fellows, that with a little encouragement, will I know do eminent service. But this is a dangerous experiment for thereafter, however it must be done.”74

The English reluctance to fully utilize black troops on the level of the Spanish and French is most likely due to the increasingly growing population of slaves. By 1756, in Virginia alone, the white population was 173,000, while the slave population was 120,000 and continuously growing. It was not uncommon for some counties of Virginia and South Carolina to have a larger population of slaves than whites. The population difference between blacks and whites made many English settlers nervous of arming their slaves unless totally desperate, out of the fear of possible slave revolts.75 When debating their defense capabilities in 1715, North Carolinians noted that the military use of slaves must be exercised with “great caution lest our slaves when armed might become our masters.”76

73 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 17-19.
75 Donaldson, History of African, 1.
was obvious discontent among slaves and slave revolts did occur, they were usually small, insignificant, and could be easily put down by a limited militia. Despite the militia’s ability to end uprisings, slave revolts engrained in the English colonists a fear of a black man with a gun. The English were not alone in such fears. In 1641, the Dutch in New Amsterdam faced threats of a Native American attack. Under pressure to defeat the natives, the Dutch turned to arming their slaves with tomahawks and pikes; however, they refused to go a step further and allow the slaves to brandish firearms. A little over twenty years later in 1664, when faced with defeat and the capture of New Amsterdam by the English sent by Charles II, the Dutch put their slaves to work constructing breastworks. The Dutch chose not to arm slaves in any capacity, a fatal mistake most likely guided by their fears, which would cost them their colonial possessions.

The various European colonies were never truly united and flip-flopped on their decisions to use black soldiers. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Jesse J. Johnson referred to the practice as “the three R’s: during peace, reject; during war, recruit; after war, reject.” Numerous colonial laws prohibited the arming of African Americans as militiamen, so many that historians fail to appreciate the tenacity of those that continued to push for inclusion. In Virginia, the penalty for black men showing up for militia musters was a fine of “one hundred pounds of tobacco.” In 1639, an Act of the General Assembly of Virginia stated: “All persons except Negroes (were) to be provided with arms and ammunition.”

Only one year before the Dutch refusal to arm their slaves and four years after Virginia banned the arming of blacks, in 1643, an African American named Abraham Pearse was listed as capable of bearing arms in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Only nine years later the colony of Massachusetts declared that “All Negroes and Indians from sixteen to sixty years of age, inhabitants or servants to the English,

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77 Donaldson, History of African, 2.
78 Donaldson, History of African, 5; Wilkes, Missing Pages in American, 8.
80 Neimeyer, America Goes to War, 66.
81 Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, vii.
be listed and hereby enjoined to attend (militia) trainings as well as the English.” The decree was reversed in 1656 and then put back into place only four years later, only to be yet again, put aside once more until the administration of Sir Edmund Andros stated again that no one above the age of fifteen should remain unlisted, slave or free.  

This time, the decree would stay in place through King William’s War, which began in 1693 and continued through Queen Anne’s War, which started in 1702. Virginia’s General Assembly clarified their position on the status of African American militia service in 1723. First, “any free Negro, Mulatto, or Indian” were exempt from being enlisted by any colonel or commander in chief. Secondly, that “free Negroes, Mulattos, or Indians, as are capable, may be listed and employed as drummers or trumpeters: And that upon any invasion, insurrection, or rebellion, all free Negroes…shall be obliged to attend and march with the militia, and to do the duty of pioneers, or such other servile labour as they shall be directed to perform.”  

During King William’s War, slaves in New York were once again used to construct fortifications, an act that protected New York and helped bring the war to a quicker end. The blacks that served did so with great results. The Earl of Belmont wrote to the Lords of Trade in April, 1699, stating, “rather than require more soldiers from England, I should advice the sending for negroes from Guinea, which I understand are brought there and brought hither, all charges whatever being borne, for ten pounds apiece, New York money, and I can clothe and feed them very comfortably for nine pence, apiece per day sterling money, which is three pence per day less than I require for soldiers.”  

Similar to the decision to arm blacks in Massachusetts, during the second year of Queen Anne’s War, South Carolina under fear of invasion would allow the arming of “trusty” slaves in defense of the colony. Because of the colonists’ constant fear of arming slaves, however, more often than not in colonial

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times, slaves stayed on the farm to allow their owners to go off and do battle or were used behind the front lines, as laborers.85

In 1706, the Spanish and French attacked North Carolina’s frontier and all free men from sixteen to sixty, including free blacks, were required to serve in the military that year.86 African Americans would once again be called upon in the Tuscarora War of 1711 in North Carolina. During a period of the Tuscarora War, a series of acts were passed regulating the military service of slaves. The following excerpts are taken from a series of South Carolina laws issued between 1704-1711:

Section 3: Every slave enlisted…on actual invasion shall be accoutered and armed by the captain of each division out of public stores with a launce (lance) and a hatchet or a gun with ammunition sufficient.87

Section 6: And be it further enacted…That if any slave in actual service of this province is wounded so that he is disabled for service to his master or owner, then such slave so disabled shall be set free at the charge of the public.

The law also contained further instructions for fines of any officers or slave owners who failed to comply with its requirements.88 The 1715 Yamasee War of South Carolina and northern Georgia, where four hundred African Americans and six hundred whites joined together and marched side by side in the same ranks to defeat a Native American threat, quickly followed the Tuscarora War.89 It was an incredibly bloody war, and many African Americans fell in battle. As a reward for their service, however, slaves who fought were set free.90 The large number of slaves who were manumitted on such occasions contributed to the size of the free black population. During colonial times, military manumissions, while rare, were still the most frequent method of liberation for African American males, as non-military manumissions were often given to women and children. On manumissions for men, historian Rout stated that “the surest route to emancipation lay in the realm of extraordinary

85 Donaldson, History of African, 3.
86 Donaldson, History of African, 7; Wilkes, Missing Pages in American, 10.
87 Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, viii.
88 Wilkes, Missing Pages in American, 14.
90 Wilkes, Missing Pages in American, 14.
service.”

Elsewhere, in New France, between 1718 and 1731, two thousand black slaves were brought into the colony of Louisiana, which amounted to nearly one-third the colonies’ white population. As in the Spanish and English colonies, they too were used for military defense. Threatened by Native Americans in 1729, the Governor of New Orleans said, “for want of soldiers I shall send out militia and even Negroes in order to be at least on an equality with our enemy.” In 1729, they took part in an attack against the Chaouacha Natives in part of a larger campaign against the Natchez, who had revolted against French domination. The following year, in 1730, ten percent of the army that met the Natchez warriors at Pointe Coupee (north of Baton Rouge) consisted of black soldiers. They performed so well that the commander of the French forces recommended the slaves be freed and offered his praise, stating, “[T]he Negroes to the number of fifteen who were permitted to take up arms did deeds of surprising valor.”

The Spanish too had an enemy in the Natchez and African Americans made up nineteen percent of a force used by Spain to wage war against the natives outside of Mobile (located in the future state of Alabama) in 1736. The battle is worth remembrance as the Spanish forces contained a separate company of black soldiers led by free black officers, which is probably the first time in colonial North America that African Americans served and were entrusted with officership. A similar battle occurred in 1742 when the Spanish sent a failed expedition from Havana to do battle with the English General James Oglethorpe in hopes of securing control of Georgia. The expeditions included a regiment of black soldiers with officers equal in rank to their white Spanish counterparts, dressed in the finest gold cloth and lace. It was reported that the black soldiers “also talked with the commander-in-chief, Don Antonio de Rodundo, with equal social equality.”

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91 Rout, Experience in Spanish America, 87, 90.
93 Wilkes, Missing Pages in American, 16.
The French and Spanish would continue to use African Americans to help fight their battles, as they did not have the same fear of revolts that the Dutch and British shared. France’s apparent lack of fear in utilizing black soldiers allowed African Americans to make up a considerable portion of the militia units serving in New Orleans, the city with the largest free black population in the South. While New Orleans had the largest freed black population in the South, they were not the only ones to have a sizable free black population. By 1723, Virginia had so many free African Americans it was ordered that “Every free Negro, Mulatto, or Indian being a housekeeper shall be enlisted in the militia, and may be permitted to keep one gun, powder, and shot.” As the free black population grew throughout the English colonies, it became more acceptable for blacks to serve in the militia, especially in the North. By 1770, free blacks would make up five percent of the black population, most living in the North and as the numbers increased so did the laws requesting they serve in the militia at the same levels as the white colonists. As they served together, Ira Berlin notes “the freemen’s military experience made whites respectful of free Negro liberty.”

In another example of outstanding loyalty and courage by slaves under fire occurred a few years earlier in 1749, when two Dutchmen named Duk Van Vost and Daniel Toll went looking for stray horses with their slave Ryckert. They had left as part of a larger body of Hollanders but broke off to search on their own. Not long after they left their party, they learned from a survivor that natives had attacked the main group. Fearing they would soon endure the same fate, Ryckert was sent back to town to warn their fellow colonists and request aid. Ryckert quickly returned home and formed a small body of seventy militia members, which he led back to a village where his owner agreed to rendezvous. Once there, with no sight of his owner, instead of remaining in town, Ryckert went back to the last known location of his master Toll, and together the three attempted to make it to the militia. They were

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unsuccessful because a group of natives ambushed them, killing Ryckert’s master where he stood. Ryckert escaped unharmed and made it back to the militia and was supplied with a horse to bring the militia to his fallen master. Once more, the group fell into an ambush, killing many of the militia members. The fate of Ryckert himself is unknown, but his courage and loyalty towards his master and fellow colonists were recorded.\textsuperscript{97}

When the French and Indian War broke out in 1754, the governors of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey were hesitant to enlist slaves into their colonial forces, as they did not want to interfere with “the property rights of the master…” or tamper with “his labor supply.”\textsuperscript{98} On February 2, 1756, a letter from Governor Sharpe of Maryland spoke of the slave owners’ unwillingness to give up their property for defense of the colony:

Instructions to enlist without Exception or Distinction all Apprentices and Servants that they can persuade to enter into the Service, that the Inhabitants having a great part of their Property vested in Servants unanimously opposed the Execution of such Instructions, that on such Opposition Violence have been committed and that unless their Cause of Complaint be speedily removed an Insurrection of the People is likely to ensure.\textsuperscript{99}

Despite the resistance, as the war dragged on, the English and French both turned to their black population once more to help fill the ranks of their army. African Americans served with English regulars and the colonial units of Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, as well as behind the lines as scouts, wagoneers, and laborers.\textsuperscript{100} Once again, slaves earned their freedom for their service, and free African Americans showed the colonists their worth as defenders of their liberties. Black soldiers were a large part of the British victory in North America as they fought with honor at the battles of Fort Duquesne, Fort Cumberland, as well as the Plains of Abraham outside of Quebec.

\textsuperscript{97} Wilkes, \textit{Missing Pages in American}, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{98} Neimeyer, \textit{America Goes to War}, 66, 188n7.
\textsuperscript{100} Donaldson, \textit{History of African}, 7.
The western edge of Maryland to this day honors the black combatants of the French and Indian War with a (now controversial) mountain named “Negro Mountain,” in honor of a black man who died heroically fighting against the French aligned natives. By 1763, as the French and Indian war was at a close, under pressure the French traded the Louisiana Territory to Spain. The resulting trade of New Orleans into Spanish hands allowed the slaves of the former French territory to take advantage of the Spanish practice of coartación (the ability to purchase one’s freedom). As a result, the number of free blacks in New Orleans increased even more significantly. Once again, the service of African Americans not only led to victory but also furthered their cause towards liberation, dignity, and citizenship.

When not at war, the colonies’ militias went from being a group of military combatants to a social organization for men to share fellowship and comradery. Once or twice a year, they would march in front of the town complete in full parade dress. They spent most of their time meeting on Sundays, marching at local parade grounds and frequenting local taverns. While the down time in-between conflicts may seem trivial in comparison to the courage displayed by black soldiers in battle, it too had its place in liberating African Americans. As black men paraded around in uniform, there was little doubt that their role as a soldier was responsible for many of their freedom. Military uniforms had only been in use for around a century before the Revolution. Once they were implemented, it was quickly found out by commanding officers that once placed in uniforms, soldiers of all backgrounds saw a marked rise in pride and morale. For both slave and free, the dress uniform, fellowship, and lifelong bonds they made surely not only changed their impressions of themselves but also of white citizens and fellow blacks who had become discontent with their position and were too lured into the military in hopes of gaining more liberty. Austin Steward, a slave in the South, described witnessing a “superbly

102 Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom, 17-18.
103 Donaldson, History of African, 2.
grand militia training session” and became “completely intoxicated with a military spirit, and sighed for liberty to go out ‘on the line’ and fight the British.”

To the slave that became a soldier, it made little difference if some still considered him a slave or if the government had yet to officially grant him freedom. The life of a soldier was a great improvement over the toil and lash of the master in the fields, and when he did finally leave the service, he was declared free. As Buckley writes, “The fact that he wore the same uniform and enjoyed the same pay, allowances, and privileges as his white comrade-in-arms naturally tended to confirm this view.”

The free blacks that were using the military to obtain more rights also had an effect on those still in slavery, through the presence of black soldiers. The sight of black soldiers no doubt left an impression on the minds of slaves, filling their minds with ideas that were contrary to what society said about slaves and blacks. Historian Duncan MacLeod argued that “The main proslavery justifications derived from the Negro’s difference and, inferentially, his inferiority. There was general agreement that with regard to intellect, skills, and morals blacks lagged behind whites.”

The common racist belief of the period that blacks were somehow sub-human was challenged by the roles, requirements, and responsibilities of soldiers, which was thoroughly ingrained in the notions of what it was to be human. Thus, blacks soldiers were human and logically then all blacks must be as well. The honorable position of soldiers brought honor, prestige, and status to blacks who were in the military, a very important status in the socially conscious colonial societies. When whites turned to blacks, they were not only admitting the black man’s worth as a human being and effective soldier, they were also admitting to their own weakness and the superiority of blacks in some military

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105 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 398.
106 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 256; Roger Norman Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 65.
108 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 456-7.
skills. The black man’s service in the military was truth to the white colonists that he was not naturally or racially inferior but in some ways superior, highly desirable and dependable. The military was often colorblind and provided African Americans an avenue towards citizenship by proving their capacity for participation in the “white man’s world.”

When a slave became a soldier, they didn’t only leave behind the back breaking and menial work of the field and the wrath of an angry master, but more importantly, they left two of what Orlando Patterson called “the three constitutive elements of real slavery… powerlessness, [and] social degradation or dishonor.” The sight of black soldiers was a tradition that African Americans could be proud of and could inspire their youth to attempt for more and to be unsatisfied with the stereotypes of blacks as rebels, resisters, and slaves. In this manner, the military participation of blacks helped pave the way not only for individual liberty but also the eventual emancipation and increase in social status of whole groups of slaves and freed black men.

This idea was not lost on African Americans and was later expressed by Frederick Douglass during the Civil War:

Go into the army and go with a will and a determination to blot out … [all] mean discriminations against us… to go into the army is the speediest and best way to overcome the prejudice which has dictated unjust laws against us. To allow us in the army at all, is a great concession. Let us take this little the better to get more. By showing that we deserve the little is the best way to gain the much. Once in the United States uniform the colored man has a springing board under him by which he can jump to loftier heights.

Abraham Lincoln would echo this sentiment: “the employment of colored troops at all was a great gain to the colored people.”

In the aftermath of the French and Indian War, fears of slave revolts once again reached an all-

109 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 104.
111 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 461, 481-2.
113 McConnell, Negro Troops of Antebellum, 106.
time high. Twenty years earlier, over 134 blacks were sent to trial for a plot to burn down the city of New York.\textsuperscript{114} In 1760, tensions rose when an English writer who called himself J. Philmore (pseudonym), anticipated a massive revolution of the enslaved, which traumatized most American slaveholders:

And so all the black men now in our plantations, who are by unjust force deprived of their liberty, and held in slavery, as they have none upon earth to appeal to, may lawfully repel that force with force, and to recover their liberty, destroy their oppressors; and not only so, but it is the duty of others, white as well as blacks, to assist those miserable creatures, if they can, in their attempts to deliver themselves out of slavery, and to rescue them out of the hands of their cruel tyrants.\textsuperscript{115}

Matters were made worse with Pontiac’s Rebellion in 1763. As enraged Native Americans attacked English settlements, the colonists recognized that with each attack they were sparing the lives of the slaves, and they began to wonder if blacks had secretly made a pact with the natives. The colonists feared that a joint alliance of Native and African Americans might be strong enough to displace the Europeans from their American colonies if they worked together.\textsuperscript{116} Militia Lieutenant William Fleming wrote to Governor Fauquier in July 1763 saying, “As the Indians are saving and Caressing all the Negroes they take, should it be productive of an Insurrection it may be attended with the most serious Consequences.” Although the slave and native alliance never amounted to anything and Pontiac’s Rebellion was squashed, several black slaves attempted to carry out their own plans of rebellion. They were hunted down and stopped but not before a few white colonists were killed and the colonists’ faith in armed slaves was once again shaken.\textsuperscript{117} Only a few years later, in France, the radical Abbe Raynal’s \textit{Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes} called for a “Black Spartacus” to arise in the New World to avenge the rights of

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\textsuperscript{114} Benjamin Quarles, Leslie H. Fishel Jr., eds., \textit{The Negro American: A Documentary History} (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Forseman, 1967), 27.
\textsuperscript{116} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 12.
\end{flushleft}
The history of colonial conflicts called for slave and free blacks in times of emergency and those crises allowed blacks a chance to demonstrate their military skills, loyalty, and to earn further military opportunities and advance themselves socially. When the survival of the colonists was at stake, they invested more power in the black population, giving them their trust, arms, and responsibility to aid them in their hour of need. It was during these emergencies that the black population had the choice to assist or to revolt against their society. In most instances, they proved their loyalty and advanced themselves not only individually but also as a whole. James Stephen argued that for African Americans, citizenship and liberty,

for the most part, was attached to military service, whenever such an emergency arose as induced the government to arm any portion of the slaves. The reasons, no doubt, partly were, that their courage was likely to be animated, and their loyalty assured, by such liberality. But there were also more generous motives. It was thought unreasonable that such as hazarded their lives in defense of their country’s liberty, should themselves groan under the heavy yoke or slavery; and be deprived of even the smallest part of that blessing, which was, in a great measure, owing to their loyalty and courage.

By the coming of the American Revolution, the African population had grown to 462,000, increasing the white colonists’ fear of revolts. As a result, free blacks started to be excluded from taking part in the militia and once again from barring arms. However, in the end, black military experience in the colonial period, as limited opportunities as they were, would set the stage for their participation in the Revolutionary War. The Revolutionary War would see African Americans join the rebels in their fight for independence, freedom, and liberty in an attempt to achieve their own various degrees of freedom and citizenship. The American Revolution would be a decisive turning point in the arming of African Americans. By 1775, they would be given their chance to prove their worthiness not only to the

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rebels but to the British as well.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{121} Donaldson, \textit{History of African}, 8.
Chapter 2: African American’s Fight for Citizenship during the Imperial Crisis and Early Years of the Revolution

“To contend for our own liberty and to deny that blessing to others involves an inconsistency not to be excused.”

As discussed in the first chapter, for slaves, the promise of freedom came in many forms but almost always required that those seeking it fulfill some form of military service. In return, they would receive liberty at the end of a conflict. It was often written into colonial laws that any slaves that performed an extraordinary service for their colony would receive freedom in return. Extraordinary services usually included killing an enemy leader, saving a master’s life, capturing enemy goods, rendering important battle information, reporting slave uprising plots, catching runaways, deserting the enemy, or switching sides during a conflict to fight against their former masters. Throughout colonial history and eventually in previously unheard of numbers during the American Revolution, the most common reason that deemed slaves worthy of liberty was courage in battle. In exchange for their freedom, black slaves would make up various military, rangers, regular, or colonial army units.

Freeing slaves was often a win-win-win situation for both the slave, the military, and the colony in which they served. In return for the relinquishing of their slaves, slave owners were compensated. Slaves that fought for their colonies, not only became free due to their service but, in some cases, would even receive a payment in the form of a pension for the rest of their life. In return, the colonial powers saw an up rise in recruitment numbers as the newly found liberties of the blacks that decided to serve inspired others to join the fight for their own freedom and additional rights. As historian Keith R. Bradley explains, “The conferment of freedom on some slaves of necessity

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122 John Jay, quoted in Donald R. Wright, African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2010), 173.
encouraged its prospect in others." While most colonies did offer African Americans that served in the military freedom, additional rights, and a chance to move into a higher social status, the act of securing freedom and greater rights for slaves and disenfranchised African Americans in return for military service was a long running and common tradition for Spaniards.

In Spain, it was standard practice for slaves to be given freedom for military service as early as the medieval period, with even older records tracing freedom for military service dating as far back as ancient Rome itself. Officially in Rome, slaves were by law not allowed to serve in the military; however, as would be the case in the American Revolution, officials simply bypassed the laws by freeing the slaves first. The most prominent occurrence of how laws could be bent and worked to suit the needs of the time occurred when the Roman emperor Augustus forced gladiator masters to sell their slaves on two occasions in order for them to serve in the military. Once in imperial possession, the slaves were freed, organized into their own army units and despite a select few eventually joining the German armies in a revolt against Roman control, fought well as brave, disciplined Roman soldiers.

The Romans were not alone in their practices, as similar methods of freeing slaves for military service occurred in ancient Greece. Both the Greek and Roman traditions would eventually serve as a model and argument during the American Revolution for the reasoning behind freeing African American slaves that enlisted in the military. The actions of Greece and Rome, two cultures that received a renewed interest by American Patriots and the English in the Enlightenment period, set the precedent that in a republic or democracy, whenever a slave “becomes a soldier, he should be made free." Many Americans believed that God had chosen America to be the example of self-government and a beacon of republican and democratic values for the world. Through their struggle for

independence and the cause of democracy, the Americans hoped to be seen to have the same ardor as the ancient heroes of Greece and Rome. The feverish supporter of the ideological values of the Revolution, Thomas Paine, summarized many Americans’ thoughts when he proclaimed that the ancients should “admire us, rather than we them.”\textsuperscript{130} The notion of rewarding service with freedom was something both sides would treat very seriously and would result in the largest rise in free African Americans until the American Civil War.

In the period before the Revolution, despite their previous reliance on slaves as soldiers in the conquest and early settlement period, colonists began to limit the use of slaves in the military out of fear of growing slave populations, revolts, and the reoccurring use of slaves by enemy powers against their masters. Throughout the period of the 1700s, there were many false alarms and whispers of the beginnings of supposed rebellions by slaves who had been promised liberty by competing colonial powers. In 1734, one South Carolinian official worried that a slave rebellion “would at any time prove very fatal if the French should instigate them by artfully giving them an Expectation of Freedom.”\textsuperscript{131} While many supposed slave rebellions turned out to be false alarms, South Carolinians did indeed have a reason to worry about their slave population. The Spanish in Florida from 1699 to the mid-1700s had encouraged slaves in South Carolina and Georgia to abandon their masters and escape to Florida where they in return would receive their freedom if they agreed to participate in Florida’s military defense or partake in expeditions to rescue more slaves from the English colonies. Hearing the calls of freedom, slaves marched to Florida in droves, often in groups as large as twenty at a time. Adding to colonists’ fears, in September of 1739, a group of runaways seized and burnt to the ground an armory in what would become known as the Stono Rebellion. From there they marched to Florida and met up with a

\textsuperscript{130} Charles Royster, \textit{A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 5.

colony of runaway slaves controlled by a black militia company.132

The situation between Spanish Florida and Great Britain’s southern colonies was not unique or the only instance of betrayal of a colony’s slave population, which further created a fear of placing slaves into the military. The promise of money, liberty, and social gains lured many slaves away from their masters and competing colonial powers made use of slaves’ quest for freedom and want for citizenship by promising freedom to any that made it to their borders and promised to serve in a military capacity once there. At times, armed blacks entrusted with the security of their colony would switch sides when they predicted the outcome of a conflict was swaying towards the opposing side. Sensing such an event, the Spanish in 1762, promised to free hundreds of their slaves and grant them liberty during the English invasion of Havana Cuba, fearing that if they didn’t do so, they would surely desert to the enemy and be made use of against them.133 For many, however, the presumption was that their service in the military would lead to freedom despite the results of the conflict at hand.134

Convincing slaves to trade sides during a conflict was often successful and was a process as old as the colonization of the New World itself. Colonies began to promise freedom before the fighting began to combat slave desertions and turncoats in an attempt to have slaves “hold out the promise of release from slavery.” Freeing slaves before their military service encouraged slaves to fight in larger numbers, created a higher degree of loyalty to their former masters, and was often the number one reason blacks originally gave their support in the defense of whites and their colonies.135 While some masters went against colonial policy from time to time and refused to free their slaves before or after service, if freedom was promised, it was generally kept although with a great degree of reluctance and

133 Rout, African Experience, 87.
134 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 436.
the government ordinarily paid for the masters’ losses.\textsuperscript{136}

Although South Carolina and the South as a whole would eventually witness thousands of slaves flee to English lines once the American War of Independence shifted its focus to the South, they would not experience a widespread slave revolution as was often predicted or as would later occur in Haiti. Despite the lack of another major slave revolt, the Stono Rebellion was not the last conflict between white colonists and the black population. In 1741, New York City was suffering an economic decline that contributed to unrest between slaves engaged in commercial activity and working class whites. Soon after, a series of fires raged throughout the city and the black population was blamed. By the end of the investigations over two hundred people were arrested and thirty to forty slaves were sentenced to death by hanging or burning at the stake.\textsuperscript{137}

Fear of slave revolts would continue to grow alongside the population of slaves in the late 1700s and would reach a climax with the coming threat of the Imperial Crisis and war with Great Britain. The colonists were aware that the slaves had numbers on their side. By the time of the American Revolution, there was close to five hundred thousand African Americans serving a lifetime of slavery.\textsuperscript{138} Slavery took hold in the southern economy largely due to tobacco. Tobacco was in such high demand by 1732; it could be compared to gold. The problem with tobacco planting, however, was that it required extensive labor and due to the demands, large plantations increased their use of slaves to profit off of the plant.\textsuperscript{139} While tobacco production would begin to decline during the mid-century (largely due to the effects it had on the soil) the initial demand created slave societies (societies in which slavery stood at the center of political, economic, and social organization) throughout the South.

\textsuperscript{136} Quarles, \textit{Negro in Revolution}, 183.
\textsuperscript{137} Daniel Horsmanden, \textit{A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by some White People in conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for burning the City of New-York in America, and murdering the Inhabitants} (New York: Parker, 1744).
Slaves would continue to be utilized on several other cash crops, including indigo, rice, and eventually cotton.

When the Imperial Crisis began, it would give slaves and free African Americans the opportunity to propel themselves towards not only freedom but citizenship, unlike any conflict that occurred in the New World. The American Revolution, an eight-year-long war, would require a massive exertion of effort from the colonists as they mobilized a military. The war effort would convert over one hundred thousand men to the position of soldier, with as many as one in ten of the available population having served. The war would touch all of American society to a degree that no previous event had.\textsuperscript{140} The American Revolution for African Americans was a chance to fight two battles simultaneously, to defeat the enemy and in the process also slay the racist structures that held them back. African Americans that entered the military knew that their bravery in battle would translate into rewards and possibly full recognition as equal citizens in the new republic.\textsuperscript{141} Beyond the battlefield, the Revolution would hold special significance for African Americans as it would begin a period were Great Britain and the soon to be United States took their first giant step towards slave free societies.

The American colonists with their principles of equality, liberty, and justice and their need for recruits began to look at free and enslaved African Americans in a new way. Great Britain, too, with its recently largely publicized, far-reaching \textit{Somerset} Case and its need for loyalist soldiers in their rebelling colonies, turned to African Americans to serve in larger numbers with greater military responsibilities that would translate into greater social mobility. Inspired by the rhetoric of the time and feeling a chance not only to win freedom but also establish themselves as citizens of a new republic or in the English Empire, which had recently “rejected” slavery, free and slave African Americans realized a need for action. Blacks picked sides and became active participants through their military service. Their service came at a time when the colonists had largely moved away from arming slaves and had

begun to reject black recruits, only to face an African American population largely determined to serve and fight for their citizenship and their allegiance to king and country. In record numbers, free and slave blacks turned out to fight and together attempted to craft a New World or restore order to the old, with themselves as equal citizens in it.

From the very beginning, blacks would take a heightened and more visible position in the early Imperial Crisis, making the cries for representation and equal citizenship just as much their struggle as the white colonists. Free and enslaved blacks participated in the various protests following the Stamp Act of 1765. In the streets of Charleston, South Carolina, slaves marched alongside the Sons of Liberty, while letting out cries of “Liberty! Liberty!” In Boston, mobs of protesters included a large population of black sailors, who were just as upset as white sailors about the activities of British press-gangs, who snatched men off the streets, regardless of color and forced them into the Royal Navy.142

Before the outbreak of conflict, in an act that was both symbolic, inspirational, and a sign of African American’s acting as their own agents of change, the first casualty in what would become the American War for Independence, was that of a runaway slave and sailor named Crispus Attucks (figure 1). Attucks, who has been referred to as the first Patriot, was both a leader and martyr of the Boston Massacre, which took place on March 5, 1770.143 The Boston Massacre was a mobbing event by subjects who were protesting British policies and the stationing of soldiers in Boston. Mobbing events were a much more common experience during this period. While often thought of as purely destructive, mobs provided a means for ordinary people and those without a say in government, like women, servants, African Americans, and young men, to make their power felt in a political system in which they had little other influence. In a sense, mobs were a physical manifestation of citizens’ griefs and

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misgivings with their government. 144

Five colonists were killed in the mobbing that would become known afterward as the Boston Massacre, when the British redcoats fired upon the volatile crowd, four of which were white, the fifth being Attucks (figure 2). Attucks was hailed as a hero for his role in standing up against the British and had a funeral of a martyr, which included a huge turnout by Samuel Adams and his Sons of Liberty. An enormous crowd of Bostonians escorted the coffins of the victims through the streets and buried all five men together in the same grave, an unusual and poignant occurrence for a black man of the period. In the famous trial that followed, in which John Adams earned great fame for his unbiased defense of the British soldiers, Attucks was a major focus. Adams claimed Attucks was attempting “to be the hero of the night.” 145 In the records of the trial, his name is mentioned no less than twelve times. 146

In the days and months following the massacre, Attucks would be immortalized as his death would be seized upon by Patriot leaders like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere to generate support for the coming rebellion, as well as increase animosity among the colonists towards the Crown. The popularization of the murder of Attucks came at the same time that many colonists began to link their struggle with Great Britain to slavery and in the process started to question the institution itself. John Hope Franklin claimed that Attucks’ death significantly connected “the struggle against England and the status of Negroes in America. Here was a fugitive slave who… was willing to resist England to the point of giving his life. It was a remarkable thing, the colonists reasoned, to have their fight for freedom waged by one who was not as free as they.” Additionally, such works like James Otis’, Rights of the British Colonies, argued that blacks had equal, inalienable rights to freedom.

144 Wood, Radicalism of the Revolution, 90.
145 Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom, 22.
146 Trials of the British Soldiers of the 29th Regiment of foot, for the murder of Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, and Patrick Carr, on Monday Evening, March 5, 1770. Before the Honorable Benjamin Lynde, John Cushing, Peter Oliver, and Edmund Trowbridge, Esquires. Justices of the Superior Court of Judicature, court of assize, and General Goal Delivery, held at Boston by Adjournment, November 27, 1770 (Boston: Belcher and Armstrong, 1807).
From the Boston Gazette or Weekly Journal of Tuesday, November 20, 1750, I copy the following advertisement:

‘Ran away from his Master William Browne of Framingham on the 30th of Sept last, a Molatto Fellow, about 27 years of Age, named Crispus, well set, 5 Feet 2 Inches high, short curl’d Hair, Knees nearer together than common; had on a light colour’d Karskin Coat, brown Fustian Jacket, New Buckskin Breeches, blew Yarn Stockings, and a Check’d Shirt. Whoever shall take up and convey him to his above said Master at Framingham, shall have Ten Pounds, old Tenor Reward, and all necessary Charges paid!’

Figure 1: Boston Gazette Advertisement dated October 1750 offering a reward of ten pounds for the return of the runaway slave Crispus Attucks.\textsuperscript{147}

Figure 2: Boston Massacre.\textsuperscript{148}

The growth of colonists’ demands for freedom in return produced an equal if not stronger cry from African Americans for their own. African Americans in Massachusetts wished to make the

\textsuperscript{147} Mullen, \textit{Blacks in America’s Wars}, 10.

\textsuperscript{148} William L. Champney. (fl. 1850-1857). \textit{Boston Massacre, March 5th, 1770}. (Boston: Smith, 1856) Chromolithograph, 17 ¾ x 24 in.
colonists aware of their commitment to liberty. Groups of slaves began to petition anyone in a position of power that they believed they could influence with their arguments of the injustices of slavery. Some slaves would even go as far as to petition the General Court of Massachusetts for their freedom on the grounds it was their natural right. Commonly, such petitions from slaves asked for land in order to farm and permission to work on their own accord so that they could earn enough money to buy their freedom. One specific group mentioned in their petition that they expected “great things” from men who were such outspoken champions of liberty. Another group approached the royal governor, Thomas Gage and personally asked for his assistance in a manner that Gage understood to be a hint towards a willingness to promise military support if he so needed.

The first major glance of hope for citizenship and freedom for slaves in both the colonies and Britain occurred in the autumn of 1771. Although the Somerset Case occurred before the actual war had broken out, it played a part during the larger Imperial Crisis. The results of the trial would be spread like wildfire by the African American population throughout the colonies and would later be used as one of the key reasons for slave and free black service in the British forces, fighting for the side they believed was ready to grant freedom and citizenship to all African Americans. The Somerset Case began when while in London, a Virginia slave named James Somerset ran away. He was pursued and caught by his master, a merchant and colonial customs official named Charles Stewart, and as a punishment was placed in jail until he was to be sold to the West Indies. When news of his arrest spread, an influential abolitionist named Granville Sharp brought the matter to the Court of King’s Bench in London to save him from his fate. Sharp had previously penned an antislavery document entitled, *A Representation of the Injustices and Dangerous Tendencies of Tolerating Slavery in England.* In his work, he argued Enlightenment ideals, specifically that natural law and human rights were the bedrock of English law. According to Sharp, “True justice makes no respect of person and can

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149 Mullen, *Blacks in America’s Wars*, 10-12.
never deny to any one that blessing to which all mankind have an undoubtful right, their natural liberty.” Sharp agreed with a similar earlier ruling by Chief Justice Holt, in which he stated that “as soon as a Negro comes into England, he becomes free.”

The case was heard in 1772, by Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. Mansfield ruled that under English common law, Somerset’s master, Charles Stewart, had no right to capture, detain, or remove Somerset from Great Britain, as slaves had a right to the English justice system and Somerset’s could not be violated. Under English law, black people (free or enslaved) were equal persons before the law, like any other, with rights to official protection. In his judgment Lord Mansfield argued that “The state of slavery is of such a nature [that] it must take its rise from positive law [human made law]; the origin of it can in no country or age be traced back to any other sources.” He argued that slavery derived no power from the law of nature, insisting that if one traced “the subject to natural principles, the claim of slavery can never be supported.”

Excited and overly enthusiastic, blacks and whites in Great Britain celebrated and cheered that over 15,000 slaves had instantly been freed. While the case, actually far from outlawed slavery and did not apply to Great Britain’s colonies, African Americans and abolitionists saw this as a landmark moment. The liberal spirit of the ruling would also encourage antislavery reforms throughout America. By the end of 1772, newspapers from all over the colonies were reporting that slaves, having heard false reports that Great Britain had outlawed slavery, started to stow away aboard ships bound for Britain. At the same time, correspondence began between Granville Sharp and American antislavery proponent Anthony Benezet, beginning a two-way communication between the Anglo-

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American abolitionists.\textsuperscript{155} Lord Mansfield’s ruling became a symbol and a rallying point for the fledgling antislavery movement and African Americans seized upon its rhetoric to appeal to the ideas of natural law. For many black Americans, the case was a source of hope for a better future.\textsuperscript{156} By 1773, a group of blacks in Massachusetts would test the ruling by petitioning the legislature for their freedom, as Somerset had in Great Britain.\textsuperscript{157}

By 1775, the Revolutionary War had begun, and the rhetoric of freedom, equality, and the rumors of the Somerset decision set slaves and free African Americans alive with the possibilities of freedom, inclusion, and citizenship. By the spring of 1775, the rumors of a possible British supported slave insurrection in Virginia reached a peak. Many Virginians believed that British officials were planning “a Scheme, the most diabolical,” to “offer Freedom to our Slaves and, turn them against their Masters.” Perhaps they were referring to the comments of William Draper, which in 1774, returned to London from a tour of the American colonies and published a pamphlet arguing that a way to crush the Patriot rebellion would be to “Proclaim Freedom to their Negroes.” The Virginian, James Madison, had heard rumors in early 1775 that a slave emancipation bill had been introduced in Parliament and that many government officials supported “a general enfranchisement of [the] slaves.” The fear of a general slave uprising was spurred along even more so when in April 1775 several groups of slaves in the James River Watershed met to plan their own rebellions. On April 15, a slave named Toney was charged with insurrection and conspiracy to commit murder. On April 18, two African Americans were sentenced to death for conspiracy.\textsuperscript{158}

While the British government did not create a formal bill to set free slaves in order to destroy the colonial rebellion, the first formal move to arm free and enslaved African Americans came from

\textsuperscript{156} Weiner, \textit{Black Trials}, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{157} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 24.
Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore. Lord Dunmore acted out of anger against the rebelling colonists and threatened to free Virginia’s slaves in April of 1775. The conflict between the governor and the colonists began when he decided to remove Virginia’s major ammunition cache out of reach of the rebels (figure 3). On April 21, 1775, he had sent a detachment from HMS *Magdalen* to remove fifteen half-barrels of gunpowder stored in Williamsburg and bring them aboard his warship. The choice to remove the gunpowder at the height of slave insurrection fears sent the colonists into a rage, almost instantly turning the governor into a villain.159

The morning following the removal of the powder, Williamsburg was filled with angry colonists equipped with weapons. They demanded the governor return the powder that he had ordered moved, however, they were willing to allow the governor a chance to do so peacefully by first meeting with a delegation to negotiate a solution. After speaking with the governor, the delegation decided to allow the

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ammunition to stay aboard his ship and encouraged the angry crowds to go back to their homes. Just as it had seemed that a potential crisis had been averted, however, “a Report was spread by his Excellency’s throwing out some threats respecting the Slaves.” The report was true. On April 22, the governor claimed that if any British official was harmed by the rebels that he “would declare freedom to the slaves and reduce the City of Wmsburg to ashes.”  

On May 3, Dunmore once again stirred the pot by issuing another proclamation claiming that he would “avail myself of any means” necessary to restore his political authority and intended to remind Virginians of their “internal weakness” and vulnerability to slave uprisings. At the very same time, “Parties of negroes mounted guard every night at the (governor’s) palace,” giving all the more weight of truth behind his threats. One month later, on June 8, 1775, Lord Dunmore fearing an impending attack by Patriot forces, fled Williamsburg for the English battleship HMS Fowey. From his ship, he began to assemble a small naval squadron to combat the rebels. For his forces to be effective, Dunmore needed recruits that knew the surrounding area and its bays. One night in July, his hopes were answered when Joseph Harris, a runaway slave from Hampton, slipped into the British lines. Harris was described as a “small mulatto man” who was the property of Henry King and served as his pilot on the Chesapeake Bay. Due to his experience as a pilot, Harris was considered to be “a very useful person” by the English, as he was “well acquainted with many creeks on the Eastern Shore, at York, James River, and Nansemond, and many others.” Once in British hands, Harris was immediately given his freedom and set to work as a pilot of a schooner, poetically called, the Liberty. The fighting over the first six months of the war had largely been contained in the northern colonies. However, on October 27, 1776, with the help of Harris, a squadron of British naval vessels laid siege to Hampton, Virginia (figure 4). By the actions of a former slave, the war was brought to the South. Harris was not alone.

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163 Holton, *Forced Founders*, 133-34.
in his efforts, the Royal Navy heavily employed African Americans that had knowledge of the local waters to serve as pilots.¹⁶⁴

As the Revolutionary War grew, Joseph Harris was only one of thousands of enslaved Virginians that would find an opportunity for freedom through the British. As further colonial unrest and anti-crown behavior boiled over, Dunmore had taken even more bold actions and in November of 1775, released yet another proclamation. This time, he made true of his previous threats by offering liberty to all slaves in return for their military service in what he called an “Ethiopian Regiment.”¹⁶⁶

Figure 4: Dunmore’s Attack on Hampton.¹⁶⁵

I do, in virtue of the power and authority to me given by His Majesty, determine to execute martial law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony. And to the end that peace and good order may the sooner be restored, I do require every person capable of bearing arms to resort to His Majesty’s standard, or be looked upon as traitors to His Majesty’s Crown and Government…I do hereby further declare all indentured servants, negroes, and others free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s troops, as soon as may be, for

¹⁶⁵ Mary Tucker Magill, *History of Virginia for the Use of Schools* (Lynchburg, Va., 1890), 188.
the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their duty to His Majesty’s Crown and dignity.\(^{167}\)

Dunmore’s proclamation would have never been a threat to the Patriot cause if African Americans had remained passive during the conflict. Weeks before Dunmore’s proclamation, black workers all over Virginia had already began to gather and discuss how to take advantage over the growing rift between Great Britain and her colonies, by then a hundred or so slaves had already fled to the British in hopes of freedom.\(^{168}\) By the start of 1776, four hundred former slaves had already escaped to freedom via British ships.\(^{169}\) After Dunmore’s announcement, the amount rose rapidly. Within a few days two hundred had fled, three hundred more by the weeks end, and almost eight hundred not soon after.\(^{170}\) In the end, around a thousand slaves would enlist in Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment and earn their freedom as they dawned uniforms inscribed with the slogan, “Liberty to Slaves.”

Dunmore’s proclamation offered almost immediate emancipation and a leap forward towards citizenship by those that served in his army. A perfect example of the effects it had can be found in the story of a man named Yellow Peter, who escaped his master and was later seen “in Governor Dunmore’s regiment with a musquet on his back and a sword by his side.” He was now referred to as Captain Peter. Peter not only won his freedom through armed service but elevated his social status.\(^{171}\) Another member of Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment, a former slave named Titus Corlies, upon earning his freedom renamed himself, Colonel Tye. Tye would go on to form his own band of interracial raiders called the “banditti.” Highly respected by the British military, they fought courageously, and Colonel Tye was able to use his skills in battle to break through the lines of race and not only unite black and


\(^{168}\) Holton, *Forced Founders*, 137.


\(^{171}\) Holton, *Forced Founders*, 156.
white men but lead them under his banner.172

Men were not the only ones liberated by Dunmore’s forces. In a rare occurrence, many enslaved women and their children escaped to British lines for freedom. One such example is that of, Francis Rice’s slave named Mary, who one night grabbed her daughter Phillis, made it to British lines, and later settled as a free woman in Nova Scotia. While most often attributed to the social advancement of men, the armed conflict between the rebels and the Crown would create generations of future free citizens that were once runaway women and their children who fled to other parts of the British Empire, which would ban slavery by 1833.173 Hearing the news of Dunmore’s proclamation, rumors spread throughout the colonies. Many African Americans came to believe that the whole purpose of the expected British invasion of the South would be to liberate them. One free black man named Thomas Jeremiah was telling slaves that “the War has come to help the poor Negroes.” At the same time a black preacher named George was telling gatherings of slaves “That the Young King, meaning our Present One, came up with the Book, and was about to alter the World, and set the Negroes Free.”174 Ideas and talk of being set free were common throughout the South.

While Dunmore and his army were unable to take their targets of Williamsburg or Charleston, he succeeded in installing fear into southern leaders, sending his soldiers on nightly raids and foraging parties.175 At the battle of Great Bridge alone, Dunmore unleashed a force of six hundred soldiers, half of them black, against the Patriot rebels.176 William Hooper, a delegate to Congress from North Carolina thought it was almost certain that when the main British force arrived in the South, “our negroes are to be armed against us.”177 Other delegates from Georgia would tell John Adams in 1775

172 Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom, 24.
173 Holton, Forced Founders, 156.
174 Holton, Forced Founders, 153.
175 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 29, 77, 134-5, 140-1, 153.
176 Astor, Right To Fight, 8.
that if the British promised freedom to slaves in Georgia and South Carolina alone, the entire South could be subdued in a fortnight.\footnote{Donald L. Robinson, \textit{Slavery in the Structure of American Politics 1765-1820} (New York: Jovanovich, 1971), 105, 110.} Hooper was correct in his assumption, throughout the war, the British would come to utilize free and enslaved blacks who were willing to serve.\footnote{Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 82.} Edward Rutledge, another delegate to the Continental Congress would later claim that Dunmore’s actions more than anything else would help separate the colonies from Great Britain.\footnote{Robinson, \textit{Slavery in American Politics 1765-1820}, 82-3, 103.}

Slaves that joined Dunmore were taking multiple risks in the attempt to secure their freedom. Not only did they have to run away from their masters, but those that were captured by the Americans received special punishment for their betrayal. Four such former slaves who had joined Dunmore’s army were captured and sent to the West Indies as their punishment, one of, if not the worst place to be sent as a slave.\footnote{Quarles, \textit{Negro in Revolution}, 129.} Both free black men and runaway slaves who turned soldiers would receive harsher punishments as prisoners of war if captured by the enemy. David Brion Davis claimed, “If black soldiers fought with the expectation of freedom, they also knew that if they were captured, they would not be treated as prisoners of war.”\footnote{Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 75.} By 1776, the number of slaves fleeing to British lines for freedom continued to increase and the British had recently offered freedom to sixty or seventy slaves that agreed to serve in their Regiment of Guides and Pioneers.\footnote{Ellen Wilson, \textit{The Loyal Blacks} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976), 34-5.} As more free and enslaved blacks rushed to join the British, a nervous Congress decreed that any black man that offered any form of assistance to the British would receive the penalty of death.\footnote{Quarles, \textit{Negro in Revolution}, 128.}

It is no surprise that the first move to arm a mass number of slaves and free blacks came from the British. In general, Great Britain and most European powers at this time had taken a more liberal standing on blacks and slavery than did the colonies. Most Europeans were indirectly or not at all
involved in the owning of slaves when compared to the colonists. Britain had nothing near the number of the half million blacks held in slavery in the colonies.\textsuperscript{185} A lack of any major social or psychological connection to African Americans in the colonies, a slave trade system that was losing its economic and political interest, Enlightenment ideals of human rights and liberty, a growing population of abolitionists, and simple geographical distance combined to give Great Britain a more logical and less fearful approach when it came to arming blacks.\textsuperscript{186} Many African Americans tended to favor imperial politics over colonial and believed that siding with the king offered more hopes of freedom and social advancement. According to D.B. Davis, “The thousands of blacks in the South who sought refuge behind British and French lines knew that a new era had dawned. That some delivery might be at hand.”\textsuperscript{187}

At the start of the conflict, the colonists were almost a mirror opposite of the British and had seemed to regress in many ways when it came to granting African American military membership.\textsuperscript{188} The use of black soldiers was extremely limited, and both Congress and George Washington had little to say about the recruitment of African Americans. The silence on the issue of recruiting blacks was partly due to the fact that the colonies did not wish to debilitate or even possibly enrage slave owners by making use of their slaves, as well as an equal hesitation to place weapons into the hands of said slaves.\textsuperscript{189} Such sentiments were displayed by Major General Philip Schuyler of New York when writing from Saratoga on July 29, 1777. Schuyler spoke of his distrust of blacks alongside the recruitment issues of the Continental Army, “one third of the few that have been sent are boys, aged men, and negroes, who disgrace our arms. Is it consistent with the Sons of Freedom to trust their all to be

\textsuperscript{185} Wood, \textit{Radicalism of the Revolution}, 122.
\textsuperscript{186} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 461.
\textsuperscript{187} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 76.
\textsuperscript{188} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 461.
defended by slaves?"\textsuperscript{190}

Racism and an overall lack of enthusiasm for their service did not stop African Americans from siding with the Patriot cause. From the start of the conflict, many blacks would serve in the colonial militia in the battles surrounding Boston.\textsuperscript{191} In fact, in the years between 1775 and 1783, hundreds of more slaves and free blacks volunteered for the Continental Army and fought in every major battle of the war, in support of their own and the colonists’ freedom.\textsuperscript{192} Thousands more who did not fight served both the Continental Army and British in various other ways as armorer, wagoneers, scouts, guides, spies, fortification laborers, sailors, foragers, waiters, and valets to officers, among virtually every other position.\textsuperscript{193} Officially the Continental Congress discouraged the enlistment of blacks, with their focus on cutting ties with the mother country and waging a war, the nature of the differences in status of men serving in the army accounted for very little of their thought. Continental recruiters often turned a blind eye to enlisting black men and the normal division between free and slave was often overlooked.\textsuperscript{194}

While service records for the Continental Army are vastly incomplete, it has been concluded by most historians that while 395,858 men had enlisted, the Patriot forces never rose above 35,000 active troops at any single time.\textsuperscript{195} Of the 35,000 a conservative estimate of African Americans who served on the side of the Patriots during the war has been settled at 5,000, approximately one black soldier to sixty white. The African Americans who enlisted served a longer term of service, an average of four and a half to five years in comparison to their white counterparts, who usually served periods of three to nine months.\textsuperscript{196} Some African American soldiers like Cato Howe, who enlisted in 1775 and Francis

\textsuperscript{190} Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 7th ser., vol. 4 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1904).
\textsuperscript{191} Davis, Problem of Slavery, 24.
\textsuperscript{192} Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 51.
\textsuperscript{193} Astor, Right To Fight, 12.
\textsuperscript{194} Wood, Radicalism of the Revolution, 25.
Freeman who enlisted in 1776, served as many as eight years.\textsuperscript{197} The participation of African Americans in the War of Independence should not be taken lightly. The American Revolution was the first military struggle in the New World that saw blacks play roles across the board in almost every military occupation and position.\textsuperscript{198} Due to the seriousness of the event and the record turnout of black soldiers, the Continental Army would remain more integrated than any American military force until the Vietnam War, almost two hundred years later, with a black presence of over thirteen percent by the end of the war.\textsuperscript{199}

As early as April 19, 1775, a slave named Prince Estabrook from the Lexington Militia commanded by Captain John Parker rushed to Buckam Tavern as one of the first responders. Both the Massachusetts musters and payroll (figure 5) as well as the newspaper the \textit{Essex Register} of April 25, 1775, (figure 6) confirm Estabrook’s service, listing him as “a Negro-Man…of Lexington” and having been wounded by British soldiers sometime during the Battles of Lexington and Concord.\textsuperscript{200} As one of the famous minute men at the battle of Lexington, Prince Estabrook would become a symbolic figure of black participation, not only fighting in the first battle of the Revolution, but also the first black soldier to fight in the war, serving throughout every major campaign. Together, with around seventy other men ranging from younger than sixteen to as old as sixty-five, many of them fathers and sons, black and white, they stood as the first Patriots to meet British redcoats on the field of battle.\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{197} Military Pension Files, RG 15, of the Adjutant General’s Office (Washington D.C.: The National Archives).
\textsuperscript{198} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 82.
Figure 5: Massachusetts Muster and Pay Rolls.\textsuperscript{202}

Estabrook was not alone on that day, as a dozen or more free and enslaved black men joined the battles. In addition to Prince Estabrook, Cato Stedman, Cuff Whittemore, Cato Wood, Caesar Ferrit, Samuel Craft, Pomp Blackman and many more black minutemen joined the fight for freedom, a few earning fame during the early confrontations. Among them was Lemuel Haynes, a free black man who would not sign up until late in April, however, went on to write a poem about the Battle of

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204 Mullen, *Blacks in America’s Wars*, 12.
Lexington and would later become a well-renowned minister. Peter Salem had also just been freed by his master so that he could enlist in the Patriot’s cause. Salem would later go on to fight with another former slave Cuff Whitemore at the Battle of Bunker Hill, where they both would gain commendations and fame for the roles they played. At Bunker Hill, Peter Salem would be accredited with the shot that struck down and killed the British officer, Major John Pitcairn, during his attempt to storm the Patriot breastworks (figure 7). Major Pitcairn had already reached notoriety and became a household name among the colonists for having commanded British soldiers at the Battle of Lexington. Pitcairn’s death was huge news and spread throughout the colonies. Shot to instant fame, Salem was presented to George Washington and received a contribution from the army for his heroic actions. Peter Salem would also be immortalized in a painting depicting the death of General Joseph Warren (figure 8).

![Figure 7: Peter Salem…Battle of Bunker Hill.](image)


206 Hand-colored engraving described as “The shooting of Major Pitcairn (who had shed the first blood at Lexington) by the colored soldier Salem.” Courtesy of J. L. Bell.
While the most famous example, Peter Salem was not the only African American to distinguish himself at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Alexander Ames, Barzilai Lew, Pomp Fisk, Grant Coope, Charleston Eads, Seymour Burr, Titus Coburn, Cuff Hayes, Caesar Dickenson, and Salem Poore all fought valiantly. Each of whom would receive a pension after the war for their services. Several of the African-American soldiers that fought at Bunker Hill have stories of note. Seymour Burr, a slave from Connecticut, fled from his master with several of his fellow slaves in an attempt to join the British and earn liberty through military service. Seymour and the other slaves were pursued and eventually caught by their owner. Instead of issuing corporal punishment to his slave, Burr’s master reminded him of how well he was treated and asked why he chose to run away. Seymour told his master he wished for liberty. Upon hearing Seymour’s confession, his master told him if he wished for liberty he would allow him to join the Continental army, and at the end of his service, he would be made a free man.

Seymour took his master up on his offer and served faithfully not only at Bunker Hill but was also present at the siege of Fort Catskill. After the war, Seymour settled in Canton, Massachusetts and received a pension from the government.  

One black soldier, Salem Poore, received a petition signed by fourteen Massachusetts officers for his bravery during the Battle of Bunker Hill, “a negro called Salem Poore…behaved like an experienced officer, as well as an excellent soldier…We only beg leave to say in the person of this said negro centers a brave and gallant soldier. The reward due to so great and distinguished a character, we submit to Congress.” Poore would later go on to fight at Valley Forge and the Battle of White Plains. Many more black soldiers would lay down their lives alongside their white comrades in the bloody battle. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story recalled an incident of an unnamed African American artillerist who had shared charge of a cannon with a fellow white artillerist. While in the midst of battle, the black man was shot in one arm. He then turned to his white comrade and requested they change positions, declaring that he had yet one arm left with which he could be of service to his country. Shortly after they had traded places a second bullet hit the man, killing him on the spot.

Despite the heroics of scores of African American soldiers, the colonists were far from as eager as Dunmore to utilize African American soldiers; there were some voices among the rebel leadership that began to see the necessity of arming blacks on a large scale. Writing from Boston in June of 1775, Continental Army General Thomas Gage declared that, “Things are now come to that Crisis, that we must avail ourselves of every resource, even to raise the Negroes, in our cause.” The British leadership too had begun to discuss the impact of African American soldiers in their armies as a result of Dunmore’s actions, but they decidedly took a step back. They did not fully approve of Lord Dunmore’s proclamation and issued a warning forbidding him from any more of such measures out of fear that

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209 Nell, Colored Patriots, 16.
210 Gerald Astor, Right To Fight, 7.
211 Mullen, Blacks in America’s Wars, 12.
212 Nell, Colored Patriots, 17.
loyalists with slaves would become alienated. Edmund Burke, an Irishman, and Member of Parliament gave three reasons as to why arming slaves was a foolish idea. Burke claimed, the slaves may not accept the offer, it would expose Britain to ridicule, and worst of all, it may cause the Americans to respond in turn with their own heavy recruitment of black soldiers. As disagreeable as arming blacks might have been, the needs of the war for both sides necessitated it, and British generals would raise black soldiers on the sly, without making any official policies.\textsuperscript{213} The British would never officially endorse the use of black soldiers, even while their use increased as the war went on.

Even though African Americans served with courage at the battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, despite their efforts, on November 23, 1775, the leaders of the Continental Army and Congress decided to reject all free and enslaved blacks from military service, choosing actively to pursue an all-white army. This choice was partially to pacify southern concerns and partially to be seen in European eyes as a “respectable” military. David Brion Davis argues one of the main reasons Congress and the military were so sensitive to blacks serving in the armed forces was their insistence to echo the beliefs and phrases about the rights of man. African Americans were fighting the same revolution for the same right that whites claimed, and this made many whites anxious.\textsuperscript{214} Such soldiers included men like Cash Africa, a free African American from Litchfield, Connecticut. Cash joined the Colonial army with his brother Jeph Africa, and several others such as George Negro, Jack Negro, and Titus Minor, who joined during the early months of the war. For Cash Africa, the decision to become a soldier was an easy one, to elevate himself out of a place in society that included racial prejudice and poverty.\textsuperscript{215} Not all African Americans ended up leaving the military, as some soldiers protested to Congress the rejection of black troops and were allowed to remain. Local recruiters largely ignored the

\textsuperscript{214} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 78.
law against enlisting blacks and “were inclined to send Negroes whenever available.”

The black reaction to their denial of service must have been significant, as General Washington became fearful that the African American soldiers might join the British army as they became more upset with their exclusion. Meanwhile, as the war lengthened, more and more slaves were attempting to find opportunities to use the conflict to run away or negotiate their freedom. Suffering from a troop shortage and having just received news of the effect that Lord Dunmore’s proclamation was having on African Americans, Washington’s worries only grew. Unwilling to risk losing African Americans to the enemy, on December 30, 1775, Washington released a general order from his headquarters in Cambridge: “As the General is informed that numbers of free Negroes are desireous of enlisting, he gives leave to the recruiting officers to entertain them, and promises to lay the matter before Congress, who he doubts not will approve it.”

The very next day Washington wrote Congress on his decision and the need to recruit blacks into the army:

It has been represented to me that, 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 employ in the Ministerial Army, I have presumed to depart from the resolution respecting them, and have given license for their being enlisted. If this is disapproved by Congress, I will put a stop to it.

Concerned about indirectly arming the enemy and a lack of manpower, on January 16, 1776, Congress published a resolution that it had decided to allow reenlistment to the free African Americans who “served faithfully in the army at Cambridge… but no others.” Cash Africa reenlisted in 1777 and served until the end of the war. Hundreds more, free and enslaved, would follow Cash back into the ranks. The desperate need for soldiers overrode any commands by Congress to only accept free African Americans. Individual colonies started to buckle under pressure and approve the enlistment of blacks

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without a Congressional ruling. Connecticut allowed the substitution of slaves for whites and considered recruiting slaves in May 1777 if they could buy themselves from their masters. In both cases, slaves were encouraged to be freed upon entering service. According to Washington, the outcome of the war may hinge “on which side can arm the Negroes the faster.”

Many free and slave blacks would use the Continental Army as their first and often only means of social advancement. The military would serve them as an avenue for upward mobility. As a soldier, African Americans could gain important rewards including freedom as well as social and economic advancement, all three important paths towards citizenship. Historian George Reid Andrews argues that a black soldier’s “bravery and even ferocity in battle sprang from…the hope for promotion: upward mobility in the army and perhaps even in the greater society.” Service in the military wasn’t only beneficial to slaves. Jack Foner, echoes Andrews’s argument, adding that “for free blacks, the hope of elevating their low social status was the prime inducement.”

While American Revolution and African American historians differ on the impact the American Revolution had on African Americans in the long term, they unanimously agree that military service broke down caste, class, color, and race distinctions during the American Revolution. The result provided new social, economic, political mobility, and previously unopened avenues to blacks.

For lower classes, the very act of being armed, trained, and counted on for victory was to achieve an increase of social status. Most free and slave African Americans had lost status since the colonial border war periods, as many colonies moved from societies with slaves to slaves societies. Many blacks no longer had open rights to bear arms, hunt, or serve one’s colony, and therefore were

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221 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 53-4; Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 135.
222 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 382.
223 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 424.
225 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 407.
228 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 415-16.
left without the means to earn respect on a large scale. At the very least, military service brought with it a change in economic status. For many black Americans, for the first time through their service, they would receive housing amenities, pay, rations, and items soldiers could expect, but slaves rarely got. Soldiers after the war could then use their learned skills and their service records as a means to obtain better jobs and positions in the economic workforce.\textsuperscript{229}

For slaves, the very act of serving as a soldier was a superior societal role than their previous. Once a slave became a soldier and was freed, he had taken a few steps up in the social order from his origin.\textsuperscript{230} In addition to military service, the war itself became an agent of social and radical change in the stance of African American freedom and citizenship. War weakened the ability for slave-owners to combat their slaves’ urges for freedom, especially when the war based itself on freedom and the end of economic and political slavery.\textsuperscript{231} The process of allowing blacks to serve as soldiers had various side effects, including inspiring others to make their stand for equality.\textsuperscript{232}

In 1775, a free twenty-seven-year-old black man in Massachusetts named Prince Hall began to encourage both freed and enslaved blacks to serve in the Continental Army. Inspired by the rhetoric of the American Patriots, Hall believed that if blacks were active participants in creating the Republic, a natural reward by the new government would be freedom for all African Americans. In an address to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety with members including John Hancock and Joseph Warren, Hall requested the enlistment of freed and slave African American soldiers to fight what he described as inhumane British Control. Despite his argument of black aid to the colonial struggle, his suggestion was declined.\textsuperscript{233} Apparently undeterred, Prince Hall was later thought to have been one of the six black men named Prince Hall listed in Massachusetts military records for service in the Patriot struggle. It is

\textsuperscript{229} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 417.
\textsuperscript{230} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 40.
\textsuperscript{231} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 427.
\textsuperscript{232} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 425.
\textsuperscript{233} Loretta J. Williams, \textit{Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities} (University of Missouri Press, 1980), 12-13.
believed he was present at the Battle of Bunker Hill.\textsuperscript{234} The same Prince Hall, with the help of other free black men, founded the first black Masonic Lodge in Boston. Freemasonry was a social organization based on Enlightenment principles including equality of men and the rights of all, an organization who therefore with its ideas of liberty, equality, peace, and brotherhood, attracted the attention and membership of many Revolution era blacks.\textsuperscript{235} Similarly, many Founding Fathers and Patriot rebels were Masons themselves, including the Marquis de Lafayette, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin, all of which whose thoughts on slavery could have been influenced by their membership.\textsuperscript{236}

One of the arguments the colonists cited as their reasoning behind restricting black military service to those that had served at Camden was “the concern that releasing some Negroes to military service could corrupt the discipline of those who remained behind to work the plantation.” Originally, George Washington was among the planters that shared this opinion. It was their belief that the prospects of freeing slaves for military service would cause discontent with those that remained in slavery. Their fear was only further confirmed when slaves hoping for a chance to become a soldier began to flee to the war zones. There was truth behind the idea that “the presence of a few blacks in uniform stirred others still in bondage.”\textsuperscript{237} As the situation became increasingly clear that there was a danger of slaves joining the British in masses and fighting for them against the colonists to earn their freedom, the colonists began to reevaluate the service of all African Americans, beyond those who initially served. After the fall of New York City, rumors began to spread of British intentions to feed slave unrest throughout the Hudson Valley. Colonists’ concerns were made worse by the large amount of slaves that were able to escape bondage, posing as freemen and offering to enlist without notice, due

\textsuperscript{234} “Prince Hall (1735 - 1807)”. \textit{Africans in America} (WGBH-TV, Boston). Retrieved Feb. 2, 2016.
\textsuperscript{235} Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom}, xvii.
\textsuperscript{236} Clary, \textit{Adopted Son}, 26.
to the chaos and disruption of the British occupation. They eventually came to believe that the only way to prevent a catastrophe would be to take the initiative and begin to arm and set free slaves as well. In 1776, Johnathan Edwards warned Congress that the British planned to free all of the slaves and arm them. To stop them, he continued, Americans must utilize and arm them first. Originally hesitant to such ideas, George Washington agreed that arming and freeing the colonists’ slaves would stop them from joining the British.

George Washington’s senior military aid Alexander Hamilton was a man who had grown up in the West Indies under some of the most extreme occurrences of slavery. However, he was not a slave owner himself and began to believe that if slaves and freed blacks were seen as soldiers, it would give hope to the idea that there was an escape from the status of slavery, where one would gain freedom and respect. With the means for self-promotion, slaves would leave slavery behind and enroll in the Continental Army. In a 1779 letter to John Jay discussing the arming of slaves, Hamilton wrote:

> An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and, I believe, will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation. This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity, and true policy, equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men.

Other colonies and prominent Continental Army officers too began to question the idea of military service as a path towards freedom and citizenship for blacks. Historian Allan J. Kuethe attributes the support for African-American soldiers “at least at the higher levels of command, (to a)… pronounced willingness to smooth over social differences on behalf of military objectives” “The military … was in its own right a catalyst for change.”

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238 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 79.
240 Clary, Adopted Son, 149.
colonial society. Military traditions, promotion for service not just by birth, the need for well-trained, healthy and high moral troops, and the desperate goal to achieve military victory overcame many racial, social, and economic differences among men. Service in the military was often the first and only way to break down societal barriers in the Revolutionary period, and it became central to African Americans attempting to destroy race and color limitations as a means of advancing one's social status.  

African American service in the Patriot cause during a time of great uncertainty required a certain degree of dependence for whites in black troops. Through fighting together for the creation of a new republic, black and white soldiers were forced to interact in ordinary day-to-day camp life and symbolic ceremonial ways. Parades and military ceremonies were one of the most open and obvious promotions of African American social status. Blacks and whites in British and Patriot armies coming from separate social lives joined in public celebrations, an apparent display of racial harmony and equality. On the highest level, African American and white soldiers had to suffer together, save each other’s lives, and form loyalty towards one another. The bonding created out of necessity, in turn, bred a greater degree of acceptance of blacks by white society.  

As historian Gordon Wood phrased it, “blacks and whites fought together, slept together, and bled together… for the first time they spent long hours, spoke with, and fought for the same cause.” Historian Carl Delger also noted in his work Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States that “to permit Negroes as slaves and free men to be armed and to fight in behalf of the national cause surely affected the way in which whites felt towards blacks, whether slave or free. Such a practice…helped to integrate the Negro into the nation.” Mixed service regiments during the Revolution opened paths up for black

243 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 418, 421, 426.  
244 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 416-17.  
246 Wood, Radicalism of the Revolution, 42.  
247 Carl N. Degler, Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States (New York:
and white soldiers to break through social, intellectual, and psychological barriers. Letters from various commanders of the Continental Army took notice of the African American presence and frequently added comments on how well they performed. The very fact that white officers had taken the effort to comment on the superb service of black men not only hinted at the previous low esteem blacks were held in but also the surprise that many officers had when their racist beliefs on blacks as soldiers turned out not to be the case.\textsuperscript{248} For many white southern soldiers, this was the first time they had worked with enslaved or free blacks on not just a more human level but often on equal terms.

One such example of how blind slave owners could be towards blacks and their own slaves can be seen in 1744, when well-known Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, journeyed on a four month trip with one of his black servants. Despite traveling together and spending such a great span of time together, Dr. Hamilton paid almost no attention to the life or habits of his slave. In a miraculously detailed report of his trip, he failed even to acknowledge the presence of his slave. Dr. Hamilton’s total uninterest in his slave can be seen as proof of the large degree of separation between whites and blacks based on society, even when having spent a large sum of time together.\textsuperscript{249} Out of necessity, the military had to view and treat African American soldiers as equal human beings who were capable of following orders and making decisions that affected the lives of others. In October of 1775, General John Thomas wrote to John Adams expressing similar feelings about black soldiers: “We have some Negroes, but I look on them, in general equally serviceable with other men for fatigue: and, in action many of them have proved themselves brave.”\textsuperscript{250} The act of arming free and enslaved blacks was the highest admission of their humanity, as they were trusted with the lives of others and the well-being of society. Dr. George Pinckard stated, “Training the slaves to arms” might “instruct them that they are men; and

\textsuperscript{248} MacMillian, 1971), 78-9.
\textsuperscript{249} Astor, Right To Fight, 9.
\textsuperscript{249} Wood, Radicalism of Revolution, 42.
\textsuperscript{250} Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, 28.
that a single step might ensure to them the rights of their common nature.”

Black military service provided a new and broader viewpoint for whites, coupled together with a transition for many, from a master and prewar slave relation to one of cooperation, as both sides fought for their versions of freedom and citizenship in a republic they were helping to create. If a black man served as a good soldier, he almost immediately diminished myths about himself and his people, including questions of intelligence, capability, and loyalty. A study of a dozen African-American soldiers in a Massachusetts corps showed no evidence of racial discrimination in pensions, provisions, wages, rewards, or punishments. Similarly, throughout the Revolution on the British side, blacks were paid the same as their white counterparts. One British loyalist in New York complained of the equality that soldiering provided blacks, writing that the “pack of dirty, idle, thieving negroes, invited into the lines by a later proclamation of General Clinton… were supplied with rations of all kinds, equally with the King’s troops.”

Slave owners had long held that blacks deserved their place in society because they were far too inferior to perform the same functions as whites. When free and enslaved blacks took to the field of battle in masses and proved themselves to be a soldier of superior quality, the racist beliefs and the institution they supported were significantly undermined. Battles often express the ultimate commitment and value of people, and during the American Revolution, African Americans rose to the occasion. Many more white soldiers, while already knowing such qualities existed in their slaves or in free blacks they had dealings with, for the first time proclaimed that some blacks were their equals or could even be their betters in categories like courage, perseverance, resourcefulness, pride, drill

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255 Wilson, *Loyal Blacks*, 64.
aptitude, and intelligence. Never before had white American soldiers interacted in such a widespread yet very intimate capacity with African Americans. Together in defense of the nation, they broke down the basic patterns of race relations. At the very basic level, many northern soldiers who served in southern campaigns had never seen the horrors of the enslavement of blacks on a larger, crueler scale as took place in the South. Exposure to the conditions of slavery would force many northern soldiers to reevaluate slavery, especially as they grew to see African Americans as partners in the war against Great Britain.

As the American forces were starved for the need of additional soldiers, South Carolinian, John Laurens, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Continental Army and one of the earliest American advocates for abolitionism, developed his own plan to meet recruitment needs and advance his social beliefs by bringing freedom to slaves. He, like many other Founding Fathers, was a pupil of the Enlightenment, having gained his beliefs while studying in Geneva, as well as from his father Henry Laurens, the president of the Continental Congress. Henry Laurens was a plantation owner and former slave trader, who had recognized the inability for the thoughts that led to the Declaration of Independence and the conditions of slavery to coexist. Henry Laurens had turned away from the slave trade before the Revolution in 1763, making him one of the first prominent Americans to take such a stance. He was an outspoken critic of slavery, despite still owning a vast amount of slaves (which he claimed he did not know how to rid himself of). In a letter to his son on August 14, 1776, Laurens explained the predicament he was in, hating the practice of slavery, yet still owning slaves himself, a very similar issue that would also plague the other prominent slave owning Patriots, Washington and Jefferson:

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257 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 426.  
258 Charles Royster, Revolutionary People, 245.  
259 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 395.  
260 Clary, Adopted Son, 150.
You know my Dear Sir. I abhor Slavery, I was born in a Country where Slavery had been established by British Kings and Parliaments as well as by the Laws of that Country before Ages before my existence, I found the Christian Religion and Slavery growing under the same authority and cultivation – I nevertheless disliked it – in former days there was no combatting the prejudices of Men supported by Interest, the day I hope is approaching when from principles of gratitude as well as justice every Man will strive to be foremost in showing his readiness to comply with the Golden Rule; not less than £20000. St would all my Negroes produce if sold at public Auction tomorrow I am not the Man who enslaved them, they are indebted to English Men for that favour, nevertheless I am devising means for manumitting many of them for cutting off the entail of Slavery – great powers oppose me, the Laws and Customs of my Country, my own and the avarice of my Country Men – What will my Children say if I deprive them of so much Estate? These are the difficulties but not insuperable I will do as much as I can in my time.  

In the same letter, Henry attempted to describe the loyalty of his slaves to their master while placing blame on the British for the continuation of the slave trade and the poor treatment of blacks:

My Negroes there all to a Man are strongly attached to me, so are all of mine in this Country, hitherto not one of them has attempted to desert on the contrary those who are more exposed hold themselves always ready to fly from the Enemy in case of a sudden descent... many hundreds of that Colour have been stolen and decoyed by the Servants of King George the third – Captains of British Ships of War and Noble Lords have busied themselves in such inglorious pilferage to the disgrace of their Master and of their Cause. These Negroes were first enslaved by the English – Acts of Parliament have established the Slave Trade in favour of the home residing English and almost totally prohibited the Americans from reaping any share of it – Men of War Forts Castles Governors Companies and Committees are employed & authorized by the English Parliament to protect regulate & extend the Slave Trade – Negroes are brought by English Men and sold as Slaves to Americans – Bristol Liverpool Mancheste Birmingham... Live upon the Slave Trade.

In a series of back and forth letters in 1776, John Laurens spoke with his friend Francis Kinloch from London. Kinloch was also a South Carolinian, who was studying abroad in Geneva, and would in the future serve as a delegate to the Continental Congress with John's father. Laurens’ correspondences with Kinloch gives an insight into his thoughts on slavery. Laurens expressed his beliefs that America could not have a full blessing in its wishes for freedom as long as it continued

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262 Laurens, Papers of Henry Laurens, 222-25.

slavery and that he took offense of the fact that Americans claimed to be fighting to obtain freedom while his brothers in the South continued to hold others in shackles:264

I think that we Americans, at least in the Southern colonies cannot contend with a good grace for liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our slaves. How can we whose jealousy has been alarmed more at the name of oppression than at the reality reconcile to our spirited assertions of the rights of mankind the galling abject slavery of our negroes?265

John Lauren’s passion for the arming and freeing of slaves was palpable and easily spread. It was at Washington’s encampment at Valley Forge in 1778 that John Laurens would leave a lasting impact on another one of Washington’s officers, the Marquis de Lafayette. Together, Lafayette, Laurens, and Alexander Hamilton spent their free time debating among one another. During this time, Laurens argued the God-given rights of man, as well as the hypocrisy of the colonists’ cause of securing their freedom, while simultaneously doing nothing to fight the perpetual existence of slavery. Laurens, however, did not use sentiment alone to defend his arguments, he used the recently written and profoundly worded Declaration of Independence.266

The original draft of the Declaration of Independence included a damning message of King George and the institution of slavery. Its origins traced back to Jefferson’s Summary View of 1774, a pamphlet that made his reputation and earned him a seat at the First Continental Congress. It depicted the American slave trade as a result of the English government forcing its economic policies onto the colonists. Jefferson argued that “the abolition of domestic slavery is the great object in those colonies where it as unhappily intruded in their infant state.”267 Jefferson expanded upon his original argument in the Declaration’s rough draft, hoping to link slavery and the oppression of the colonies and bring an

265 Clary, Adopted Son, 149.
266 Clary, Adopted Son, 150.
end to both in one bold move:

1. He [the king] 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 miserable death in their transportation thither. this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain.

2. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.

3. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguishing die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms amongst us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.268

Historians like Garry Willis and David Brion Davis argue that Jefferson’s third paragraph was a direct attack against the king’s agent, Lord Dunmore’s, whose proclamation of November 1775, offered freedom to all slaves that escaped their masters to join “his Majesty’s troops.” Even though he acted alone, Dunmore’s use of slaves inflamed the sentiments of the entire South as they feared the possibility of a massive slave insurrection. Jefferson’s damnation of Dunmore’s actions served as a final example of British War crimes, and further justified the Declaration of Independence.269 Jefferson did have some weight behind his argument, in addition to Dunmore’s damning actions, earlier in 1772 the Virginia House of Burgesses tried to limit the importation of slaves, arguing it was “a Trade of great Inhumanity,” however, the Crown rejected the bill. Similarly, a 1771 bill passed by the Massachusetts assembly to end slave importations was struck down by the royal governor.270

The Declaration, however, was just as hypocritical in its creation as those it blamed for the horrors of slavery, as the author Thomas Jefferson was also a slave owner. This hypocrisy wasn’t just noted by Laurens as he spoke to Lafayette but had also generated harsh criticism by the English. In George III’s propagandist, Samuel Johnson’s pamphlet entitled Taxation No Tyranny, he argued, “We

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268 Waldstreicher, Slavery’s Constitution, 38; Boyd, Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 426.
269 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 9-10.
270 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 23.
are told, that the subjection of Americans may tend to the diminution of our own liberties; an event, which none but very perspicacious politicians are able to foresee. If slavery be thus fatally contagious, how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"  

Perhaps having already heard of Dunmore’s force, or having come up with a similar idea of his own, Johnson pondered that perhaps slaves should be called out as soldiers to end the rebellion. He even went as far as to suggest that slaves that fought in the Revolution be made the new colonial overlords, stating “They may be more grateful and honest than their masters.”

A similar condemnation of the American’s hypocrisy was written by Thomas Day to a slaveholding acquaintance in the colonies, “Is money of so much more importance than life?... If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independence with one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves… Gentlemen, as you are no longer Englishmen, I hope you will please to be men; and, as such admit the whole human species to a participation of your unalienable rights.” Slaves too began to criticize slavery publicly using references to natural rights and the struggle of the colonists to achieve their liberty. The Imperial Crisis, British criticism of slavery, and African American’s thirst for liberty merged into one powerful force.

While in the end, the pages that discussed slavery were cut out by the Continental Congress, Jefferson himself preserved the papers and included them in his unfinished autobiography. Nonetheless, the Declaration clearly stated that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Colonists took all too serious not only the belief that

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they were born free and equal, but that they had rights that were owed to them. The philosophy and idealism behind the Declaration and the feelings it produced in the populace made possible the striving of African Americans for their due freedom and rights. Many blacks supported the Patriot cause, not just for selfish reasons, but because they truly began to believe the ideology and rhetoric of the rebels.

When the Declaration was read to the populace of Philadelphia for the first time, a nine-year-old black boy stood in the crowd listening intently. The words of the Declaration resonated with James Forten and would shape his future. As soon as he was old enough, he signed up to be a Patriot privateer to help fight for the freedom of the country and his people. He would later be captured by the British and was offered the chance to switch sides; however, he chose to endure months of captivity aboard a prisoner ship rather than be a labeled a traitor. He fully believed that the new republic he was fighting for was worth risking his life. Although he was freeborn, he sympathized with enslaved people and wanted to see their bondage ended. Forten believed that the Declaration’s promise of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” meant full citizenship for everyone, even slaves.

Another African American man, a river pilot, named Mark Starlins was “deeply inspired by patriotic feelings.” According to Quarles, some African Americans it seemed were even more patriotic to their colonies or the crown than many whites. The same could be said for the loyalists. When writing to the Secretary of State, Lord Dunmore spoke of the problem of recruiting whites compared to blacks: “Your Lordship will observe by my letter…that I have been endeavoring to raise two regiments here, one of white people, the other of black. The former goes on very slowly, but the latter very well.”

As W.E.B. Dubois would later state, it became clear to both the British and Americans that blacks “used [their] own judgment and… fought because [they] believed that by fighting for America

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279 Quarles, *Negro in Revolution*, 120.
[they] would gain the respect of the land and personal and spiritual freedom…the American Negro always fought for his own freedom, and for the self-respect of his race… The motive of deserving well of those citizens and securing justice for his folks.” 281 As the war moved forward, slaves began to petition more against their colonial masters, using the very same principles the colonists were using against Britain in an attempt to finally win their freedom. Most pleas followed a typical format, “We have in common with all other men, a natural right to our freedom without Being depriv’d of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever.” 282 Service in the Revolutionary War, as well as the rhetoric of the colonists, gave African Americas the idea that freedom was not simply something good to obtain, but something all had the right to expect. The ideals espoused during the period made all person free and equal with God-given inalienable rights, and for many African Americans, it would give them the chance to claim those rights. 283

By the end of the war, many prominent white colonists came to agree that these rights extended to African Americans as well, and for many abolitionists, the Declaration of Independence became the symbol of their crusade. 284 In a letter dated 1778, a Lieutenant in the Continental Army, Thomas Kench, wrote that slaves must be given freedom for fighting against the enemy for the nation’s freedom. Kench wrote, “it is justifiable that Negroes Should have their freedom and None amongst us be held as Slaves as freedom and Liberty is the main Controversy that we are Contending for and I trust under the smiles of Divine providence we shall obtain.” 285 Contemporary American historian, David Ramsay of South Carolina predicted that there would “not be a slave in these states fifty years

282 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 276; Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th ser., vol. 3 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1877), 436–37.
284 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 166.
285 Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, 77.
hence.” Many other prominent southern leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry agreed with Henry Laurens, who claimed that the Revolution would cause a “slow, but certain death-wound” to slavery.  

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Chapter 3: The Close of the War and Mass Emancipations

“In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance, and by the leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert that the same Principle lives in us.”

By the end of the American War of Independence, a change was occurring in the hearts and minds of many white citizens. Many began to view free and enslaved blacks in regard to their military service and deserving of the equality the rhetoric of the war seemed to promise all that risked their lives for liberty and republican ideals. It was the Revolution itself, not only with its appeal to liberty but with its idea of a citizenship of equal individuals that made slavery in 1778 a strange institution to a large group of Americans. Now that the Americans were creating a republic and changing from subjects to citizens and since the ideal of a republic was that citizens were equal, there was little sympathy left for subjugation and varying degrees of freedom and dependency. Since the revolutionaries idolized the idea of citizen soldiers, which traced back to Cincinnatus and the Roman Republic, if all soldiers who fought to establish a new republic were citizens and if the Continental Army was the embodiment of the Revolution, were not blacks who fought in the Revolution citizens as well? At the closing of the war, the fledgling nation struggled to balance the ideals of slavery and beliefs of racial inferiority, with the changes in thought towards black soldiers and blacks as a whole created by the necessity of manpower, the rhetoric of the Revolution, and the experiences of whites who served alongside blacks.

Opposition to enlisting blacks in the Continental Army was the strongest in the Deep South and to maintain a united war front for the time, Congress refused to recommend blacks serve. Eventually, however, the dire need for fighting men caused the colonies to cave one by one. Most northern states

had begun to enlist African Americans, especially those that were free. By 1778, the shortage of manpower in the Continental Army grew even more desperate. In response, Congress began to actively encourage states to manumit slaves who had served in the military and to allow slaves to serve as military substitutes for their masters in return for their freedom. Furthermore, those that used this process to free their slaves had no further liability to their former property. One such slave named Samuel Charlton enlisted in the Continental Army as a teamster in substitution for his New Jersey master who had paid him a silver dollar for his service. While serving in George Washington’s baggage train, Samuel Charlton would receive a personal commendation from Washington himself for his courage and devotion to the cause.\textsuperscript{291} Later that year, Vermont outlawed slavery entirely, and North Carolina allowed private manumissions for outstanding service.\textsuperscript{292} In 1778, Massachusetts followed suit, creating its own slave enlistment act, freeing all slaves serving and paying their masters for their worth.\textsuperscript{293}

Emboldened by a change of stance in Congress, the Northern colonies began to expand their recruitment of black soldiers. Massachusetts included blacks in their draft and in 1778, Rhode Island, which was largely occupied by British soldiers, voted to create two battalions of black soldiers offering them freedom for their service. Shortly after, the rest of New England followed suit.\textsuperscript{294} By June of 1778, over five hundred African Americans would fight alongside Samuel Charlton and their fellow white Patriots at the Battle of Monmouth.\textsuperscript{295} Present at Monmouth was Henry Hill, a black soldier who had also fought at Lexington, Brandywine, and would go on to fight at Princeton and Yorktown. For his outstanding service during the war, upon his death in 1833, he would be buried with full military

\textsuperscript{295} Jesse J. Johnson, \textit{The Black Soldier Documented (1619-1815)}, (Hampton, Va.: Hampton Institute, 1969), 104.
honors. 296

Northerners had hoped that the creation of free and slaved regiments would “produce the Emancipation of a number of those wretches and lay a foundation for the Abolition of Slavery in America.” 297 During the colonial retreat from Rhode Island in August of 1778, one of the new battalions of black soldiers had shown “desperate valor,” according to John Sullivan, as he described how they had repelled three “furious assaults” by Hessian regulars. 298 A Hessian soldier would later report having seen “Negros in abundance” in all regiments, “and among them there are able-bodied, strong and brave fellows.” 299

The South was much more hesitant to bow to the pressures of their recruitment needs, out of obvious fears of losing their workforce. In Virginia alone, in 1771, the top 7.9 percent of planters controlled around one-third of all the land in the entire colony. 300 Slavery was a way of life for the South. At first, only Maryland and Washington’s home colony, Virginia, would allow the inclusion of black soldiers, with Maryland permitting slaves to serve, while Virginia only allowed for freed black men. Once Virginia had opened up service to freed black men such a vast amount of runaways attempted to join, Virginia was forced to pass an act requiring every African American to display a certificate from a justice of the peace proving that he was a free man before he would be permitted to serve in the army. 301 In most cases, black soldiers who fought in the war were hired or placed in as substitutes by their masters or whites that could afford to send them in their stead. 302 As the situation

302 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 395.
became more desperate in the southern campaign, lawmakers finally wrote to South Carolina and
Georgia in 1779 requesting that they immediately raise “three thousand able-bodied negroes.”

The request was largely due to two proposals sent by John Laurens to his father from Valley
Forge on January 14, 1778. In his letter, he requested that he be allowed to return to South Carolina to
recruit slaves for the army and in return, they would be granted their freedom at the end of the war.
Laurens wrote that he wished to train “a well-chosen body of black men, properly officered.” He would
start with just forty men, which would be recruited straight from his father’s plantations:

I would solicit you to cede me a number of your able bodied men slaves, instead of leaving me
a fortune. I would bring about a two-fold good: first, I would advance those who are unjustly
deprived of the rights of mankind to a state which would be a proper gradation between abject
slavery and perfect liberty, and…would reinforce the defenders of liberty with a number of
gallant soldiers. Men, who have the habit of subordination almost indelibly impressed on them,
would have one very essential qualification of soldiers. I am persuaded that if I could obtain
authority for the purpose, I would have a corps of such men trained uniformly equip’d and
ready in every respect to act at the opening of the next campaign.

In addition to freeing slaves and recruiting them into the cause of liberty, John also wished to
prove to southern plantation owners that their economy would continue to get along just fine without
slavery. To do so, he also asked his father to lease one of his plantations and operate it using free black
labor. In March of 1779, Congress agreed and sent John south to recruit 3,000 slaves (“three
thousand able-bodied negroes”) for the army and supplied him with enough money to compensate the
owners for their losses. Congress had given permission to authorize Laurens to free all slaves who
served and promise each soldier a sum of fifty dollars to be paid at the end of the war. This daring plan
to arm slaves on a large scale in the Southern Theater won the support of many generals of the
Southern Army, including Benjamin Lincoln and Nathaniel Greene. Nathaniel Greene had hoped for
four regiments of African Americans and was willing to promise freedom and equal treatment for their

303 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 395.
125; Fritz Hirschfeld, George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,
1997), 130.
305 Clary, Adopted Son, 150.
In 1782, Greene would write a letter to Governor Rutledge of South Carolina, expressing his views: “The natural strength of the country, in point of numbers, appears to me to consist much more in the blacks than in the whites. Could they be incorporated, and employed for its defense, it would afford you double security. That they would make good soldiers, I have not the least doubt.” In the same letter, Greene recommended “to raise some black regiments… To fill up the regiments with whites is impractical, and to get re-enforcements from the northwards precarious, and at least difficult, from the prejudices respecting the climate. Some are for it; but the far greater part of the people oppose to it.” Greene wrote, “The force I would ask for this purpose (black corps)... would be four regiments...(they) should have their freedom, and be clothed and treated, in all respects, as other soldiers; without which they will be unfit for the duties expected from them.”

Alexander Hamilton attempted to help his friend out by sending Congressman John Jay, an abolitionist sympathizer, perhaps his only poignant words on the issue of slavery. Hamilton wrote:

Col Laurens, who will have the honor of delivering you this letter, is on his way to South Carolina, on a project, which I think, in the present situation of affairs there, is a very good one and deserves every kind of support and encouragement. This is to raise two three or four battalions of negroes... The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability or pernicious tendency of a scheme which requires such a sacrifice. But it should be considered, that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation. This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favour of this unfortunate class of men.
Alexander Hamilton did not see how the Southern war effort could continue without more troops and due to the present circumstances, Lauren’s plan made sense. Hamilton thought slaves would make good soldiers, not just for the want of liberty, but because they were abundant, available, and beaten into the kind of obedience Hamilton believed soldiers must have. Most importantly, if they did not make use of them, the British would.\footnote{Clary, *Adopted Son*, 150.} Despite the support of his father, as well as Hamilton and John Jay, John Lauren’s attempts were futile. Despite successfully getting himself elected to South Carolina’s State Assembly, he had little luck. Slave owners in South Carolina and Georgia refused to participate in the plan. Defeated, he eventually returned to the army. The denial of additional African American troops could not have come at a more inopportune time. The British commander in chief General Clinton, influenced by Lord Dunmore’s use of African Americans, had just released his own proclamation from his headquarters in New York City, declaring free any slaves who fled to the British lines:\footnote{Johnson, *Black Soldier Documented*, 21.}

> By His Excellency Sir Henry Clinton, K.B. General and Commander-in-Chief of all his Majesty’s Forces within the Colony laying on the Atlantic Ocean, from Nova Scotia to West Florida, inclusive, etc., etc., etc... Whereas, the enemy have adopted a practice of enrolling Negroes among their Troops, I do hereby give notice, That all Negroes taken in arms, or upon any military duty, shall be purchased for [the public service] a stated Price; the money to be paid to the Captors. But I do most strictly forbid any Person to sell or claim Right over any Negro, the property of a Rebel, who may take refuse with any part of this Army; and I do promise to every Negro who shall desert the Rebel Standard, full security to follow within these lines, any occupation he hall think proper.\footnote{Johnson, *Black Soldier Documented*, 20-1.}

Laurens never gave up hope, however, and would raise the issue once more in 1782, but, would die in battle before anything new could be done.\footnote{John Laurens to Alexander Hamilton, July 14, 1779, Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, September 11, 1779, in Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Clary, *Adopted Son*, 151.} Despite the well intent of John and Henry Laurens, they were too out of touch with their fellow Carolinian and Georgian plantation brethren, who turned a cold shoulder to the notion of putting muskets in the hands of their slave laborers. One of the few
exceptions of this was Dr. David Ramsay, who said he was disgusted with “White Pride and Avarice” and saw them as “great obstacles in the way of Black liberty.”

With the British occupation of Savannah at the end of 1778 and the recapture of Charleston in 1780, the theater of war switched to the South and gave the opportunity for thousands of more blacks to escape behind enemy lines or win their freedom in battle. By 1779, the British had armed 200 blacks in Savannah and by 1782, the British in Savannah were offering freedom to any blacks that would serve as their guides in the countryside. One Savannah slave named Quamino Dolly helped guide the British forces through a maze of swamps to launch a surprise attack on the rebels. In Savannah, African American soldiers numbered so high that every one in ten British soldiers was black and officials no longer attempted to hide the use of blacks in the military. Jefferson himself, who owned more than two hundred slaves, lost over twenty-eight as many decided to desert him for freedom inside the British army. One former slave, Boston King, recalled the period in his memoirs, explaining that he was “determined to go to Charles-Town, and throw myself into the hands of the English.” He later recalled, “the happiness of liberty, of which I knew nothing before.” King would later join the crew of a British warship and sail to New York, where he was one of three thousand African Americans evacuated in 1783 to freedom in Nova Scotia.

With the war moved to the South, the number of black soldiers rose in both the British and Continental Armies. As the number of black soldiers increased, so did the manumissions and state laws furthering African American freedom. In 1780, Pennsylvania was the next state to adopt a gradual emancipation law. Only a year before, in 1779, slaves in and around Portsmouth, New Hampshire

314 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 395.
315 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 83.
316 Donald R. Wright, African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution (Wheeling, Ill.: Davidson, 2010), 200.
seized the initiative and approached legislature and challenged lawmakers to live up to the Revolution’s ideals of equality for all. The slaves argued that they wanted to be treated the same as other citizens of New Hampshire and have “an Opportunity of evincing to the World our Love of Freedom by… opposing the Efforts of Tyranny and Oppression over the Country in which we ourselves have been so long unjustly enslaved.” They pledged that if New Hampshire abolished slavery as a practice that went against “Justice and Humanity” and that “the name of slavery may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom,” that every black man would be happy to fight alongside the colonists against the British forces.\(^3\) New Hampshire would go on to grant African Americans the same bounty privileges as whites and most importantly, freedom to any who served in the army for three years. In return, scores of African Americans pledged their service to the Patriot cause. One such man, Jude Hall, served faithfully in the Continental Army for eight years (enlisting before the 1779 legislative hearing) and fought in almost every major battle of the war in return for his freedom.\(^3\)

In 1782, Virginia had enacted a law allowing for private manumissions and with it, some began to free their slaves both individually and in groups.\(^3\) One famous Virginian, who struggled with the release of his slaves at this time, was James Madison. He had recently purchased nine hundred acres in what was once Mohawk territory in New York. He wished to use the land for “several projects” in which he could test ideas so that he could “depend as little as possible on the labour of slaves.” Shortly after, one of his slaves named Billy ran away and was then recaptured. Usually in such a case, a runaway slave would be severely punished, or sold off, commonly to a harsher life. Madison decided against such actions and explained his reasoning to his father, James Madison Sr., claiming that it would have been wrong for him to sell him “merely for coveting that liberty for which” the Americans

\(^3\) Davis, Problem of Slavery, 25, 87; Julie Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to the Civil War (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 31.

\(^3\) Nell, Colored Patriots, 70-1.

\(^3\) Davis, Problem of Slavery, 25; Waldstreicher, Slavery’s Constitution, 60.
were fighting.\textsuperscript{323}

Blacks often served because they were drafted as substitutes. Others were promised what Alexander Hamilton phrased as “freedom with their swords,” being rewarded manumission after successful completion of their service in the army. Other motives included adventure, bounty money, and genuine belief in the goals of the American Revolution, goals they felt may also include their well-being.\textsuperscript{324} Blacks did not just contribute to the war effort through combat service. While South Carolina refused to give slaves the ability to serve as soldiers and only a selected few would fight, South Carolina had opened up to accepting them into noncombat roles. Slaves were hired to man military hospitals and boards, as well as to build fortifications, work at lead mines, tanneries, foundries, serve as waiters and cooks, and other industry essential to the war effort. While most were unable to do battle themselves, they performed combat support operations in the Wagon and Forage departments.\textsuperscript{325}

In the South, both English and Patriot forces used free and enslaved blacks heavily as spies, guides, and messengers. As messengers, blacks would travel back and forth between enemy lines, often risking their lives. In return, they were rewarded with freedom and payment.\textsuperscript{326} As spies, African Americans could easily pass through enemy lines at higher rates than whites, often posing as runaways or deserters. Black spies were often successful in their mission to supply information about the enemy or derail the enemy’s plans. On one such occasion in 1775, the British were given false information about the strength of a fort in Virginia. Similarly, while the Continental Army camped on Long Island in July of 1776, General Greene wrote Washington to provide him with information received from a black man that had been taken prisoner and later escaped: “A Negro…was taken prisoner [as he says]

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\textsuperscript{324} Higginbotham, \textit{War of Independence}, 396.
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last Sunday at Coney Island. Yesterday he made his escape, and was taken prisoner by the rifle guard. He reports eight hundred Negroes collected on Staten Island, this day to be formed into a regiment. 327

As a reward for their service as spies, many blacks along with their wives and children were given freedom, not bringing only the spy, but his whole family and future generations closer to citizenship. 328 South Carolina rewarded one such black spy, named Antiguae and his family with freedom in repayment for gathering important intelligence about enemy troop movement. Blacks were also used as military laborers abundantly throughout the conflict, put to work chopping down trees, destroying bridges, and creating defense fortifications. This was especially true in the southern states of Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina. Virginia purchased slaves to work at the Westham Ironworks and the lead mines at Chiswell. Georgia and South Carolina authorities ignored local complaints and used slaves to strengthen batteries and forts. 329

The increase in the free African American population in the 1780 – 90s was almost completely due to military manumission, and Patterson argues that “the role of warfare has been most seriously underestimated as a factor contributing to the rise of the free groups. Military manumission may indeed have been the earliest form of release on a significant scale in the post Columbian history of the hemisphere.” On both the British and colonial side, no method of manumission allowed so many slaves to become free as did military manumission during the Revolutionary War. 330 Benjamin Quarles stated that this would be the case in most of America’s wars. 331 At first, black soldiers would be overlooked, but as the conflicts grew more costly, authorities would resort to the “one great remaining manpower pool and the Negro would emerge from his status as rejected inferior to become comrade in arms.” 332

327 Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, 22-23.
328 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 13, 94-6, 142-3.
329 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 396.
331 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, vii.
332 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 396.
War didn’t only increase manumissions, but it provided opportunities for slaves to run away not just to the British but Patriots as well during the confusion of battle or the absence of their master. The size of the war gave countless slaves the chance to escape bondage, and many took it without even hearing of the promise of freedom given to those that made it to enemy lines. Berlin claims that “many slaves, especially in the Lower South, never having heard of Dunmore’s promise, Clinton’s proclamation, or any other specific pledge of freedom, joined their master’s enemy as a logical alternative to bondage.”

In 1780 and 1781, the British were focusing all efforts on the Southern Campaign and Lord Cornwallis’s army marched through North Carolina into Virginia. Runaway slaves from all over the countryside joined the invading British army, leaving destruction in their path. Many planters, like Thomas Fleming Bates, lost their slaves to Cornwallis’s army as they marched through Virginia. Slaves saw the opportunity of the British invasion as a chance to escape their masters’ plantations once and for all. Slaves “flocked to the enemy from all quarters even from very remote parts” and “some plantations were entirely cleared, and not a single Negro remained.” Henry Lee of Westmoreland County confirmed that it appeared that some Virginians had “lost every slave they had in the world.” The Virginian physician Robert Honeyman recorded in his diary that local planters had lost “20, 30, 40, 50, 60, or 70 Negroes.” While Virginian planters may have been exaggerating their losses, there was truth behind their cries of losing many slaves to Cornwallis army. In August 1781, Cornwallis himself wrote, “great numbers [of slaves] have come to us from different parts of the country.”

While the British never admitted they were actively collecting slaves as far south as Florida, the Crown was offering slaves freedom, a new uniform, and two pounds payment to any that fought

335 Wright, African Americans in Colonial, 189.
336 Maass, Road to Yorktown, 99.
bravely against the rebels in the South. In response, towards the end of the war, between the years of 1781 – 83, states like Maryland New York, Virginia, and North Carolina began heavier recruitment of slaves. Maryland specifically acquired 750 slaves, paying their masters and promising to free them after the war.

As the war turned against the British and defeat was nearing, many English generals urged for a wider adoption of African American soldiers. General Leslie wrote to General Clinton of the “necessity I shall in all probability be under of putting arms into the hands of negroes… a measure that will soon become indispensably necessary shou’d the war continue.” Lt. Colonel Moncrief also asked Clinton to create a brigade of soldiers from slaves, but both gentleman’s pleas were to no avail. In the end, Cornwallis would find himself and thousands of his African American allies surrounded and vulnerable to attack at Yorktown, an area accessible to attack by both land and sea, resulting in a situation that would cost the British the war.

Surrounded by enemy forces and desperate for more soldiers in order to hold off until more reinforcements arrived, Cornwallis replaced all of his servants with African Americans to free up every white soldier available for battle. At Yorktown, Cornwallis’ army made use of around 500 slaves who “fell comfortably into the role of wartime auxiliaries.” Thousands of blacks aided the British in various ways, including the building of fortifications, boatmen, and foragers, all the way to women that served as maids, cooks, and mistresses.

The French army under Rochambeau which had joined the Americans at Yorktown was surprised by the make-up of the Continental Army at the end of the war and how well they worked together under Washington. The amount of African Americans in the Continental Army was so

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337 Quailes, Negro in Revolution, 151.
338 Saunders J. Redding, They Came in Chains (New York: Lippencott, 1974), 41; Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 135, 139.
340 Waldstreicher, Slavery’s Constitution, 49.
341 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 38.
significant that Rochambeau’s aide-de-camp, Baron Ludwig von Closen, wrote of it in his journal entry of July 1781: “I had a chance to see the American army, man for man. It was really painful to see these brave men, almost naked, with only some trousers and little linen jackets, most of them without stockings, but, would you believe it? Very cheerful and healthy in appearance. A quarter of them were negroes, merry, confident, and sturdy.”343 There are no reliable statistics for the number of black soldiers who fought alongside the Patriots; this is largely because military records do not make note of racial identities and black soldiers were mixed throughout white military units. What records are available often refer to African American soldiers as “A Negro Man,” or “Negro Name unknown.” Estimated records report a conservative amount of 5,000; however, it is likely many more served.344 While blacks were in local militias, they were more often found in the Continental Army, which by 1778 had a fair amount of black soldiers. Most black soldiers served in the infantry, with a few in cavalry and artillery regiments, a large amount of them served as orderlies given domestic assignments as waiters and cooks.345 Baron Von Clossen observed that around a fourth of Washington’s army located at White Plains, New York in July 1781 consisted of Negroes. Among them, “Three-quarters of the Rhode Island regiment consist of negroes and that regiment is the most neatly dressed, the best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers.”346

For more than five years, the black Rhode Island corps had fought with “courage and skill” throughout New York and Virginia. It’s over 200 black soldiers according to one officer was “the most neatly dressed, and best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers.” Another traveler crossed the Rhode Island regiment in Connecticut around January 1781 and upon seeing them, reported the following: “At the ferry-crossing I met with a detachment of the Rhode Island regiment… The majority

344 Risch, Supplying Washington’s Army, 26.
345 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 396.
346 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 416; Clossen, Baron Ludwig Von Clossen, 92.
of the enlisted men were Negros or mulattoes; but they are strong, robust men, and those I saw made a very good appearance.” Almost every contemporary report of black soldiers described them as “sturdy” or “able-bodied.”347 A watercolor painting of American soldiers at Yorktown painted by a French officer, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine DeVerger, includes a uniformed black soldier of the First Rhode Island Regiment (figure 9). Unfortunately, the men of the Rhode Island regiment fought bravely at the battle of Point Bridge in New York on May 14, 1781, where it was wiped out by an army of British loyalists.348 Even in defeat, however, the black soldiers proved their loyalty and bravery to the cause. With their last efforts, the black soldiers of the 1st Rhode Island surrounded their mortally wounded officer, Colonel Greene and one last time displayed the “traits which distinguished this regiment[s]… devotion to their officers” when they quickly hovered over him, protecting his body. The “sabers of the enemy reached his body only through the limbs of his faithful guard of blacks, who… protected him, every one of whom was killed, and whom he was not ashamed to call his children.”349

Figure 9: American Soldiers at Yorktown.350

347 Royster, Revolutionary People, 241-2.
349 Livermore, Negros as Slaves, 144.
During the Virginia Campaign leading up to the final battle of Yorktown, Virginia Governor Thomas Nelson Jr. had enraged Lafayette with his policy on black combatants. The governor had ordered that all slaves taken from the enemy must be returned to their former owners. In his statement, he explained, “The principle on which it is supposed men fight, at present is to protect and secure to themselves and fellow citizens their liberties and property.” Therefore, to ensure all Patriot property was secured, Nelson made sure it extended to that of slaves that had either been taken by the British or had run off to join them. This troubled Lafayette, as most of his spies, were black and had risked their lives in the pursuit of liberty, and he could not believe that an outcome of the war was to return them to slavery. The most famous of Lafayette’s slaves employed under him during the war was James Armistead. Armistead was already working for the British under General Lord Cornwallis, and Lafayette had hired him after to work as a double agent, feeding misleading information to the English army as well as running messages between Lafayette and other spies. He was Lafayette’s best source of information leading up to the victory at Yorktown, therefore playing an integral role in the colonists’ ultimate victory.

Nelson was not alone in his beliefs or practices; slaves taken from the British or colonist still loyal to the crown were considered public property and used in similar fashions or kept by southern plantation owners as spoils of war. In response to Patriot raids on Loyalist slaves, the British in South Carolina began using black soldiers to guard army plantations. Lafayette was not alone in his disgust at the thought of returning black soldiers to slavery, the use of slaves as payment for service or taken as spoils of war. James Madison was outraged when Virginia proposed a plan to encourage more white soldiers to enlist by offering recruits payment in slaves. Madison said of this, “would it not be as well to liberate and make soldiers at once of the blacks themselves as to make them instruments for enlisting

351 Clary, Adopted Son, 323.
352 Clary, Adopted Son, 325.
353 Frey, Water from the Rock, 139
white Soldiers? It would certainly be more consonant to the principles of liberty which out never to be lost sight of in a contest for liberty.”  

The attitudes and mindsets of many Americans had become concerned with the situation of blacks in America, especially those who had taken up arms in the name of liberty. These sentiments even penetrated into the heart of slavery: the southern colonies. By 1778, Virginia had made the importation of slaves illegal, while Maryland’s Quaker population had announced that the owning of humans as property was an offense worthy of excommunication. David Ramsay displayed these beliefs in his writings of the time, claiming that there had been a radical change in society and that people had been “changed from subjects to citizens [and] the difference is immense.” Furthermore, Ramsay stated that equality was the “life and soul of Commonwealth” and Republican citizenship implied equality. The argument of equality was the most powerful ideological force let loose during the American Revolution, a force African Americans would utilize in their racial struggles as they fought for their freedom, liberty, and citizenship.

An unknown essayist stated that “The blacks are naturally brave as any people under heaven; their motives of fidelity, if liberated, stronger, if possible, than those which operate on the whites.” The newspapers of the period started to recognize the acts and bravery of black soldiers as well. The August 7, 1777 edition of the *Pennsylvanian Evening Post* recorded the bravery of a black scout only referred to as “Prince” during a raid led by Colonel Barton that resulted in the capture of the British General William Prescott in Newport, Rhode Island, “They landed about five miles from Newport, and three-quarters of a mile from the house, which they approached cautiously, avoiding the main guard, which

was at some distance. The Colonel went foremost with a stout active negro [Prince] close behind him, and another at a small distance; the rest followed so as to be near but not seen.” Once at the bedroom of General Prescott, Prince “instantly thrust his beetle head through the panel door and seized his victim while in bed.” In the Connecticut Courant of May 19, 1777 and in the Boston Gazette of Oct 13, 1777, similar statements also appeared. In countless battles, blacks had proven and would continue to prove their bravery. Another such example occurred in the 1780s, when a private in Washington’s army known as “Black Sam” Frances, received personal thanks and two hundred pounds from Congress for his bravery in battle. Frances’ daughter, Phoebe, would also save George Washington’s life by revealing a plot to poison him.

Blacks were not blind to the ideals of the day either, and they began to apply the revolutions theory and ideals to combat their status. Slaves began to petition for freedom and to call into question the state of slavery. A specific African American named “Vox Africanorum” explained the sentiments of his people: “Liberty is our claim. Reverence for our Great Creator, principles of humanity and the dictates of common sense, all convince us, that we have an indubitable right to liberty…. Though our bodies differ in colour from yours; yet our souls are similar in a desire for freedom. Disparity in colour, we conceive, can never constitute a disparity in rights.”

With the victory at Yorktown and the close of the campaign, thousands of African Americans were freed with the evacuating British or the victorious French army, both which were now ready to sail back home. Even though the French had arrived to assist the Americans, they ended up sheltering many runaways. The promises of freedom offered by Dunmore and Clinton during the Revolution were upheld even in defeat. Those who had fought for the Crown received their freedom

358 Astor, Right To Fight, 9.
359 Ottley, Negro in New York, 36-8; Higginbotham, War of Independence, 416n14; Davis, Problem of Slavery, 278.
360 Higginbotham, War of Independence, 397.
362 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 80.
and safe passage away from enemy territory. Excluding the over 5,000 blacks who had already left before Britain surrendered, roughly 8,000 African Americans left with the British from Savannah and New York, and around 6,000 more sailed from Charleston. Thomas Jefferson’s estimations placed thirty thousand slaves escaping with the British in 1781 alone (figure 10). As Woody Holton argues in his book, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, African Americans, especially those enslaved, obtained a larger measure of freedom and increase in social status than many average white citizens of the time.

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Some African Americans would offer to joined “a corps of Volunteers to serve in the West Indies” or South America, with the agreement that they would be provided for and freed. One of the corps that would go on to serve in the West Indies regiment was the South Carolina Corps, which had fought well for the British during the Revolution. The South Carolina Corps was most likely formed in 1779 when the British had taken “many hundreds” of African Americans in the state during their southern offensive. Upon hearing of the raising of more black soldiers by the British, General Greene wrote Washington, “The enemy have ordered two regiments of Negroes to be immediately embodied, and are drafting a great portion of the young men of that State (South Carolina), to serve during the

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367 1783 list of blacks leaving New York on British ships courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, https://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Autumn07/slaves.cfm
368 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 163, 167, 176; Wilson, Loyal Blacks, 69.
The corps had an excellent war record, performing well at the battles of Stoney Creek, Eutaw Springs, and several other places. According to one British officer, the South Carolina Corps and “Their experience with black troops in the American Revolution also convince other officers that the best solution to British military problems in the West Indies was to enlist slaves by offering them freedom in exchange for military service.” Not only was the Carolina Corps given their freedom for their extraordinary service, but upon being discharged, each soldier was granted rations as a form of pension for “as long as they may live.” Originally, the corps was made up of both free and enslaved blacks and included both infantry and cavalry forces. However, in June of 1781, while still fighting in South Carolina they were converted into a full cavalry unit. Another black corps that had fought for the British and called itself the “King of England’s soldiers” would remain in the United States after the war and continue to harass the countryside of Georgia for many more years. By the close of the war, tens of thousands of African Americans had received their freedom, either through volunteering to fight or making use of the chaos the Revolution offered.

From 1775 – 1781, there was hardly a single battle without African Americans present on one or both sides of the conflict, including Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, Ticonderoga, White Plains, Bennington, Brandywine, Saratoga, Savannah, and Yorktown. From the Boston Massacre, Somerset Case, Lord Dunmore Proclamation, to the damning paragraphs of the rough draft of the Declaration of Independence, to the daring plans of John Laurens, blacks not only played a major role in the conflict but were a major aspect of the struggle itself. Two African Americans, Prince Whipple, and Oliver

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369 Johnson, Black Soldier Documented, 22.
370 Quarles, Negro in Revolution, 115, 148-9; Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 181.
371 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 244.
374 Wilson, Loyal Blacks, 49-57; Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 445.
Cromwell would even make the now famous crossing of the Delaware on Christmas day with George Washington (figure 11).  

The Revolutionary War made it possible for thousands of African Americans to gain their freedom through their service. The war itself would play a major role in ending slavery in the North and be the source of a considerable amount of manumissions in the South. While the Revolution did not eradicate slavery, it raised the issues of freedom and human rights and brought a significant change for many blacks in American society. For the first time, thousands could declare that they were free, and much more had greater personal independence and were closer to citizenship. Such massive leaps in manumissions would not have occurred if it was not for a perfect storm of components working together during the Revolution that favored African American liberty. The need for additional soldiers in both the British and Continental Armies and the competition that each side fostered against one another in order to secure the black population for their own use. The rhetoric of the Patriot cause with its ideals of liberty, republicanism, and citizen soldiers. The bravery and commitment of the

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African Americans that served, like the famed First Rhode Island Regiment, and the bonds forged between prominent white colonial leaders and the African American men that served at their side.

As the next chapter will explore, the war and the role of African Americans in it had led to a profound change for themselves, their families, the entire black population, and the nation as a whole. Their service in the war brought with it not only freedom for those enslaved but also chances to achieve a measure of social and economic independence and, for many that served, enough money to buy their loved ones out of bondage.\textsuperscript{378} Knowingly or unknowingly those that fought in the Revolution led their people towards citizenship.

Chapter 4: Reaping the Fruits of Service: Emancipation, Pensions, Property, Voting Rights, Honors, and Expanded Additional Steps towards Citizenship.

“This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood is now our mother country.”

“Now is the time to demonstrate to Europe, to the whole world, that America was in earnest, and meant what she said, when ... she pled the cause of human nature.... Let not the world have an opportunity to charge her conduct with a contradiction to her solemn and often repeated declarations; or to say that her sons... have been actuated in this awful contest by no higher motive than selfishness and interest... Ye rulers of America beware!”

The war brought significant and permanent changes for African Americans that served, which in turn, spread to the wider free and enslaved population. Historian George Reid Andrews claimed, “To acknowledge black participation in a nation’s military... is to acknowledge the contributions which entitled black citizens to equality with whites.” The American Revolution brought blacks closer to citizenship than any other event until the Civil-War and in some instances such as voting rights, until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Between eighty to one hundred thousand slaves ran away to freedom and the period after saw a drastic increase in maroons, as well as slave insurrections, often led by slaves who had gained military experience serving under the British in the war. Benjamin Quarles agrees that the war not only freed thousands of slaves and allowed freed blacks to improve their status but also forced white Americans to reevaluate their beliefs on slavery and how it fit with their newly proclaimed liberty. As a result, emancipation and abolitionist proponents began to gain increasing support. In a speech addressed to an anti-slavery society, Dr. William Harris, a Revolutionary War veteran, summed up many Patriots’ views on slavery and the war itself:

It surprises me that every man does not rally at the sound of liberty, and array himself with those who are laboring to abolish slavery in our country. The very mention of it warms the

blood in my veins, and, old as I am, makes me feel something of the spirit and impulses of ’76. Then liberty meant something. Then, liberty, independence, freedom, were in ever man’s mouth. They were the sounds at which they rallied, and under which they fought and bled. They were the words which encouraged and cheered them through their hunger, and nakedness, and fatigue, in cold and in heat. The word slavery then filled their hearts with horror. They fought because they would not be slaves. Those whom liberty has cost nothing, do not know how to prize it.384

Dr. Harris continued, shifting his tone to the heartships he endured during the Revolution:

I have stood in battle where balls, like hail, were flying all around me. The man standing next to me was shot by my side—his blood spouted upon my clothes, which I wore for weeks. My nearest blood, except that which runs in my veins, was shed for liberty. My only brother was shot dead instantly in the Revolution.

Dr. Harris then turned his speech to the reason why he had decided to address the anti-slavery society that day:

There was a black regiment in the same situation. Yes, a regiment of negroes, fighting for our liberty and independence—not a white man among them but the officers—stationed in this same dangerous and responsible position. Had they been unfaithful, or given way before the enemy, all would have been lost. Three times in succession were they attacked, with most desperate valor and fury, by well disciplined and veteran troops, and three times did they successfully repel the assault, and thus preserve our army from capture. They fought through the war. They were brave, hardy troops. They helped to gain our liberty and independence.385

By 1780, while the war was still in its closing moments, the Pennsylvania legislature approved a gradual abolition law and crafted a constitution that echoed the Declaration of Independence, stating “all men are born free and equal.” Around the same time, two Massachusetts slaves named Quock Walker and Mumbet Alias Elizabeth Freemen took the ideals of the Revolution and put them to task. In individual court cases they argued that the Declaration, as well as Massachusetts’ state constitution, which included a “free and equal” clause, had essentially freed all blacks and that unless it could be proven that “all men” did not apply to black people, slavery could no longer exist. Walker and Freeman’s arguments proved convincing as they both gained their freedom and by 1783 Chief Justice William Cushing ruled that “the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and

Chief Justice Cushing went further than to simply free Quock and end slavery in Massachusetts but also argued the case for black citizenship as well:

Whatever sentiments have formerly prevailed in this particular or slid in upon us by the examples of others, a different idea has taken place with the people of America, more favorable to the natural rights of mankind, and to that natural, innate desire of Liberty, with which Heaven (without regard to color, complexion, or shape of noses, features) has inspired all the human race. And upon this ground, our Constitution... sets out with declaring that all men are born free and equal—and that every subject [that is, citizen] is entitled to liberty,... as well as life and property—and in short is totally repugnant to the idea of being born slaves.387

Fifty-three years later, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw upheld Cushing’s ruling, concurring with him that all African Americans who set foot in the state of Massachusetts (with the exception of fugitives) became “subject to all its municipal laws... and entitled to the privileges which those laws confer.”388 Pennsylvania and Massachusetts were not alone. By the end of the war, it had become apparent that slavery was dying in the North. Vermont was the first state to end slavery, having abolished it almost overnight and granting blacks the right to vote.389 Several states in the North by the 1790s would grant the right for free blacks to vote as a result of their general enfranchisement during the Revolution. Later, in 1782, when Kentucky became a state, its constitution allowed all free adult males, including blacks, the right to vote. African Americans made particular use of this new right they received, one that would continue largely untouched by the time of Andrew Jackson.390 Although there were several Northern states where free blacks were not granted suffrage, exclusion from voting did not exclude them from citizenship, as citizenship had always had a wide range of qualifications and limitations even amongst white citizens. The inability for black citizens to vote was no different than the inability for white women or children to vote. Even though some states did not grant them the right...
to vote, with citizenship came the privileges of property, liberty, access to the courts, and perhaps most importantly, the means and the ability of black citizens to demand further rights owed to them even if it went against the wishes of individual states.\textsuperscript{391}

Despite a large number of slaves in Connecticut, the antislavery movement succeeded, and a gradual abolition law was adopted. Likewise, Connecticut’s Supreme Court of Errors ruled that slaves that had been emancipated had “become sui generis, and entitled to all the rights and privileges of other free citizens of the state.”\textsuperscript{392} New Hampshire’s 1785 constitution stated “all men (were) born equal and independent” with “natural rights” that included “enjoying… life and liberty.” In 1799, New York adopted a gradual plan for emancipation, and New Jersey followed suit in 1804.\textsuperscript{393} During the convention to change New York’s constitution, Dr. Robert Clark spoke of African American service, “these people helped to fight your battles by land and by sea. Some of your States were glad to turn out corps of colored men, and to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with them.”\textsuperscript{394} Closer to the Chesapeake, Delaware and Maryland loosened their policies on enslaved and free blacks. As a result of the war, both states had an increase in free African Americans whose service in the army granted them freedom.

Rhode Island received increasing pressure from the black veterans of the Rhode Island regiment, as well as its enslaved and free African American population. In response, the state passed an abolition bill in 1784.\textsuperscript{395} Since the Revolution, the Rhode Island regiment had become a symbol of African American courage and liberty throughout the North. The \textit{New York Courier and Enquirer} reported that,

\begin{quote}
The colored people of Rhode Island deserve the good opinion and kind feeling of every citizen of the State, for their conduct during the recent troublous times in Providence. They promptly volunteered their services for any duty to which they might be useful…the Rhode Island colored regiment fought, on one occasion, until half their number were slain. There was not a regiment in the service which did more soldierly duty, or showed itself more devotedly patriotic.
\end{quote}

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In an address against slavery, Governor William Eustis of Massachusetts spoke of the famed regiment stating, “In Rhode Island, the blacks formed an entire regiment, and they discharged their duty with zeal and fidelity. The gallant defense of Red Bank, in which the black regiment bore a part is among the proofs of their valor.” Judge Tristam Burges from Rhode Island addressed Congress in 1828 and spoke further of the famed Rhode Island regiment, “At the commencement of the Revolutionary War, Rhode Island had a number of slaves. A regiment of them were enlisted into the Continental service, and no braver men met the enemy in battle; but not one of them was permitted to be a soldier until he had first been made a freeman.”

Slaves who had served in place of their masters used the growing pressure of the newly freed black population to make sure that their service translated into freedom. While substitutes had been promised freedom upon their enlistment and had blended in with white troops, the sincerity of the promise was always in question until after the war. In one instance, a slave named Ned Griffen served in North Carolina as a substitute for his owner, William Kitchen. In return for serving as his substitute, Kitchen promised Griffen freedom at the end of the war; however, when the war was over, Kitchen decided to sell him to another slave owner instead. Ned Griffen took his case to the North Carolina General Assembly and was awarded his freedom. In a similar case, the Connecticut Superior Court awarded freedom to Jack Arabas after he successful sued his master for reenslaving him after he had fought in the Continental Army for three years. Throughout the United States, similar questions of freedom were settled in favor of black troops with the various state governments choosing to pay their

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396 Nell, Colored Patriots, 74, 77.
397 Negro Soldier, 7-8.
398 Winch, Between Slavery and Freedom, 31-33.
former masters for their slave substitutes, ending any doubt they were not free.⁴⁰¹

Before the Revolution, all of the thirteen colonies had slaves and prospered from slavery in various degrees. The North was no exception. By the mid-1700s, one out of every five families in Boston owned at least one slave. Black slaves made up twelve percent of the population of Rhode Island and over a quarter of New York City’s working age males were slaves, with one-half of all households owning at least one slave.⁴⁰² States like Connecticut and Rhode Island had significant slave populations. In Rhode Island specifically, slavery was of both economic and social importance. Despite this, the North made the most use of black soldiers during the Revolution, the largest amounts coming from Rhode Island. Slaves in Rhode Island played an active role in changing minds, as they proved their loyalty to the state, like the slave Quaco did in 1782 when he escaped British forces in Rhode Island and reported all the intel he had on them to the rebels, in return earning his freedom.⁴⁰³

Black service in the war undermined slavery in the North. While the North would see blacks petition for the end of slavery as early as 1766, it was the war and its rhetoric that produced the loudest plea from African Americans. According to Davis, slaves “appealed to the rebels’ ideology of natural rights.” Forming a pattern, in most states throughout the North, like Connecticut, when abolition was first proposed, it was done so with consideration and a direct link to slaves who had become soldiers and served in the patriot cause. A comparison of the service records of Connecticut's African American soldiers with a 1790 census of free black heads of families contains many of the same names. Additionally, forty African Americas out of 195 soldiers on the 1790 census were listed as free heads of households. Over 20 percent of Connecticut's black enlistment records matched a name on the 1790 head-of-household census.⁴⁰⁴

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In time, the question of freedom in return for the arming of slaves turned to a larger question of slavery and its place in the North.\textsuperscript{405} Philadelphia itself would go from a population of 40 to 60 percent slaves, to less than 2 percent by 1800 and would form the first anti-slavery society in the world.\textsuperscript{406} As a result of African American service in the war and a turning tide of opinion generated by patriot rhetoric, over two hundred years of slavery had ceased to exist in the North within two decades.\textsuperscript{407} Furthermore, a Northern congressman of the time predicted that the exact combination of military service and emancipations of blacks from the war would “lay the foundation of the [complete] Abolition of Slavery in America.” \textsuperscript{408}

In a sign of the changing times during the war, every state except for Georgia and South Carolina banned or put a limit on the slave trade at one point or another.\textsuperscript{409} Likewise, in 1784, Congress failed to outlaw slavery in its entirety in all western territories by only one single vote.\textsuperscript{410} Service in the military furthered the abolition of the slave trade bringing slavery to an earlier end and allowed free blacks to gain wider social and civil rights. During the Revolution, the military acted as a radicalization of the rhetoric put forth by the colonists and the war itself brought swift change to the status of blacks and slavery.\textsuperscript{411} Throughout the post-war era, rhetoric alone did not change the status of African Americans, as they remained their own active agents of change, to ensure promises that were made during the Revolution were fulfilled.

In general, free African Americans received equal treatment in New England’s court system. With knowledge of the system, free blacks could use the laws for economic gain to collect money and make good on various debts owed to them. Similarly, in criminal cases, they were granted full legal

\textsuperscript{405} David Brion Davis, \textit{The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823} (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 76, 78-9, 83.
\textsuperscript{407} Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom}, 25-6.
\textsuperscript{408} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 467.
\textsuperscript{409} Quarles, \textit{Negro in Revolution}, 194-5.
\textsuperscript{410} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 467.
\textsuperscript{411} Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 451.
rights, with no marked distinction or inequality between punishments received by whites.\textsuperscript{412} Free African Americans not only made use of the system but used it for the betterment of themselves and all black Americans, free or enslaved. In 1787, free blacks in Philadelphia formed the Free African Society, the first black mutual aid society which dedicated itself to the spiritual, economic, and social needs of Philadelphia’s growing free population. In 1799, the free black population of Philadelphia petitioned Congress to outlaw the kidnapping and forcing of people into slavery, as well as finally abolish slavery as a nation. In 1806, Boston opened its first African American meeting house which would serve as the center of worship, education, and civic advancement for its black members. The following year, the United States moved to outlaw the slave trade effective January 1, 1808. Free blacks in the North would begin to observe this date as a holiday in hopes that the ending of the slave trade also meant the death of slavery itself.\textsuperscript{413}

While the South, with its entire economy rested upon slave labor did not see the complete end of slavery as did the North, progress towards freedom was still significant. Despite the continuation of slavery, more antislavery societies existed in the South than in the North. In 1783, the Virginia Legislature emancipated multiple slaves who had fought in the Revolutionary War. Following the state’s example, many slave owners also freed their slaves. At war's end, General Horatio Gates, a plantation owner residing in Virginia, gave his numerous slaves freedom and made provisions to ensure they were to remain financially stable.\textsuperscript{414} By 1790, all Southern states, including the previously stubborn Georgia and South Carolina had ended the slave trade (at least officially). In Richmond, the Virginia Abolition Society was formed, and the number of free African Americans rose from 3,000 in 1780 to over 13,000 just ten years later.\textsuperscript{415} From there, between 1780 and 1810, the free black population

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\textsuperscript{412} Weiner, \textit{Black Trials}, 40.
\textsuperscript{413} Winch, \textit{Between Slavery and Freedom}, xviii.
\textsuperscript{414} Nell, \textit{Colored Patriots}, 124.
\textsuperscript{415} Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 28.
\end{flushleft}
increased faster than the slave population of the entire United States. Additionally, Southern generals and politicians like Washington and Jefferson, as well as soldiers who had served side by side with blacks, working closely with them, came out of the war with different opinions of blacks and looked to free their slaves. By becoming soldiers, free and enslaved blacks became visible to a wider population of whites of all backgrounds and helped to violate the stereotypes of blacks. Such sentiments would later be repeated during the Civil War when a Confederate leader argued, “If slaves make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong.”

Out of the prominent generals of the American Revolution, Lafayette had one of the most drastic conversions from slave owner to abolitionist through the course of the war. He would later claim, “I would never have drawn my sword in the cause of America, if I could have conceived that thereby I was founding a land of slavery.” During two of the trips in which he returned to America after the war, Lafayette made several attempts at assisting and coming to the aid of black soldiers he had fought alongside with during the Revolution. One of the most famous examples was Lafayette’s already mentioned spy, James Armistead. While visiting Richmond, Virginia, Lafayette ran into his former spy who had renamed himself James Armistead Lafayette in honor of the general. Armistead informed Lafayette that he had petitioned the Virginia Assembly for his freedom in return for the service he rendered during the war. In an attempt to help his old friend, Lafayette then wrote the lawmakers informing them that Armistead had “perfectly acquitted himself with some important commission I gave him and appears to me entitled every reward his situation can admit of.” With Lafayette’s help, the assembly granted Armistead his freedom in 1787 and gave him a lifelong pension for his services. The story of Lafayette and James Armistead is not unique, several more examples of

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419 Nell, *Colored Patriots*, 218.
such brave service by African Americans being returned by rewards include the Virginia slave named Latchom, who in 1781 shot and killed a British soldier, while also saving his master's life and was in return rewarded freedom. Similarly, in 1782, another Virginia slave named Jupiter captured two enemy guns and won himself freedom.\textsuperscript{421}

While Lafayette may not have been the only officer to help win freedom for African Americans, he went further than most when it came to his convictions to see slavery end in his time. Using his immense fortune (as one of France’s richest nobility), he purchased a plantation in French Guiana to make an attempt to free, educate, and introduce slaves into society. Once the plantation and slaves were purchased, the first step of his process was to gather all the whips and instruments of torture used by slave masters and burn them in a huge bonfire while the slaves watched. From there Lafayette started an experiment with gradual abolition through a process that involved slaves earning money for their labor that they could then use to purchase “additional day[s] of the week” which could be used as they wished. The eventual plan was for the slaves to develop paid labor and saving skills until he had purchased enough days to become “master of his whole time.” When the French Revolution broke out, Lafayette was forced to end his short-lived experiment. France’s Revolutionary government declared that all slaves were to be immediately freed; however, those that worked at Lafayette’s plantation remained to work and earn wages under the caring General.\textsuperscript{422}

As a plantation owner, Virginian, and leader of the new nation, George Washington had a more complicated situation than Lafayette when it came to granting freedom to slaves. During the course of the war and through his experiences working hand in hand with black soldiers and assistants, George Washington had become a closeted abolitionist. One rather touching display of the connections made during the war took place between the slave-owning Washington and an African American man named Primus Hall. Hall was a bodyguard attached to Colonel Timothy Pickering. Pickering and Washington

\textsuperscript{421} Quarles, \textit{Negro in Revolution}, 184.  
\textsuperscript{422} Nell, \textit{Colored Patriots}, 218.
were very close during the war, and Pickering would often provide him counsel and late night conversations while the army was encamped. One night Washington entered the Colonel’s tent to find that the Colonel was not there; however, inside the tent was the Colonel’s bodyguard, Hall. While waiting for Pickering to return, Washington decided to exercise and recruited Hall’s service. The exercise involved Hall tying a rope to a stake and allowing Washington to run and jump backward and forwards. After meeting Hall that night, Washington would frequently return to have him assist in the General’s exercise.

One night when Pickering and Washington were at different camps, Washington rode to speak with the Colonel. As their conversation took them late into the night, Pickering invited Washington to stay in his tent rather than make the long trip back to his camp. Upon the suggestion of staying the night, Hall encouraged Washington to stay and had informed him that there was “plenty of straw and blankets” for the General to sleep on. As the officers went to sleep, Hall perched himself on top of a stool, placed his head in his hands and attempted to as well. Not long after, Washington awoke from his sleep to find Hall atop the stool. Washington had noticed that Hall had given him his blanket and straw so that he could sleep comfortably while Hall sat through the night. Immediately Washington whispered to Hall requesting he join him. Hall politely refused, but the General insisted, shifting his body to make space. Giving in to Washington’s request, Hall joined him and together the leader of the Continental Army, and a humble African American servant slept side-by-side, sharing the same bedding and blanket until morning.423

While the future president rarely spoke out against slavery in any official capacity, he shared his views in his writings and personal correspondences. In a letter to Robert Morris, Washington claimed there was “not a man living [that wished more than he]… to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery]… but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be

423 Nell, Colored Patriots, 20-22.
accomplished & that is by legislative authority.” That did not stop Washington, however, from doing what he could when it came to his relationship to slavery. Washington vowed that he would never again “possess another slave by purchase.” Furthermore, he would support any plan “by which slavery in this country may be abolished by slow, sure and imperceptible degrees.”

Washington also amended his Last Will and Testament with a provision about his slaves: “Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right shall receive their freedom.” With the request of freedom also came a demand forbidding the sale “of any Slave I may die posed of, under any pretense whatsoever.” Additionally, Washington had made arrangements that the elderly and sick that were freed would be cared for, and the children would be educated for “some useful occupation.” Lastly, Washington stated the wishes for the fate of his slaves were to “be religiously fulfilled… without evasion, neglect, or delay.” A special provision was added for a slave named William Lee, granting him immediate freedom and an annuity of thirty dollars for life. In his Will, Washington explained, “This I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.”

With the defeat of the British, despite attempts by the Americans to stop them, thousands of slaves who had served in the royal army were evacuated with their forces and freed. General Lafayette, John Jay, and Henry Laurens raised the issue of slavery at the following peace conference. Both men wished that the slaves that had gone to the British lines would be returned to the Americans. It was with the help of John Jay that Lafayette had joined the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves in 1788. During the conferences, it was the belief of Lafayette that if they were returned to the Americans, it would result in their release and subsequent freedom. However, the

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424 Clary, Adopted Son, 378.
426 Nell, Colored Patriots, 125.
427 Frey, Water from the Rock, 192.
428 Clary, Adopted Son, 377.
British commanders had already granted them such freedom and they could not be returned. Despite great pressures against them, British generals like Alexander Leslie at Savannah and Guy Carleton at New York refused to hand over the African Americans that served under them. According to the British leaders, those that had responded to the calls of freedom entrusted the English to live up to that promise. The honor of their promises was at stake. The British were not alone in this feeling as it was shared by many Americans. William Eustis, Governor of Massachusetts and veteran of the Revolutionary war, told Congress in 1820: “The war over, and peace restored, these [black] men returned to their respective States; and who could have said to them, on their return to civil life, after having shed their blood in common with the whites in the defence of the liberties of the country, ‘You are not to participate in the rights secured by the struggle, or in the liberty for which you have been fighting’? Certainly no white man in Massachusetts.”

For many Americans, the concerns for African Americans that had fought in the war did not end with ensuring their freedom. Those that had served in the Continental Army in addition to being granted freedom if previously enslaved had also received land grants and pensions in an attempt to ensure “equal footing” for the now-retired black soldiers. Congress first granted pensions in 1789 to those who were disabled during the war or to families of anyone who was killed. In 1806 state and militia troops were allowed to apply for pensions under the same circumstances. Finally, in 1818 all veterans of the war were rewarded pensions for their service. Of interesting note, the 1818 act which granted pensions to all Revolutionary War soldiers, black and white, referred to all veterans as citizens.

When Jehu Grant applied for his pension in 1836 he recalled his memories of the war, “the

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431 Voelz, *Slave and Soldier*, 452.
432 Voelz, *Slave and Soldier*, 245.
songs of liberty…saluted my ear, [and] thrilled through my heart.” Additional records of African American war veterans like Quack Matrick of Stoughton Corner, Massachusetts, a man only referred to by The Hartford Review as Hamet from Middletown Connecticut and Samuel Charlton, who fought at the Battle of Monmouth and several other skirmishes in New Jersey, all collected lifelong pensions. A closer look at pension records reveals not only gains in financial stability but land and material possessions as well. Black veterans like Cuff Tindy, who was formerly a slave, had won freedom through service and was now a farmer of his own land. Another veteran, Cato Freedom was listed as the owner of thirty-three acres of land, a plow, cow, ax, as well as other household items. Additionally, many states like Rhode Island enacted legislature that required care for poor black veterans:

since disbanding… many of the…soldiers have become sick, and others were unable to maintain themselves…it is necessary that provisions should be made for their support…Any…Negro… who was heretofore a slave, and enlisted into and served in the Continental Battalions in the pay of this State, by virtue of an Act of this Assembly passed at the Session in February, A.D. 1778, shall become sick, or otherwise unable to support and maintain himself, it shall be the duty of the Town-Council of the Town where such…Negro… was heretofore a slave, and enlisted into the Continental Battalions as aforesaid, and shall be sick or otherwise unable to support and maintain himself, to direct the Overseers of the Poor of such Town to Take Care of and provide for such sick or poor.

Beyond the initial freedom, care, and increased membership in American society that the war brought those who fought in it, the thousands of African Americans that found freedom or ran away during the fighting, had a secondary impact: the weakening of the plantation system of the South. The chaos of the war, which included raids on plantations, the slaves that left the fields to fight in place of their masters, free black men that inspired slaves to enlist themselves, and those that ran away to join the British, all slowly helped to damage directly or wither away the Southern plantations. Davis

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434 Brown, Arming slaves, 200.
435 Nell, Colored Patriots, 23, 80, 95.
436 Neimeyer, America Goes to War, 85.
concluded that the American Revolution “Necessarily shattered the fragile security of many
slaveholding societies.”438 The structural shock to the slave system generated a massive increase in
manumissions and loosened the often strict regulations on one’s ability to release a person from
ownership. As one governor wrote, “A Negro is never of any use in the plantation after they have
carried arms.”439 What followed has been described as a “manumission fever” in which over a short
period many more slaves were released. While the North became known for its anti-slavery stance, the
South generated many abolitionists during this period that appealed to the courts and launched freedom
suits. While only freeing a little of the Southern slave population, the manumission fever opened up
new avenues and precedents for the emancipation of slaves in the South.440 Patterson has also argued
that the war increased the rate of manumission as a result of integrated military units blurring the lines
of free and slave, as well as disrupting racist practices. According to Patterson, it was the war itself that
can be attributed to the major growth of freed groups through America, as both sides armed and freed
slaves.441 Together, black soldiers, along with their white officers and the necessities of war, combined
to produce an opposition to slavery and a path to end the institution itself.442

In the years that followed, a substantial new group of free blacks would arise. Together, many
moved to Northern cities that offered them greater opportunities and the simple ability to blend into the
already established urban classes. After the war, the African American populations of Boston, New
York, and Philadelphia swelled. Once in the cities, many African Americans turned their attention to
freeing their relatives and bettering the status of their people. One African American, John C. Stanley,
was quite successful following his freedom in 1798, managing to purchase the freedom of his wife, two

438 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 72, 81.
439 Roger Norman Buckley, Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815 (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1979), 38.
440 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 301-303; Davis, Problem of Slavery, 76, 78-9, 83.
441 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 290, 287, 293.
442 Voelz, Slave and Soldier, 466.
children, his wife’s brother, and nineteen other African Americans that remained in slavery.\textsuperscript{443} Self-purchase also increased, largely by those who had received government rewards for their service against the British or for maintaining order at home while their masters were away. Black merchant women also benefitted from the money they made during the war and afterward took part in the post-war building and commercial boom. City life offered African Americans the advantage of living amongst each other in large numbers. Soon black institutions were created that provided African Americans with additional resources and security necessary to live as free citizens. Soon black churches were created, and together they pooled their resources to start African American schools. With the move to cities also came the opportunity to find new paying jobs and become successful farmers, professionals, housekeepers, artisans, etc. Other opportunities included the chance to change their former names given to them by their masters, reconstruct families, or make new ones.\textsuperscript{444} By the end of the Revolutionary period, the foundations were created to allow for the free black community to grow.

While the Revolutionary War did not end slavery in the South, it did create a new relationship between slave and master. Before the war, masters that had slaves run away posted runaway slave ads that called for their return and slaves that were caught were met with extreme punishments, which often included separation from loved ones or bodily harm. As the war raged on, and as slaves fled their masters in unprecedented numbers and for the first time showed their agency on a grand scale, masters had to rethink their methods and responses to keep their property. Instead of striking the fear of punishment in their runaway slaves, masters now turned to forgiveness and pleading for their return.

The following three slave ads display the change in attitude:

\textsuperscript{443} Donald R. Wright, \textit{African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution} (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 2010), 190, 191, 193.  
\textsuperscript{444} Wright, \textit{African Americans in Colonial}, 194-5, 203, 205-6.
Savannah Royal Georgia Gazette, January 18, 1781.
One Guinea will be given for each of the above Negroes, and all reasonable charges, on their being delivered to Mr. John Charles Lucena at Savannah, or to the subscriber in Beaufort. **If they will return to their duty they will be forgiven.**
JANE GROVE.
Beaufort, January 6, 1781.445

Charleston South-Carolina and American General Gazette, April 16, 1778.
RUN away in January last, two negroes named BRISTOL and CELIA, formerly the property of Dr. Oliphant; they are well known in different parts of the country, and have been seen lately in Charlestown. **Should they return of their own accord, their elopement will be forgiven.**
THOMAS ROCHE.

Charleston South-Carolina and American General Gazette, November 4, 1780.
THE following NEGROES have absented themselves from the subscriber’s plantation... **I promise, that if any of them return home of their own accord, they shall be forgiven; and those who are near town, may call on Mr. William Greenwood in Charlestown, for a pass to my plantation.** Any person who will give such information of the above negroes, so as they may be had again, shall receive TWO GUINEAS reward for each negro.
ANDREW LORD.446

The American Revolution and the colonists shift from a monarchal hierarchical structure to a one of republicanism, liberty, and independence had additional impacts on the black population. Ideas of freedom and independence changed the idea of property from just largely consisting of owning land and material possessions to the attributes of a man, his personality, and his skills. For the very first time, the call of equality trumped birth and wealth as they came to believe that no one was born better than anyone else.447 By 1791, the geographer Jedidiah Morse described New England as a place, “where every man thinks himself at least as good as his neighbors, and believes that all mankind have, or ought to possess equal rights.”448 African Americans had little to no place in the previous definition,

446 Charleston South-Carolina and American General Gazette 1764–1781." In Runaway Slave Advertisements, vol. 3.
448 Jedidiah Morse, Geography Made Easy: Being an Abridgment of the American Universal Geography to which are prefixed Elements of Geography for the use of Schools and Academies in the United States of America. (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1791), 65.
but under the new understanding of worth, blacks had proven themselves as more than capable. Having fought to establish the Republic and with over a half of the country consisting of free states with a sizable portion of free African Americans inside of them, slavery could no longer be used as a justification for excluding blacks from citizenship. In 1794, Congressman Albert Gallatin echoed this sentiment arguing that “Every man who took an active part in the American Revolution, was a citizen according to the great laws of reason and nature.” Given the general concept of citizenship and the traditional principles of law, there seemed to be no way to deny free African Americans the rights and privileges of citizens of which were due to them upon release from bondage or to those born to free parents, by birthright. As the United States grew, slavery would continue to be a heated debate. With the abolition of slavery in the North and only 3,000 slaves remaining out of a population of over 125,000 by 1830, the South and its largely proslavery stance started to become increasingly isolated and separated from mainstream America. The Constitution had abolished slave imports as a nation in 1808 and the newly created Northwest Territory prohibited the use of slaves. Masters who had moved or even passed through Free states or territories on temporary trips with their slaves raised the question of the status of freedom when traveling beyond the South.

Eventually, Southern states acknowledged the fact that bringing a slave into a free area would mean freeing of said slave. This idea was tested several times. The Maryland Court of Appeals ruled in 1799 that a slave hired out by his master to work in Pennsylvania was therefore deemed free the second he set foot in the state due to the state’s abolition laws. Even the supreme court of the Deep South state of Mississippi ruled in 1818 that any slaves that had been located in the Northwest Territory at the time the Ordinance of 1787 had abolished slavery in the region were released from their “absolute subjection” and were hence to be seen and treated as free men in Mississippi courts. According to the

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449 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 234.
450 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 311.
452 Weiner, Black Trials, 94.
Mississippi’s Supreme Court ruling, “Slavery is condemned by reason and the laws of nature. It… can only exist, through municipal regulations, and in matters of doubt…courts must lean ‘in favorem vitae et libertatis.’”

In 1807, the Supreme Court and governor of the newly formed Michigan territory ruled that they would not return fugitive slaves from Canada since the Constitution made no provisions to obligate the territory to surrender runaway slaves to foreign nations. Virginia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina followed the lead of Maryland, Mississippi, and Michigan. Virginia formally recognized the laws of Free states and ruled in their favor when it stated that in 1820 and 1833 slaves that had been carried to Ohio and Massachusetts had thereby been freed. In Louisiana, Judge François Marin ruled that the “right of a State to pass laws dissolving the relation of master and servant, is recognized in the Constitution of the United States, by a very forcible implication,” therefore the Ohio Constitution “emancipates, ipso facto, such slaves whose owners remove them into that state, with the intention of residing there.”

One specific example of a slave having been emancipated upon leaving the South involved a slave woman in 1833 who had been taken to Massachusetts from Virginia when her master had the intention of settling there. Though he had recently returned to Virginia, his residence was now listed as Massachusetts, and he had therefore ceded any rights of ownership over his slave. As late as 1850, a South Carolina court had freed a slave that had been taken to Ireland and brought back against his will. Slaves that remained in the South were not completely without hope either, as they looked to the North for a route to freedom. By 1849, roughly 50,000 slaves would escape using the Underground Railroad, which would not only increase the amounts of free African Americans but would further exacerbate the growing conflict of ideals between the North and South.

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453 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 304.
454 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 502.
455 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 305.
456 Davis, Problem of Slavery, 514.
457 Weiner, Black Trials, 136.
With the admission of Missouri as a state and the Missouri compromise, which allowed slavery to exist in the new state and below its southern border, the question of free black citizenship was once again raised. Charles Pinckney of South Carolina delivered a speech about African American veterans in response to the growing Missouri question:

It is a remarkable fact, that, notwithstanding, in the course of the Revolution, the Southern States were continually overrun by the British, and every negro in them had an opportunity of running away, yet few did. They then were, as they still are, as valuable a part of our population to the Union as any other equal number of inhabitants. They were in numerous instances the pioneers, and in all, the laborers of your armies. To their hands were owing the erection of the greatest part of the fortifications raised for the protection of our country. Fort Moultrie gave, at an early period of the inexperienced and untried valor of our citizens, immortality to American arms. And in the Northern States, numerous bodies of them were enrolled, and fought, side-by-side with the whites, the battles of the Revolution.458

A large group of senators and representatives objected to a provision of the Missouri Constitution, which barred free blacks from entering the state. They argued that free African Americans had not been considered foreigners when the first states’ constitutions were formed and since the American Revolution they had enjoyed the rights of citizenship including the rights to acquire property by inheritance, the right of religious freedom and personal protection, as well as the broad guarantees of the Bill of Rights. Furthermore, free African Americans not only defended their country through service in the military but had also been compelled to pay taxes like any other citizen. Free blacks had also belonged to a category of person in the United States denominated as “natives.” One spokesperson exclaimed, “if being a native, and free born, and of parents belonging to no other nation or tribe, does not constitute a citizen of this country, I am at a loss to know in what manner citizenship is acquired by birth.” Since free blacks were “not aliens or slaves… [they] were of consequence free citizens.”459

Several state courts upheld the belief that free blacks were citizens with full rights. In an 1827 unanimous court decision in Tennessee, Judge Henry Crabb argued that freedom “transfers its possessor, even if he be black… from the kitchen and the cotton-field, to the court house, and the election ground.” Seven years later, fellow Tennessee Chief Justice John Catron echoed Crabb’s argument on free blacks, stating that once blacks were given freedom, the state adopted “into the body politic a new member” and free black’s votes were “of as high value as that of any man” in the state of Tennessee. In 1838, in the case of the State vs. Manuel, Judge William Gaston of the North Carolina Supreme Court claimed that the principles of law led to the conclusion that free blacks were, in fact, citizens and that “Slaves manumitted here became freemen—and therefore if born within North Carolina are citizens of North Carolina—and all free person born within the State are born citizens of the state.”

Gaston argued that under North Carolina’s original constitution, free black men had the right to vote and despite that right having been taken away in an 1835 revision, the loss of voting rights did not change the status of their citizenship. All people who were neither slaves nor aliens were citizens. If certain rights were taken away or lacking, it was not the status of the individual that should be called into question, but the discriminatory law. Gaston argued:

Surely the possession of political power is not essential to constitute a citizen. If it be, then women, minors, and persons who have not paid public taxes are not citizens… The term ‘citizen’ as understood in our law, is precisely analogous to the terms subject in common law, and the change of phrase has entirely resulted from the change of government. The sovereignty has been transferred from one man to the collective body of the people- and he who before was a “subject of the king’ is now ‘a citizen of the state.”

While the eventual ruling of the infamous Dred Scott case would deliver a major blow to black citizenship, it wasn’t as all-encompassing and final as some have claimed. Despite a majority support-

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460 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 316-17.
461 Kettner, Development of American Citizenship, 317, 322.
ing the decision, it was not unanimous. While the ruling applied to the federal government, Chief Justice Taney made the point of recognizing the ability of states to determine their local citizenship status. In their own states, blacks may have the rights of their residency. Chief Justice Curtis disagreed with the ruling and argued that although Congress held the power of naturalization, individual states had the right to define who qualified as a citizen within their domain and who retained the right to vote and hold office. Under Curtis’s definition of the ruling, blacks who were considered citizens in Ohio or Massachusetts would remain citizens if they traveled to Mississippi or South Carolina.\(^\text{462}\) The issue of African-American citizenship would remain open and would continue to be debated amongst the branches of the government until the Civil War. Many Northern and some Southern states defended the idea that free blacks were citizens entitled to all the rights citizenship entailed. On the other hand, by the 1820s, many other Southern states under increasing pressure of losing their economic livelihood, began to close themselves off. They became increasingly politically defensive and rejected the idea that blacks could be citizens.\(^\text{463}\) As Robert M. Cover stated, “It is rare to find a man ready to concede that a revolution with himself as a target would be just.”\(^\text{464}\) Under such pressure, Revolutionary ideals lessened in the South.

Black soldiers had served in colonial conflicts before, with little to no change in policy. The American Revolution brought tens of thousands of blacks into service as soldiers and sailors. Never before in the pan-Atlantic world had so many blacks served in such a concentrated period.\(^\text{465}\) The service of African Americans in the Continental and British Armies began the painfully slow process of assimilating blacks into the mainstream American life.\(^\text{466}\) Before the Revolution, it was difficult for white

\(^{462}\) Kettner, *Development of American Citizenship*, 326-7, 331.
\(^{466}\) Higginbotham, *War of Independence*, 397.
Americans to think of granting freedom to supposedly passive slaves; however, as the Revolution defined liberty as the reward for righteous struggle, a struggle many blacks participated in, the ideas of many Americans towards black freedom and citizenship had changed.\(^{467}\) The stereotype had been revised as soon as blacks enrolled in the military and took to the field. The service of African Americans in the creation of the country and the rhetoric of the Patriot cause presented a direct challenge to slavery. According to the colonists’ beliefs, a soldier was good, not evil; trained, not ignorant; civilized, not savage and therefore civilized and deserving of citizenship.\(^{468}\) The social pressures created by the Revolution formed the conditions that enabled African Americans to gain leverage on an unprecedented level and allowed them further to continue negotiations with the dominant white culture.\(^{469}\)

By the time the war had ended, “it was perfectly clear that the principles for which Americans had fought required the complete abolition of slavery; the question was not \textit{if} but \textit{when} and \textit{how}.” Johnathan Edwards Jr. predicted in 1791 that at the current rate of progress it would “be as shameful for a man to hold a Negro slave as to be guilty of common robbery or theft” in fifty years’ time.\(^{470}\) He was not far off. While the South fell short of the Revolutionary ideals, there was nonetheless a radical change. As Davis has pointed out in his work, the very existence of any antislavery in the South was a remarkable social change and made slavery a vulnerable institution. This was largely due to the antislavery sentiments of many prominent southern Founding Fathers and Revolution heroes including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, St. George Tucker, Arthur Lee, and John Laurens, but none of it would have been possible if African Americans did not rise to the occasion, choose sides, change hearts and minds, and fight to secure their citizenship.\(^{471}\)

\(^{467}\) Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 257.
\(^{468}\) Voelz, \textit{Slave and Soldier}, 411-12.
\(^{469}\) Niemeyer, \textit{America Goes to War}, 66.
\(^{470}\) Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 255, 313.
\(^{471}\) Davis, \textit{Problem of Slavery}, 211.
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“The shooting of Major Pitcairn (who had shed the first blood at Lexington) by the colored soldier Salem.” Hand-colored engraving. Courtesy of J. L. Bell.


