



Black Soldiers in the Revolutionary War

Introduction

These words from the Declaration of Independence are familiar to many Americans: “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.” These words helped stoke the fires of British North American colonists to fight for freedom due to the perceived political, economic, and social injustices made against them by Great Britain. It is ironic that these words about freedom were written by a Virginian slave owner, and future president, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson owned hundreds of enslaved persons of African descent who, “labored for his happiness”. Jefferson was not alone. Many of the Founding Fathers, such as George Washington and James Madison, enslaved men, women, and children. They pursued their own freedom while denying the rights and liberties to persons of African descent both enslaved and free.

Regardless, black British North American colonists, free and enslaved, believed in the cause of liberty with its hopes and promises for a better future. Initially, over 5000 free and enslaved black colonials fought with the Continental Army, even when such freedoms and liberties were not promised to them. In contrast, around 20,000 free and enslaved black colonials found the British promise of freedom to be more convincing, and fought as loyalist soldiers under the royal banner. In the view of enslaved and free black colonials, the Revolutionary War became a test of what it meant to be free, and their experiences explored what it meant to be American.

Research Questions to Consider

What was the conflict and compromise for free and enslaved blacks fighting for the British or the Patriots?

Are there individual soldiers, spies or participants, on either side, who has an interesting story?

Did the war change the perceptions and status of free and enslaved African Americans?

How did the war impact the institution of slavery in the new nation?





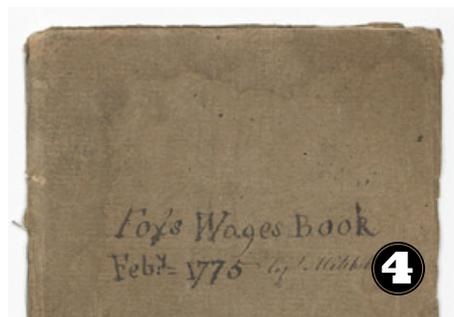
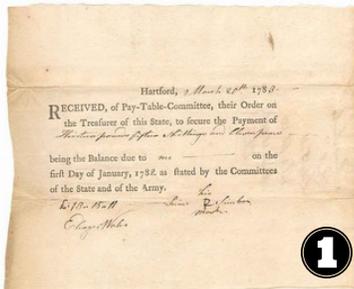
Secondary and Primary Text Resources:

1. Adams, Catherine and Elizabeth H. Peck. *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
2. Gilbert, Alan. *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
3. Holton, Woody. *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2009.
4. Nash, Gary B. "African Americans in the Early Republic." *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 12-16.
5. Smithsonian Institution. *The American Revolution: A Visual History*. New York: DK Publishing, 2016.

NMAAHC Resources:

List of Resources:

- 1) Voucher of payment to Private Prince Simbo
- 2) Receipt for blankets given to soldiers Prince Simbo and Sampson Freeman
- 3) Ledger of supply costs for eleven Revolutionary War soldiers
- 4) Wage book for the slave trading ship Fox captained by Robert Mitchell



Pages 1- 2 Photo Banner:

The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781. (Courtesy of Tate Britain)

All items and images are part of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, unless otherwise noted.

To find these resources and more information, visit:

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/collection>