

Fighting for Someone Else's Freedom:

What was the Role of Slaves in the American Revolution?

Students of American history courses spend significant time studying the lead up to and events of the Revolutionary War, but they are missing a key component of the story. American history textbooks and state standards omit a rich portion of this historical period by not addressing the role of slaves and African Americans in the American Revolution. Additionally, history courses neglect to address the experience of slaves after the war and the impact the service and later manumission of slaves had on the global slave trade.

The American Revolution, however, was not the first conflict in which African Americans fought on North American soil. Laws were passed like that of the Virginia House of Burgesses banning blacks from participating in the state militia in 1639 and again in 1705. These laws prevented “Negro[es], mullatto[s], or Indian[s] from holding civil, military, or ecclesiastical office.”¹ However, when a situation became dire and resources restricted, laws were reshaped to allow African Americans and slaves to serve. “Although general policy in early America was to exclude Negroes from militia service, manpower shortages often outweighed the reluctance to give the Negro a gun.”² Blacks fought in many conflicts between the British colonies and Native Americans and other European nations with an estimated 5,000 black soldiers fighting in the French-American War.³

Students must address the paradox of colonial leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson simultaneously owning slaves while fighting for freedom from the British crown. In a letter to her husband, Abigail Adams writes, “it always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me. Fight ourselves for what we are daily [ebbing] and plundering from those who have as good a right freedom as we have.”⁴ Additionally, historians report that Prince Whipple, a slave who was an oarsman for General Washington as he crossed the Delaware River, said to his master, “you are going to fight for your liberty...but I have none to fight for.”⁵

The United States has a long history of slavery. Although not the recipient of the majority of enslaved Africans in the western world as only 5% of Africans landed on the shores of the New World, the population of slaves in North America increased

1 Blacks though history served heroically in military. (2007, February 14). Retrieved from http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/new-pittsburgh-courier-city-edition/mi_8152/is_20070214/blacks-history-served-heroically-military/ai_n50649668/pg_2/?tag=content;coll

2 Quarles, B. (1996). *The Negro in the American Revolution*. The University of North Carolina Press, p. 8.

3 *Making freedom: sourcebook 2. A Song Full of Hope: 1770-1830*. (2004). Heinemann Educational Books

4 PBS (1998). *Africans in America*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h23t.html>

5 Henderson, J. (n.d.). *New Hampshire Individuals of Note*. Retrieved from http://www.johnjhenderson.com/Notables/Biographies/prince_whipple.htm

dramatically.⁶ More enslaved African men were brought to the New World than women, however, the population of enslaved women increased most rapidly in North America. As a result, North America quickly had a “self-reproducing” slave population.⁷ The slave population was able to grow and slaves became a major part of the American economy and social structure. Only 25% of colonists owned slaves, but they were nonetheless a critical piece to the economy of the colonies. Most slaves worked on farms, especially tobacco farms in Maryland and Virginia, but others worked as general laborers and craftsmen.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, enslaved Africans could be found throughout the colonies. In addition to these enslaved Africans was a smaller population of free African Americans. In 1775, African Americans made up about 500,000 of the approximately 2.5 million people living in the colonies. (Modern Curriculum Press, 1994) As the conflict drew near, African Americans were banned from joining either side of the conflict for fear that arming slaves would result in resistance and rebellions. Additionally, most African Americans were slaves and their enlistment would violate the property rights of masters. Would masters be compensated for their loss of property if their slaves were to join the army? The dominant reason for prohibiting the enlistment of slaves in the army, however, was fear. As stated by a group of Carolina slave owners, “there must be great caution used [in the military employment of Negroes] lest our slaves when armed might become our masters.”⁸ Although state militias would allow African Americans to fight sooner, the national army was reluctant to allow black soldiers, as it had to appeal to the colonists up and down the east coast.⁹

The Boston Massacre in March of 1770 showed the early conflict between colonists and British soldiers. This event displayed the growing tension between the two groups and resulted in the death of five men, one of whom was an African American named Crispus Attucks. This event marked the first black casualty of the oncoming war, although it wouldn't officially begin for five more years and fueled anti-British sentiment among the colonists. Although Crispus Attucks was a free black American, he would be somewhat of an exception. Once the war began, British and American leaders would offer a trade of military service for freedom.

African Americans served alongside the Patriots in the Battles of Lexington & Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill. Peter Salem, a freed slave, fought at the Battle of Concord and later at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He is remembered, in part, because he is believed to be the African American soldier in Trumbull's painting of the Battle of Bunker Hill. Salem Poor is another African American who fought in these early battles.

6 Coclanis, Peter. "Slavery and the Southern Economy: Myths & Realities." America on the World Stage. University of Virginia, Charlottesville. 21 Sept. 2010. Lecture.

7 Morgan, Philip. "Origins of American Slavery." America on the world stage: a global approach to U.S. history. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 35-49. Print

8 Quarles p. 13-14

9 Quarles p. 14

Poor purchased his freedom to fight and was commended as, “behaving like an experienced officer as well as an excellent soldier.”¹⁰

Even with the involvement of African Americans in these earlier conflicts, the American Army instructed recruiting officers that, “they should not enlist, among others, any deserter from the Ministerial army, nor any stroller, negro or vagabond.”¹¹ Concerns about rebellions and uprisings continued this practice.

The British saw the delay and debate exhibited by the colonists and the Continental Army. Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, did not plan to abolish the institution of slavery in the British colony, but did see the advantages of offering slaves emancipation in exchange for fighting for the Crown. The Patriots were funded in large part by slave-owning plantation farmers who were made wealthy by the labor of their slaves. If the British could draw the slaves away from these wealthy individuals, the foundation of the Patriot cause would falter. Additionally, the more immediate need of manpower encouraged the issuance of Dunmore’s Proclamation.

This proclamation, issued in November of 1775, called for slaves to run away from their Patriot masters and join the Loyalist cause. In exchange for their service, these runaway slaves were promised freedom after the war.¹² Nearly 500 slaves escaped to join Dunmore’s regiment, however, “the number of Negroes who fled to the British ran into the tens of thousands.”¹³ Slaves escaped from Loyalist owners were returned to their masters. Meanwhile, the Virginia Assembly passed an ordinance allowing runaway slaves from Patriot owners to return to their masters without fear of punishment.¹⁴

Dunmore’s escaped slaves became the Ethiopian Regiment and later a guerilla force called the Black Brigade. These groups were trained in formation marching and shooting and were involved in the evacuation of Norfolk, Virginia and maritime service throughout the Chesapeake.¹⁵ An African slave named Colonel Tye was a leader of the Black Brigade and is responsible for the assassination of many Patriot leaders. He is also responsible for helping the British withstand an attack on New York City by the Patriots.¹⁶

In the winter of 1777-78, the Continental Army was in distress due to desertion and disease and was struggling due to a lack of manpower. General Washington changed his mind in regards to the enlistment of slaves and allowed for the First Rhode Island Regiment to be formed, known as the first African-American military regiment. This

¹⁰ Quarles, p. 11

¹¹ Quarles, p. 15

¹² "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation - North Carolina Digital History." *LEARN NC*. North Carolina Digital History, n.d. Web. 5 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4238>>.

¹³ Quarles, p. 119

¹⁴ Song Full of Hope, p. 58

¹⁵ "Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed." *The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*. Web. 5 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/lord-dunmore-s-ethiopian-regiment>>.

¹⁶ PBS, Colonel Tye, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p52.html>>

was just one of many examples of policy reversals on the Patriot side of the conflict. Nearly 5,000 free blacks like Cuff Smith, James Forten and Cesar Prince fought for the American colonists.

Ultimately, in 1783 the Treaty of Paris was signed formally ending the conflict between the British and the American colonists. One point of the treaty was that all prisoners of war and property confiscated by the Loyalists was to be returned to the Patriots. This proved problematic when the property in question was slaves who had been promised emancipation by the British at the end of the war. The British refused to return the slaves to the colonists and tried to document the service of slaves in the Book of Negroes. Eventually thousands of slaves were shipped from New York to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, Barbados, Liberia and Britain. For many slaves, the end of the war resulted in being thrust back into the global slave trade network. Slaves sent to the Caribbean found themselves working on sugar plantations and a large group of freed slaves were shipped across the Atlantic to begin a new country in Liberia.

The Revolutionary War receives considerable attention in American history classrooms, but the whole story is not told. Colonists faced an often-tough decision in determining for which side to fight. For slaves, the decision was based on the single factor of which side would result in freedom the fastest. Many African Americans, both free and enslaved, played an important role on both side of this defining conflict of American history and should be recognized. Additionally, the American Revolution played a large role in defining the institution of slavery in the American colonies, but it also impacted the global slave trade for years to come.

Annotated Bibliography

Quarles, B. (1996). *The Negro in the American Revolution*. The University of North Carolina Press.

This book is considered *the* source on the participation of African Americans in the American Revolution. It examines the role of slaves in the events leading up to, throughout, and after the war. Quarles identifies the role of slaves in the war as an unidentified and underrepresented part of American history and writes to draw attention to the subject.

Making freedom: Sourcebook 2. *A Song Full of Hope: 1770-1830*. (2004). Heinemann Educational Books.

This text is a sourcebook for educators and is part of a collection of books that address the theme of African Americans in U.S. history. The text includes a collection of lesson plans, narrative, and primary source documents that promote the idea that African Americans were “making history” as opposed to simply being swept along with events of the time. The book includes a CD with digital documents and songs to be downloaded and reproduced.

PBS (1998). *Africans in America*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/title.html>

This website provides a digital narrative of Africans in America and has a detailed narrative of Africans in the Revolutionary Era. There are three sections of the website: a narrative with background information of the time, a resource bank with images and documents, and a teacher’s guide to help instructors use the website. There is a focus on specific individuals in addition to many primary source documents.

Henderson, J. (n.d.). *New Hampshire Individuals of Note*. Retrieved from
http://www.johnjhenderson.com/Notables/Biographies/prince_whipple.htm

This website provides a biography of Prince Whipple, a slave in the American Revolution, who is credited with being an oarsman of the boat used in Washington’s Crossing of the Delaware. Whipple is emblematic of the slave trade’s relation to the war in that he is believed to have been born in Africa and then sold into slavery and brought to the colonies.

Coclanis, Peter. "Slavery and the Southern Economy: Myths & Realities." *America on the World Stage*. University of Virginia, Charlottesville. 21 Sept. 2010. Lecture. Podcast of lecture accessible online:
<http://www.handsonhistorylibrary.org/modules.aspx>

Coclanis is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In his lecture and article, *The Economics of Slavery* (accessible online: <http://www.handsonhistorylibrary.org/ModuleResources/Economics%20of%20Slavery.pdf>) he worked to identify common perceptions of the role of slaves and the institution of slavery in the colonies and provide alternate explanations. Coclanis argued that the "plantation south" that many students of history romanticize did not really exist. Most families owned one slave; with the median number of slaves owned being 4-6. Families owning a large number of slaves were few and far between. Coclanis identified the poor, uneducated population, unequal distribution of wealth, and an undiversified economy as factors that contributed to the fall of the southern colonies.

Morgan, Philip. "Origins of American Slavery." *America on the world stage: a global approach to U.S. history*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 35-49. Morgan is a professor of history at Johns Hopkins University. His lecture and publications include a discussion of the growing population of slaves in the colonies and the origins of slavery in the colonies. In his article, *The Origins of American Slavery* (accessible online: http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/49355.html?type=print), Morgan argues that slavery was not an institution unique to the United States. Originally, slavery was not based on race, but "blackness" and servitude became unquestionably related in the western world. Native Americans were used as slaves, but their susceptibility to disease quickly eliminated them as a source of labor. Podcast and PowerPoint from lecture accessible:
<http://www.handsonhistorylibrary.org/modules.aspx>

Taylor, Quintard. The University of Washington, Seattle. An Online Reference Guide to African American History. Retrieved from: <http://www.blackpast.org>

This website provides an overview of African American history separated into people, institutions, and organizations. The website provides a digital archive of resources separated into three categories: African American History, African American History in the American West, & Global African History. Each category includes an encyclopedic overview of key people and groups, in addition to timelines and primary source documents like music, speeches, and pictures. The website boasts having the largest collection of free African American resources on the Internet. The digital archives can be sorted by state, allowing teachers or students to access information specific to location.

Ms. Emily Dooley
Monticello High School
America on the World Stage

"Lord Dunmore's Proclamation - North Carolina Digital History." *LEARN NC*. North Carolina Digital History, Retrieved from:
<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4238>

This is a digital copy of the document, issued by the Governor of Virginia on November 7, 1775, which called for the slaves of Patriot owners to join the Royal Army in exchange for emancipation. Dunmore's forces were depleted and he hoped to reinforce his numbers while also creating chaos for the colonists with this proclamation. It is estimated that thousands of slaves escaped their masters to join his army.