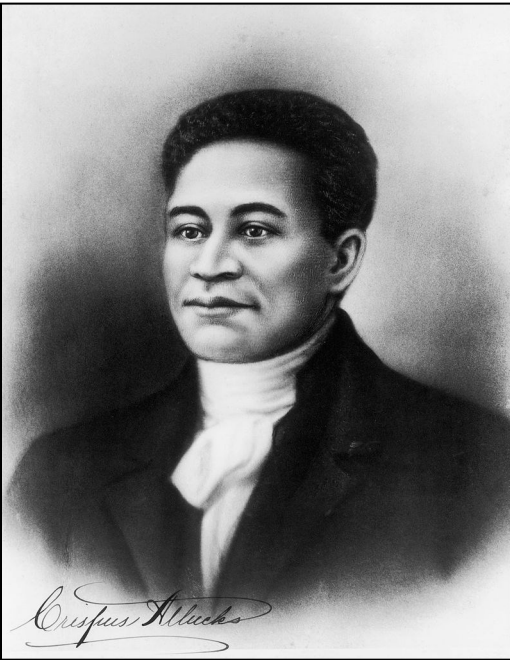


BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE REVOLUTION



Posthumous Portrait of Crispus Attucks (Wikipedia)

Many Americans are aware of the story that African Americans played in the Civil War, but what about those African Americans who participated in the nation's birth? Scholarship indicates that as many as 9,000 blacks served in the Continental Army, while another several thousand were lured into the British forces with a guarantee of freedom offered to those enslaved persons who fled to British lines. Prior to the American Revolution slavery was practiced in all of the 13 colonies, with the bulk of them enslaved in the South.

The earliest black patriot hero of the American Revolution is Crispus Attucks one of the five Bostonians killed in March 1770 during the Boston Massacre. Since then Attucks has been heralded as "the first to die for freedom."

Five years later, on the first day of the war, African Americans saw action at both Lexington and Concord. Some were freemen and others enslaved persons. These men enslaved or free served in local militia or Minute Man units. The most notable among these individuals is Prince Estabrook who was wounded in the opening round of the Revolution on April 19, 1775. Two months later at the first major battle of the war, the battle of Bunker Hill, African Americans also participated including Salem Poor and Peter Salem, an enslaved person from Framingham, Massachusetts who fought for seven years to help American gain independence.

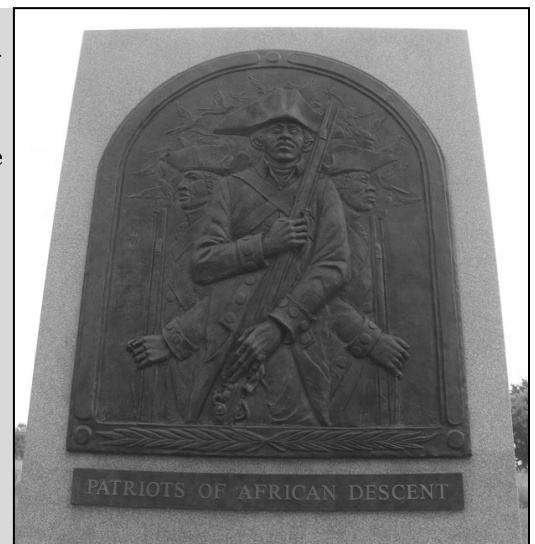
Generally, those blacks who did serve in the Continental Army, served because they were inspired by the cause of the war – freedom and liberty. Many believed that by pitching into the American effort they could secure either their freedom from slavery or additional rights.

As the war continued many including Commander-in-Chief, George Washington, was reluctant to see black men with guns. This form of paranoia was prevalent, particularly with southerners who feared that their enslaved population so armed would lead to slave rebellions. But Washington came to see the zeal of patriotism expressed by African Americans serving side by side in regiments with whites and softened his attitude. It is noteworthy that African Americans in the Continental Army endured all the hardships that that rag-tag force bore, including the memorable winter encampment at Valley Forge, where a monument honors their role during the winter of 1777-1778.

After the outbreak of hostilities Virginia Governor, Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation saying that any enslaved person who left their master to serve with the British would secure their freedom. In addition to Dunmore's Proclamation the Virginia governor organized a fighting unit of former slaves in what became known as Dunmore's Ethiopian Brigade. These men, in a twist of irony, sported uniforms that were embroidered with the statement, "Liberty to Slaves."

Free blacks as well as enslaved persons knew the stakes were high after the Continental Congress declared independence. Jefferson's stirring opening, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," seized the fervor of the colored patriots who wanted a place at the table in the new nation.

Many black soldiers in the cause of independence served alongside whites in the same state regiments in the Continental Army. Integrated units would not reappear again until the 1950s during the Korean Conflict when the federal government desegregated the military by Executive Order of President Harry Truman.



Monument to Patriots of African Descent (Valley Forge)

One state notable for a singular black regiment was Rhode Island which organized the First Rhode Island Regiment who fought during battles in and around Newport, in and around New York City, and stood in line with their fellow patriots at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. At the height of the war one out of every five soldiers in the Continental Army were black. A French officer at Yorktown noted that approximately one-fourth of the American forces there included persons of color.

Manpower crunches forced state to reconsider the arming of blacks as they needed to fill their quotas to the Continental Army. This was less problematic for the northern states than it was for the southern states, particularly the Carolina's and Georgia. The entrenched belief that whites were superior to blacks and the nagging thought of slave uprisings plagued them.

Ironically George Washington's man-servant Billy Lee, served beside his master during the entire war and in some ways, was an unofficial body guard.

The Continental Navy had its share of black manpower as well. African Americans up and down the Atlantic Seaboard had been engaged in seafaring for many years prior to the war. These sailors found a home on American warships, including privateering vessels. Southerners were more willing to let blacks serve in navies as opposed to the army.

When the war ended, Northern states gradually began to amend their state constitutions prohibiting slavery based on the record

“...And I do hereby further declare all indented Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY'S Troops as soon as may be...”

- Lord Dunmore

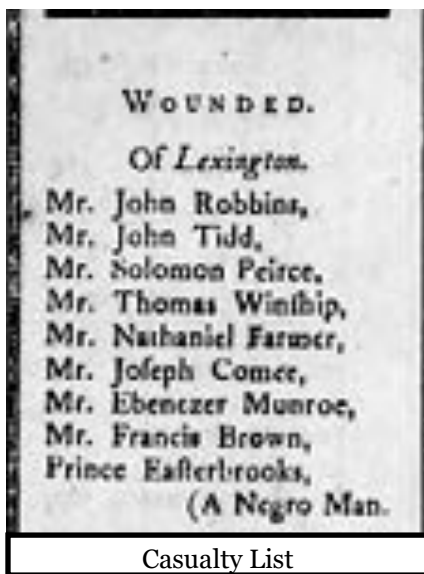
Excerpt from Lord Dunmore's Proclamation of Emancipation

of blacks who had served in the Continental Army. When Vermont entered the Union as the 14th state in 1791, it was the first state to prohibit slavery in its constitution.

With the war ending about 5,000 blacks who served in the British Army or in Loyalist Regiments left North America to find new life on the islands in the Caribbean or moved to England. Those who relocated to England had to endure prejudice and a very different climate. Some also relocated to Canada, where they too, encountered similar fates of their brethren.

Northern blacks who served in the Continental Army found that even though they served with distinction as free people they were treated as second-class citizens. Congress in 1792 effectively closed the door to blacks serving in the army declaring, that only “free able-bodied white citizens” could serve. Some white owners who had promised their enslaved blacks freedom, placed them back in bondage once the war was over.

When the Constitution was officially ratified in 1789, five of the thirteen original states granted free black males the right to vote. Eventually those rights would be lost over time.



Casualty List

There is no doubt that blacks contributed mightily to the war on both sides. Sadly the cause for which they personally strove, liberty, be it in a Continental Army uniform or that of a British Loyalist unit was still many years away in a far off future.

Activity

Activity: Have students research Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore's Proclamation and determine the irony of the uniform that was worn by his Ethiopian Regiment.