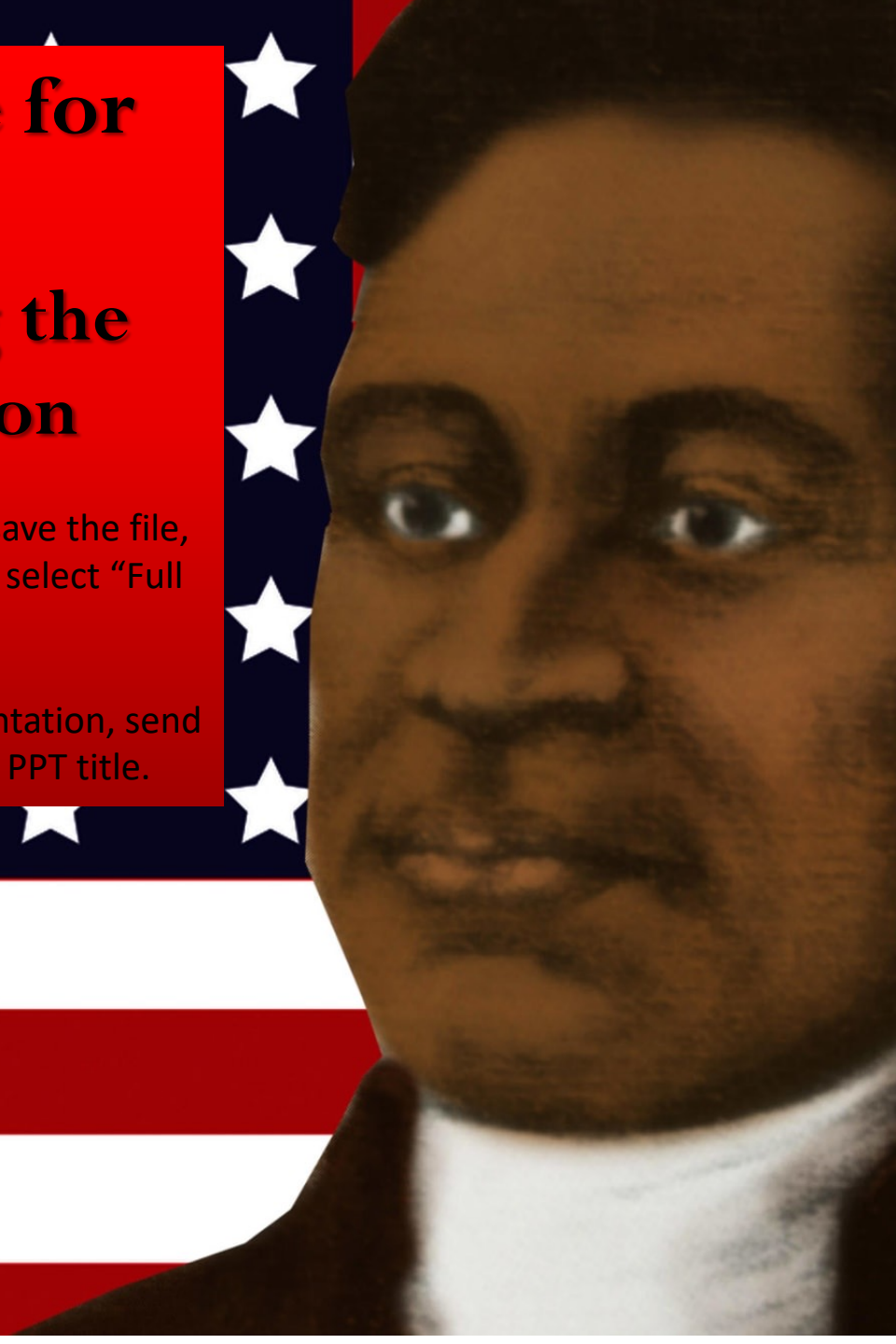


A Parallel Struggle for Freedom: Black People During the American Revolution

To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode

To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to **CarolinaK12@unc.edu**; include the PPT title.



What comes to mind when you think about the

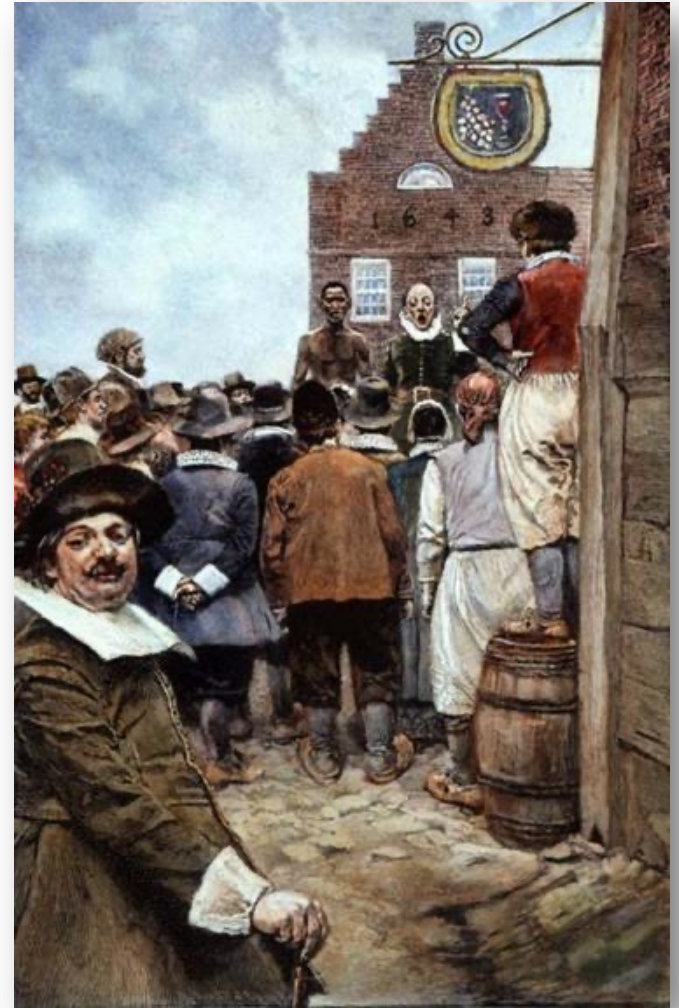
Revolutionary War



Enslavement During Colonial America

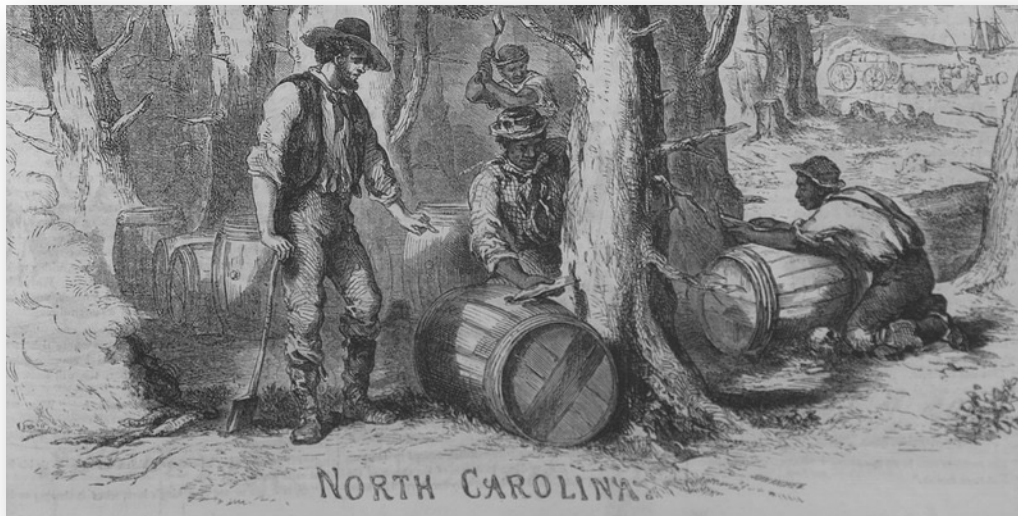
- While slavery existed in every colony at one time or another, the economic structure of farming (i.e., tobacco & rice) in the 1700s South grew to depend on the forced labor of Africans.
- This growing demand for forced human-labor led to a prosperous “Slave Trade” from Africa to the colonies, building the economic wealth of many white colonists throughout the 1700s-1800s.
- At the onset of the War for Independence, at least **500,000** Black people lived in the colonies, of whom around 90% were enslaved.

Source



*First auction of enslaved people in
New Amsterdam*

- African captives faced harsh conditions in colonial America.
 - Work hours were long & grueling; living conditions were crude/insufficient; abuse from enslavers was common; families were often broken apart
 - For those enslaved during this time, there fewer places to escape to, since none of the colonies outlawed slavery prior to the Revolutionary War.
 - There was a small chance a captive would be freed when their enslaver died, but it was equally likely that their family would be split up & sent to the enslavers surviving family members. ([Source](#))



Engraving illustrates the fabrication of turpentine as enslaved men drain sap from trees into barrels. ([Source](#))

RESISTANCE OF THOSE ENSLAVED

Despite the system into which they were forced, those enslaved resisted their bondage in many ways.

- **Revolt and uprisings** | Dangerous & rare, but they did occur (i.e., Stono Rebellion, South Carolina, 1739)
- **Purchase freedom** | Some enslaved people managed to work & save money to purchase their freedom.
- **Escape** | A complex & risky decision, some enslaved people attempted escape. Some who were successful lived in **maroon communities**, such as in the **Great Dismal Swamp**.
- **Maintaining Culture & Humanity** | Black people developed a vibrant culture that embodied a combination of African traditions & newly forged communities
 - adopted Christian worship & made it their own; storytelling (as oral tradition & for sharing critical information); music, dance, and other forms of emotional sustenance

? What were some additional (perhaps less obvious) forms of resistance?

“Free Persons of Color” in Colonial America

- “Free persons of color” or “free Blacks” were terms used to describe people who were not white nor enslaved. It included African Americans, Native Americans, and people who were bi/multi- racial.
- A small number (9%-10%) of Black people in Colonial America were free.
 - While America’s free Black population would grow in later years, it generally increased far more slowly than both the white & the enslaved population.
- How was a Black person before the American Revolution able to be “legally” free?
 - They were often bi-racial, free at birth if their mother was white or a free person of color herself. (Colonial law generally provided that a child's status followed that of its mother.)
 - Purchased their freedom and/or the freedom of family members.
 - Sometimes, elderly persons, someone sick or disabled, or in someway deemed "past labor," were discarded & thus “free.”
 - Very seldom was an enslaved person manumitted (freed) by a conscience-stricken enslaver.

Giving Credit Where Credit is Due

- The forced work of enslaved people & the contributions of free Black people supported the colonies & should be equally credited with America's eventual success & prosperity.
- Despite discriminatory laws, attitudes & institutions during colonial times, Black people played a pivotal role in the formation of American society, challenging and even setting precedents for race relations.



A Parallel Struggle for FREEDOM

The slave trade is “the most shocking violation of the law of nature...What is a trifling three-penny duty on tea compared to the inestimable blessings of liberty to one captive?”

-James Otis

- By the 1760's, colonists began to wage a war of words & protests against the British.
- The Declaration of Independence became a symbol of human rights and personal freedom.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Preamble to the Declaration of Independence

- At the time he wrote it, Thomas Jefferson enslaved over 200 men, women and children.

How do you think enslaved people and free Blacks would respond to white colonists' calls for freedom, liberty & human rights?

“Whether fighting for the British cause or for the American cause, African Americans were fighting for freedom. It was a freedom struggle.”

~James O. Horton

[The role of Black people] “in the Revolution can be best understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle.”

~Benjamin Quarles



To the Honorable Council & House of Representatives
for the State of Massachusetts—
January 13th 1777—

The Petition of a great number of Negroes who are detained
in a state of Slavery, in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country—
Humbly shewing—

That your Petitioners apprehend that they have, in common
with all other Men, a natural & unalienable right to that freedom which
the great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all Mankind,
& which they have never forfeited by any compact or agreement
whatsoever— But they were unjustly dragged, by the cruel hands of
Slave, from their dearest friends & home of them even born from
the bowels of their tender Parents— Born a poor, wretched &
plundered Country— & in violation of the Laws of Nature & of Justice
& indignance of all the tender feelings of humanity, brought hither
to be sold like Beasts of Burthen & like them condemned to slavery
for life— Among a People professing the mild Religion of Jesus—
A People not insensible of the sweet & rational Freedom— Nor
wondering to regret the unjust endeavors of others, to reduce them to a
state of bondage & subjection— Your Honors need not to be informed
that a life of Slavery, like that of your petitioners, deprives of every
social privilege, of every thing requisite to render life even tolerable
is far worse than nonexistence— In imitation of the laudable example
of the good People of this State, your Petitioners have long & patiently
waited the event of Petition after Petition by them presented to the
legislative Body of this State, & are not but with grief reflect that
their success has been but too slender— They can not but regret of the
astonishment that it has never been considered, that every principle
which Justice has acted on the course of her unhappy
difficulties with Great-Britain, yields stronger than a thousand
arguments in favor of your Petitioners— They therefore humbly
beseech your Honors, to give this Petition its due weight & consideration
Keep an Aid of the Legislature to be grasped whereby they may
be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural
right of all Men— & their Children (who were born in this land
of Liberty) may not be held as Slaves after they arrive at the age of
twenty one years— In may, this State (no longer changeable with the
uncertainty of acting themselves, the part which they condemn by
others) be proposed in their present glorious struggle for Liberty, &
have those blessings secured to them by Heaven, of which our
neighbours can not wish to deprive them—

Petitions

- As white colonists began to wage a war of words and resistance against the British colonial government, Black people also called for their own personal freedom.
- Their poems, letters, and petitions used the rhetoric of the age to appeal for slavery's abolition.

On Jan. 13, 1777, abolitionist [Prince Hall](#) and seven other African Americans presented a petition (pictured left) for freedom to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives.

Running Away



Two Dollars Reward.

Ran-away from the

Subscriber in Middletown, on the 12th ult. a Negro boy named *QUACO*; he is lively and active, about 19 years of age; had on a blue upper jacket, and a light cloth colour'd one under it, an oznabrig shirt and trowsers, a black neckcloth with a collar under it; he was seen going toward Colchester. Whoever will take up said Negro, and return him to me, or secure him, and give me notice that I may have him, shall have the above reward, and all necessary charges paid by

SAMUEL WILLIS.

Middletown, Nov. 1. 1772.

- The Revolutionary period offered increased opportunities for self-emancipation, and thus more enslaved people attempted escape/escaped.
- Historians estimate between 55,000 and 100,000 (9% -17% of all enslaved people) ran to freedom during these years.
- Some hoped to join loved ones they had been separated from. Others ran to the British lines or formed maroon communities where they could live freely among themselves.

Running Away

- As early as the 1690s Black people fled south to St. Augustine, Florida.
- By the 1700s, North Carolina also had a reputation as a haven for escapees:

“Fugitive slaves from VA & NC turned the Great Dismal Swamp into a sanctuary. The swamp was an ideal hideout. According to a 1780s traveler, runaways were ‘perfectly safe, and with the greatest facility elude the most diligent search of their pursuers.’ Blacks had lived there ‘for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves...upon corn, hogs, and fowls...’ The runaways cultivated small plots of land that were ‘perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around...’”



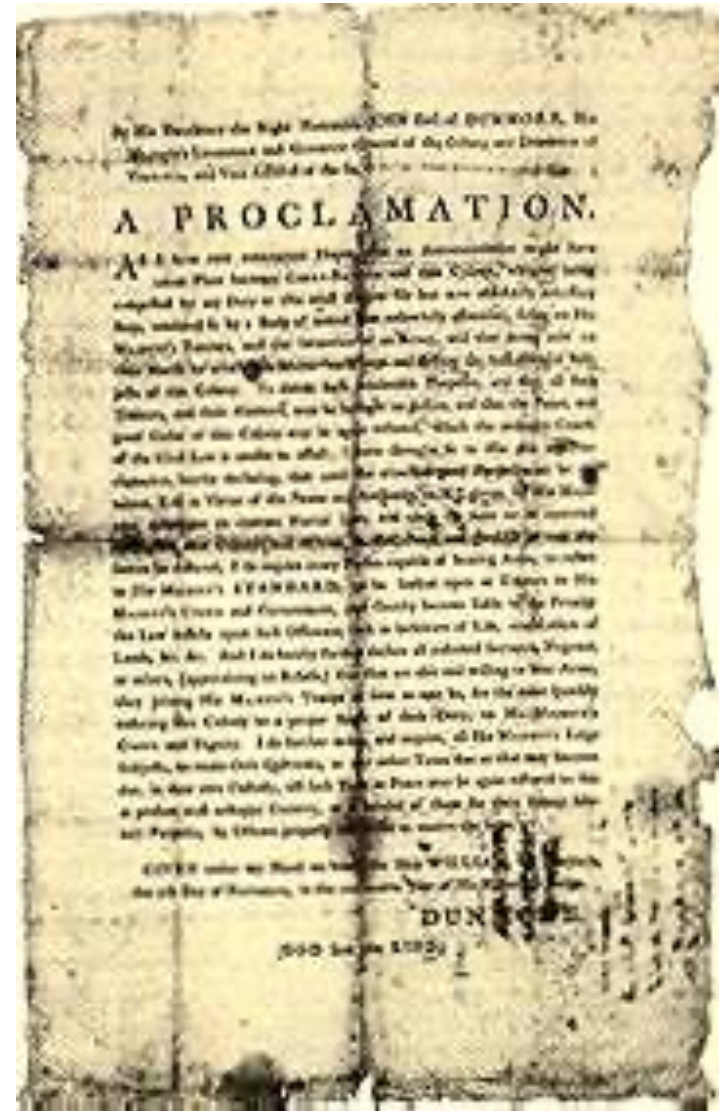
- The decision to flee was not an easy one and the risks were tremendous.
 - Those who ran away risked making the situation harder for family or friends left behind.
 - Escape was not easy. Dehydration, starvation, injury, exposure, and numerous other challenges faced runaways.
 - Enslaved people who were captured risked being tortured, executed, deported to the West Indies, & more.
- Even those who were successful in escape still faced challenges.
 - Those escaping to British lines often ended up in refugee camps that were poorly equipped to handle so many people.
 - Escapees lived with the trauma of enslavement, and the constant threat that they could be captured.

(Source)



Running Away (Encouraged by British)

- British Loyalists *were* aware of the benefit enslaved persons escaping & joining their side could bring.
- On Nov. 7, 1775 the royal Governor of Virginia, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, issued a statement (**Dunmore's Proclamation**) promising freedom to any person enslaved to a Patriot who would help the British.
- In May 1776, the NC General Assembly appointed a committee "to enquire of ways & means ...to prevent the desertion of slaves."



Revolt

The British intend to “to let loose
Indians on our Frontiers, and to
raise the Negroes against us...”

*~Joseph Hewes, a North Carolina delegate
to the Continental Congress, 1775*

- It was recognized by both Patriots & Loyalists that the pending War would create a period of instability – which they worried could heighten not only running away, but the risk of revolts by enslaved people.

“If American & Britain should come to hostile rupture I am afraid an Insurrection among the slaves may and will be promoted. In one of our Counties lately a few of those unhappy wretches met together and chose a leader who was to conduct them when English troops should arrive-which they foolishly thought would be very soon and that by revolting to them they should be rewarded with their freedom.” ~James Madison, 1774

Revolt

- While uprisings were not common in the colonies, attempts were made - & they shattered incorrect stereotypes of compliant, contented enslaved people.
 - In Gloucester County, Virginia in 1663, known as “The Servants Plot,” white and black indentured servants rebelled against the colony’s exploitative tobacco cultivation industry.
 - In 1712 New York City, around 23 enslaved men armed themselves & killed at least 9 white enslavers.
 - In 1739, South Carolina, up to 100 Black people participated in the Stono Rebellion, the largest uprising in the American colonies.
- While no American revolts were successful, and they led to increasingly restrictive and inhumane laws, they did increase fear in enslavers.
- In response to such fears, in 1774, the North Carolina Provincial Congress banned the importation of enslaved people.

Why would a Black person,
enslaved or free, join...

The Loyalists?

The Patriots?

Joining the Loyalists

- Many Black people looked to the King's troops as liberators & flocked to British lines.
- Within a month of **Dunmore's Proclamation**, hundreds of Black men had joined the Loyalist fight in what was called "**Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment**".
- It is estimated that throughout 1775-1776, Dunmore had hundreds of Black men under his command.

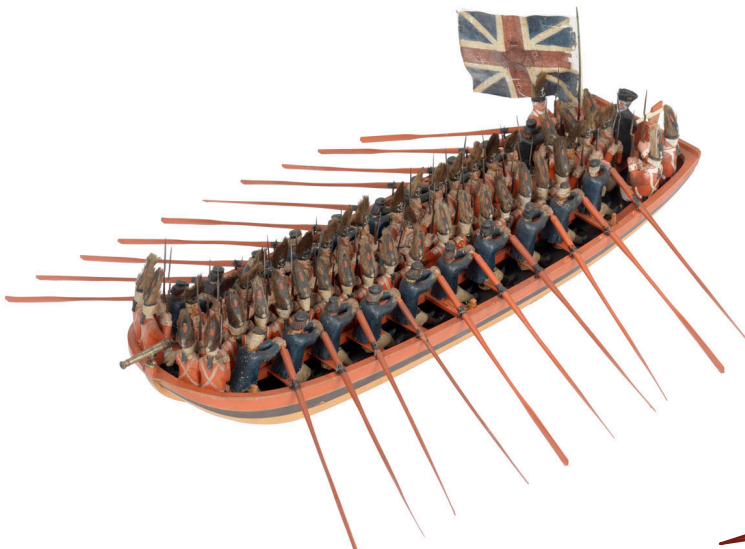
21 Ethiopian Regiment members from North Carolina:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Moses Campbell | 12. Quash Quince |
| 2. Moses Caswell | 13. Peter Quamina |
| 3. Abner Cromwell | 14. Thomas Peters |
| 4. Anthony Ferguson | 15. David Saunders |
| 5. Peter Johnson | 16. Murphy Steele |
| 6. Jacob Howard | 17. John Thomas |
| 7. Solomon Howard | 18. Toby Tismore |
| 8. Abraham Lesslie | 19. Harry Williams |
| 9. Daniel Moore | 20. Joseph Williams |
| 10. Samuel Moore | 21. William Williams |
| 11. Abram Quince | |



Formerly enslaved, Cornelius Titus (aka Colonel Tye) fought for the Loyalists & led his own "Black Brigade," the greatest guerilla fighting force of the Revolutionary War. [Source](#)

- In NC, when the British fleet dropped anchor off Cape Fear in early 1776, many enslaved North Carolinians fled there.
- The muster rolls of the British stationed off Cape Fear recorded the names of Black people who “deserted from the Rebels” or “fled for Protection.”
 - The HMS Scorpion, for instance, reported that thirty-six Black people, including at least eleven women, came aboard on March 3, 1776.
- In addition to Black Loyalist contributors on the field and in the British Navy, others were organized into the “Black Pioneers,” providing support through building fortifications, cooking, laundering, etc.
- Black Pioneers also provided valuable intelligence to the British regarding the roads and waterways of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.



“The [N]egroes are deserting from the Sea Coast... Three of mine were intercepted on their way and are now in Goal [jail].”

~William Hooper, one of North Carolina's signers of the Declaration of Independence



- Dunmore's Proclamation & its instigation to desert, join the British, or even rebel became official British policy.
- It is estimated that 20,000 Black people aided the British.
- However, those who successfully made it to British lines often had to take shelter in refugee camps that were poorly equipped to handle so many people. Here many women and children suffered from starvation, disease and death.

Joining the Patriots

- Why would a Black man join the Patriots? Some believed that supporting America's independence would mean that "all men are created equal" would grow to include them after the war as well.
- They wanted better lives, hoping service might bring them greater rights; success; freedom from slavery; income; land grants; and/or other opportunities.



*T. Payton, Black Continental Soldier
(National Military Park NC)*

Joining the Patriots

- Black men had long served in colonial militias and probably even saw action during the French and Indian War. They were often relegated to support roles, but nonetheless made important contributions.
- General George Washington and other colonists (especially those who enslaved people) opposed recruiting Black men, both free and especially those enslaved, into the Continental Army.
- As war with Britain broke out in the spring of 1775, however, Massachusetts patriots needed every man they could get, thus a number of Black men – enslaved and free -- served bravely at Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill.



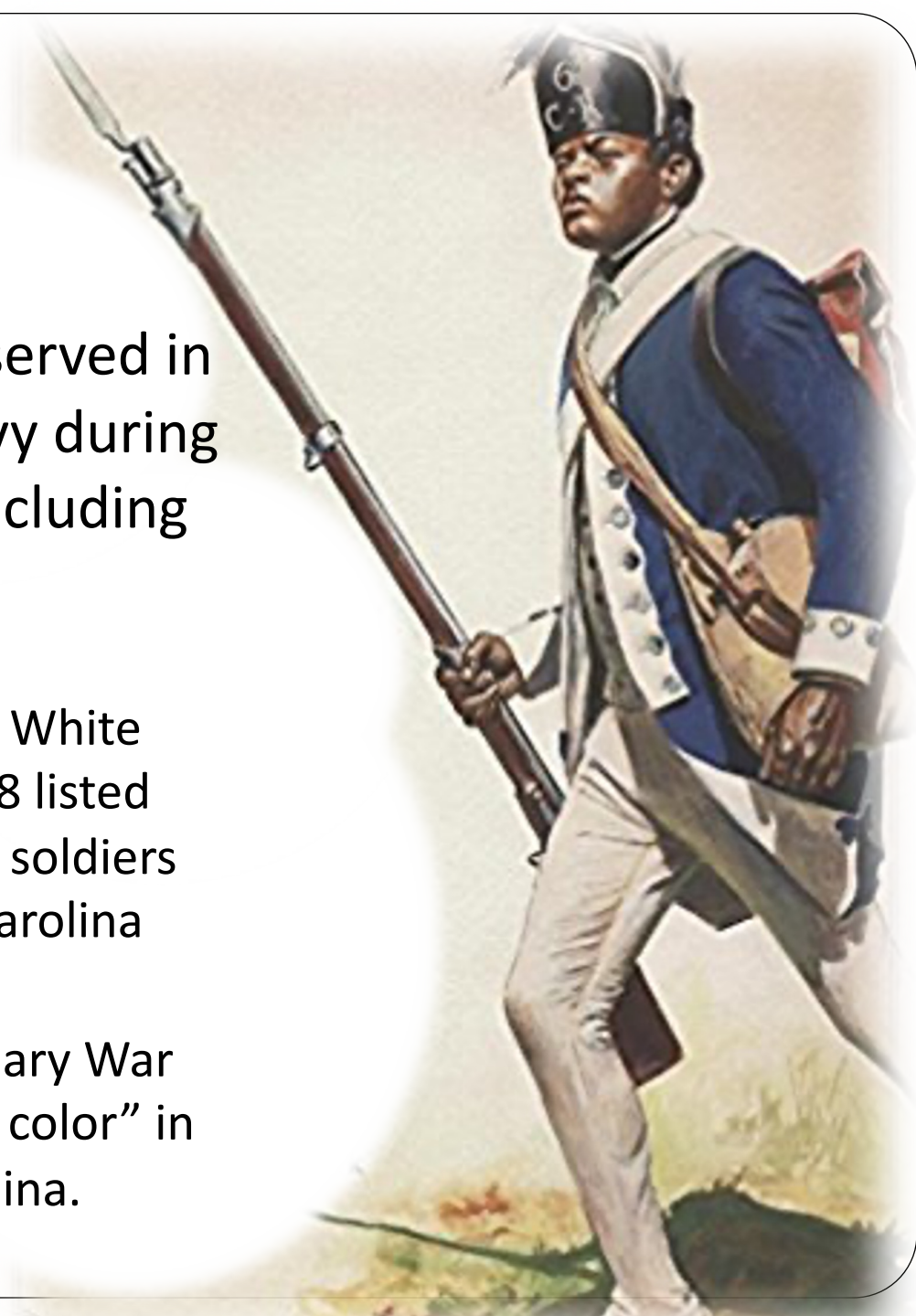
Salem Poor, who was formerly enslaved but purchased his freedom in 1769, performed so heroically at Bunker Hill that 14 officers wrote to the MA legislature, commending him as a "brave and gallant Soldier" who deserved reward.

- After Dunmore's Proclamation, General Washington relented & enlisted free Blacks to forestall their joining the British side.
- Hundreds of Black people fought in battle, as well as served as laborers, spies, guides, musicians, servants, weapons crafters, and more.
- By 1778, the Continental Army had dwindled to 18,000 due to disease and desertion. This forced Washington to approve plans for a **Black Regiment** of free Blacks and enslaved people.



Black Patriots

- About 5,000 black soldiers served in the Continental Army & Navy during the American Revolution, including many from North Carolina.
 - For instance, a Muster role for Continental Army Stationed at White Plains New York in August 1778 listed 755 black soldiers; 58 of these soldiers were serving with the North Carolina Line
 - At least 133 known Revolutionary War Veterans were “free people of color” in Coastal/Southeast North Carolina.



The Harlowe Patriots

The Harlowe Patriots were free men of color from the community of Harlowe, North Carolina that fought in the American Revolution.

The 14 Harlowe Patriots

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Martin Black | 8. Simeon Moore |
| 2. Isaac Carter | 9. George Perkins |
| 3. John Carter | 10. Isaac Perkins |
| 4. Joshua Carter | 11. Hezekiah Stringer |
| 5. William Dove | 12. Aaron Spelman |
| 6. John Gregory | 13. Asa Spelman |
| 7. Absalom Martin | 14. Mingo Stringer |





John Chavis

- Born free in Oxford, NC, around 1763, Chavis enlisted in December 1778 in the Fifth Virginia Regiment, serving honorably for three years in the Revolutionary War.
- He went on to become a prominent minister and educator, teaching both Black and white students in Raleigh.

“Tell them that if I am Black I am free born American & a revolutionary soldier & therefore out not to be thrown entirely out of the scale of notice.”

John Chavis in an 1832 letter to Senator Willie P. Mangum

Black Patriots

- In North Carolina free Black men were subject to Patriot militia service requirements.
- In some cases enslaved people served as substitutes in the war for their enslavers, often on the promise that their freedom would be granted for doing so.
 - For example, Ned Griffen, “a man of mixed blood,” was to win his freedom by substituting for his master, William Kitchen, a soldier in the North Carolina Brigade. Ned did so, but upon his discharge, Kitchen took back his offer and sold Ned. Ned petitioned the General Assembly in 1784 and was granted his freedom “forever hereafter.”
 - In many cases, enlistment bonuses and pay would go straight to their enslavers.

Everyday Resistance

“I was free, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land.”

- Despite the various pathways to freedom that enslaved people risked, systemic barriers and dangerous threats to them and to loved ones kept many in their situation.
 - *How would an enslaved person survive & gain economic stability? How would they know where to go or what to do, if they had limited knowledge of the area beyond their place of enslavement? What would happen if they were captured? If they had family, could they survive together? Would they ever be able to live life in the open?*
- Not taking the risk of escape or rebellion is understandable, but this doesn't mean that enslaved people were compliant, docile, or content.
- Enslaved people weighed their individual circumstances, and even when unable to escape, still resisted in everyday acts of defiance.

Everyday Resistance

- slowing work, feigning illness, breaking tools, or sabotaging production
- theft
- secretly learning to read/write
- secret worship
- working on the side & saving money
- maintaining culture & community
- singing, dancing, & other forms of creative expression



“What right have we to expect oppressed peoples in the past to spill their blood on the barricades when they were fully aware of the hopelessness of victory and of the terrible consequences of defeat?” ~Eugene Genovese

Black Contributions

- Regardless of which side they joined, Black people – free, enslaved - men, women, & children – contributed in many ways:
 - Soldiers
 - Spies/double agents
 - Servants to officers
 - Served as laborers & craftsmen
 - “Pioneers” who built fortifications, repaired/cleared roads, made weapons & ammunition, shod horses, etc..
 - Provided support roles, such as cooks, launderers, powder boys, etc.
 - Guides (due to familiarity w/ the landscape)
 - Musicians
 - Serving as thought leaders & abolitionists
- Black labor was foundational to the War & the growth of America and our economy.



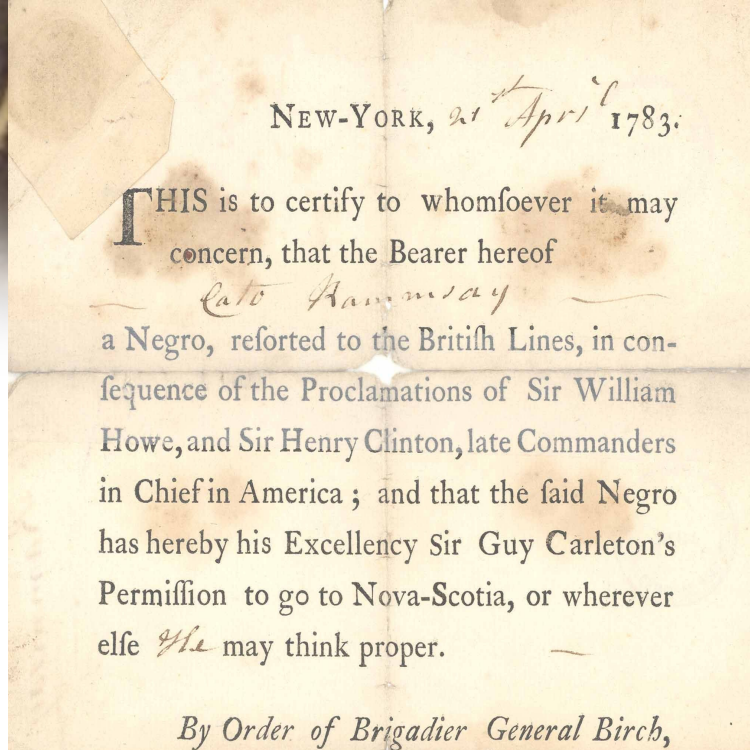
James Forten, a “Founding Father,” was a “free person of color” in Philadelphia, PA. At the age of 14, he volunteered as a “powder boy” on a British ship. After the Rev. War, he went on to become a successful businessman and leader of Philadelphia's African American community. He was a prominent abolitionist, suffragist, & civil rights activist.



After the War

*“This dreadful rumor [of
reenslavement] filled us
with inexpressible anguish
and terror, especially when
we saw our old masters,
coming form Virginia,
North Carolina, and other
parts, and seizing upon
their slaves in the streets...”*

~Boston King



NEW-YORK, 21 April 1783.

HIS is to certify to whomsoever it may concern, that the Bearer hereof
Cato Hamonday
a Negro, resorted to the British Lines, in consequence of the Proclamations of Sir William Howe, and Sir Henry Clinton, late Commanders in Chief in America ; and that the said Negro has hereby his Excellency Sir Guy Carleton's Permission to go to Nova-Scotia, or wherever else *He* may think proper.

By Order of Brigadier General Birch,

Sources

- PBS Africans in America
- A History of African Americans in North Carolina by Jeffrey Crow, Paul Escott, & Flora Hatley Wadelington
- The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina by Jeffrey Crow
- Slavery and the Making of America
- Free African Americans in the Colonial Era
- Honoring Our Patriots (dar.org)
- Answering the Cry for Freedom: Stories of African Americans and the American Revolution, by Gretchen Woelfle
- <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/usrevolution/african-americans>