

BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE WAR OF 1812

Not unlike their forbearers a generation before during the American Revolution, African Americans had difficult decisions to make regarding supporting either the new United States or Great Britain. On the one hand if they fought for the American republic they would be fighting for a nation that legally protected the institution of slavery and denied free blacks citizenship rights on the other hand if they pitched into the British war efforts they would be seen as at best, traitors. At these crossroads were competing agenda's both of which African Americans hoped would make enslaved African Americans free and free black Americans more than second class citizens in the new nation. In the end, the results of the war changed very little and firmly left slavery in place promoting it to flourish.

During the war those African Americans who served alongside white American's in defense of the nation, did so with great bravery, as was the case with Charles Ball a freedman turned flotilla man in Joshua Barney's Mosquito Fleet which plied the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. During the American defeat at Bladensburg, Maryland in August 1814 Ball remained behind with his wounded commander, Barney, as the American forces fled in panic opening the way for the British to capture Baltimore. Ball's heroism is recalled in a heroic monument dedicated in 2014 not far from the battle field of Bladensburg, called Un-
daunted in Battle.



Illustration of Charles Ball, an African American soldier in the War of 1812
(National Park Service)

In the same Chesapeake campaign of 1814, British Admiral George Cockburn actively recruited slaves who worked on plantations in the Chesapeake region into what he called, the Colonial Marines. Cockburn believed that these slaves turned warrior and trained on Maryland's Tangier Island were a bonus for his forces, saying, "They have induced me to alter the bad opinion I had of their whole race and now I really believe that those we are training, will neither show want of zeal or courage when employed by us in attacking their old masters." Ironically the Star-Spangled Banner, the great American cultural landmark to emerge from the war, written by Francis Scott Key, who himself was a slave owner and had prosecuted in the District of Columbia abolitionists found its legacy tied to the Colonial Marines as in the third stanza of his poem, he dismisses with indignation these people of color who chose to align themselves with Great Britain.



This 1903 drawing of the Battle of New Orleans, on January 8, 1815, depicts African Americans fighting with the American Army to repel the British attack of the city (Library of Congress)

During the crucial land engagements of the Chesapeake Campaign, specifically at the battle of North Point, African Americans did rally to the American cause and helped to turn back British land forces that were intended to work in conjunction with the naval bombardment of Fort McHenry. And at the Battle of New Orleans both freedmen, slaves, and Creoles stood shoulder to shoulder with American Regulars and Tennessee militia units in January 1815 in one of the climactic battles of the war. General Andrew Jackson was in desperate need of man power and in the dire moment at hand the color of a person did not faze him.

Activity

Have students write a reflective journal about the struggle African Americans faced during the War of 1812 to either serve with the British or with the Americans. Students should consider why this internal struggle even existed.