

## The Revolution's Black Soldiers

It is hard to estimate how many free blacks and slaves served in the Royal Army, but whatever the number; it is only a fraction of those who were willing to wear **red coats**<sup>1</sup> if only the British had let them. It is not that the blacks were necessarily pro-British; first and foremost they were pro-black, prepared to support the side that held out the greatest hope for them to improve their lot. That side was the British, as their response to **Dunmore's proclamation**<sup>2</sup> showed. But freedom, the price for black help in the war, was a price neither the British nor their **loyalist**<sup>3</sup> allies were prepared to pay.

As black soldiers were becoming a rarity in the British army, their numbers were increasing on the American side. When Congress instructed the states in September 1776 to raise 88 infantry battalions, few African-Americans were left in the Continental Army<sup>4</sup>. Southern opposition had resulted in the exclusion of most black men. However, the realities of war forced Congress and the states to reevaluate their policies.

Despite bonuses and **bounties**<sup>5</sup>, recruits were slow to sign up. To bring the Continental Army up to strength, Congress ordered the states in January 1777 to fill their units "by drafts, from their militia, or in any other way." As Virginia was unable to meet her quota of 10,200 men with volunteers, a draft based on the existing militia lists had to be considered. The Militia Act of the summer of 1775 had required that "all free male persons, hired servants, and apprentices between the ages of 16 and 50 years . . . be enrolled or forced into companies." This excluded slaves by definition, but free blacks were registered to serve, though "without arms."

Registration on a militia list was one thing, serving in the Continental Army quite another. The militia usually served short-term and hardly ever outside state boundaries. The Continental Army wanted long-term soldiers who served wherever needed, an unappealing prospect for Virginians at a time of heightened slave unrest and the threat of wholesale desertion of their black property to the British.

The lottery-based draft law enacted in May 1777 greatly increased the number of blacks in the Virginia Line. Free blacks were the first to be called up, as Virginia tightened the enforcement

---

<sup>1</sup> red coat - a British soldier. The British soldiers would often wear red coats as seen in many paintings.

<sup>2</sup> as we discussed a proclamation offering freedom to slaves who fought for the British

<sup>3</sup> someone loyal to Britain

<sup>4</sup> the army formed after the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War by the colonies that became the United States of America

<sup>5</sup> a monetary gift or reward, typically given by a government

of the draft. "It was thought that they could best be spared," Governor Thomas Nelson informed George Washington.

Very few free blacks were as wealthy as James Harris of Charles City County, who was able to **afford a substitute**<sup>6</sup> to fight in his place in 1780; most had no choice but to join up. But slave owners could afford substitutes and, when faced with a draft notice, many a master presented a slave to the recruiting officer for a freeman and a substitute. Many a runaway told the nearest recruiter that he was a freeman, anxious to fight.

More often than not, he was accepted without too many questions; the army was always short of men. General Washington himself had opened the door for African-Americans in his general orders of January 12, 1777, in which he instructed recruiters to "enlist none but Freeman," the implication being that the recruit could be black just as long as he was free. To put an end to such unpatriotic behavior on the part of some masters and to stop the self-emancipation of slaves, the Virginia Legislature amended the 1775 Militia Law in June 1777 by "forbidding any recruiting officers within this Commonwealth to enlist any negro or mulatto into the service of this, or either of the United States, until such Negro shall produce a certificate ... that he is a freeman."



During the winter of 1777-78, dozens of black Virginians served in every one of the state regiments, freezing, starving, and dying at Valley Forge. By February 1778, the survivors were marching with white comrades through the snow, practicing Baron von Steuben's as yet unfamiliar drill. When the Steuben-trained army proved its mettle at Monmouth in June, about 700 blacks fought side-by-side with whites. Eight weeks later, an army report listed 755

blacks in the Continental Army, including 138 Blacks in the Virginia Line.

Partially in response to Monmouth, Sir Henry Clinton, who had replaced Howe in May 1778, shifted the theater of war to the South. On June 30, 1779, Clinton promised in his Philippsburg Declaration that "every NEGRO who shall desert the Rebel Standard, [is granted] full security to follow within these Lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper." In response, tens of thousands of slaves fled behind British lines.

---

<sup>6</sup> hired soldiers were commonplace amongst the wealthy even through the Civil War

In May 1780 Charleston fell, and most of the Virginia Line were taken prisoners. When General Horatio Gates lost at Camden in August, Virginia lay virtually defenseless before Lord Cornwallis. The military situation was serious enough that a debate concerning the arming of slaves began in the new capital of Richmond. There was ample precedence for such a step.



New Jersey's Militia Act of May 1777 permitted masters to enlist slaves as substitutes. New Hampshire opened the door to the recruitment of slaves to fill the state's Continental quota in the fall of that year, and Connecticut soon followed suit. In October 1780 an all black unit, the 2nd Company, 4th Connecticut Regiment, was formed. That company, some 48 black privates and NCOs under four white officers, existed until November 1782.

In January 1778, General Washington had given his approval to Rhode Island's plan to raise an entire regiment of black slaves. Over the next five years 250 former slave and freedmen served in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. Massachusetts'

all-black unit, the Bucks of America under Samuel Middleton, the only black commissioned officer in the Continental Army, probably also had its origins early in 1778. Similar to Rhode Island, the state bought and emancipated slaves willing to become soldiers. In October 1780, even Maryland accepted "any able-bodied slave between 16 and 40 years of age, who voluntarily enters into service . . . with the consent and agreement of his master." New York would begin to recruit slaves in March 1781.

Although the white sails of Major General Alexander Leslie's fleet with 2,500 British troops on board had already appeared in Hampton Roads, the Virginia Legislature refused to arm slaves. Instead it voted in October 1780 to grant every recruit who enlisted for the duration of the war 300 acres of land and the choice between a healthy black male slave between the ages of 10 and 30 years or £60 in specie. The slave bonus would be raised by a special tax on planters who owned more than 20 slaves. The use of slaves as bounties later became known as "Sumter's Law," after General Thomas Sumter, who began offering Tory slaves as enlistment bonuses in South Carolina in April 1781.

Military necessity made the Continental Army and the Virginia State Line an integrated force. Observed a Hessian officer: "The Negro can take the field instead of his master, and therefore **no regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance**, and among them are able-bodied and strong fellows." What the diarist did not report was that every Hessian regiment contained black soldiers as well.

Britain's German auxiliaries had disembarked in New York during the early summer of 1776; by March 1777 they had begun to recruit black volunteers. Facing manpower shortages as severe as those of the British, they quickly tapped the labor pool of runaways. Hundreds served as laborers or servants, but the **Germans readily put blacks in uniform as well.**

Most of the 115 African-Americans on Hessen-Cassel and Hessen-Hanau regimental rosters came from southern states. Many were very young, mere children of 11, 12, 13 years, who served as drummers and fifers, freeing up older, taller whites for service with the musket. Hessian records from 1777 to 1783 show 83 black drummers as well as 3 fifers.

On the eve of departure for Europe, the Hessians discharged some two dozen black men who wanted to stay in America. About 30 soldiers plus an unknown number of officer servants not on regimental rosters, some with their wives and children, crossed the Atlantic for Cassel, where they arrived in late 1783.

A contingent of Brunswick troops under Baron Friedrich Adolf von Riedesel that had been captured at Saratoga spent four years as part of the Convention Army interned around Charlottesville. In February 1781 the exchanged Baron Riedesel encouraged his officers to recruit black soldiers from among the refugees in New York. Among them was James Barks of Williamsburg, possibly a former slave of Norfolk merchant James Parker and a survivor of Dunmore's regiment.

In France, Africans had served in the armed forces since the late 17th century. When the **Comte de Rochambeau's** expeditionary corps stepped ashore in Newport in 1780, it counted at least one black soldier in its ranks: Jean-Baptiste Pandoua from Madagascar, who had joined the Bourbonnais regiment as a musician in 1777. He deserted in June 1782, while his regiment was quartered in Virginia. Unlike other participants in the war; the French did not, could not, recruit American blacks. After all, they had come to aid the Americans, not to steal their property.