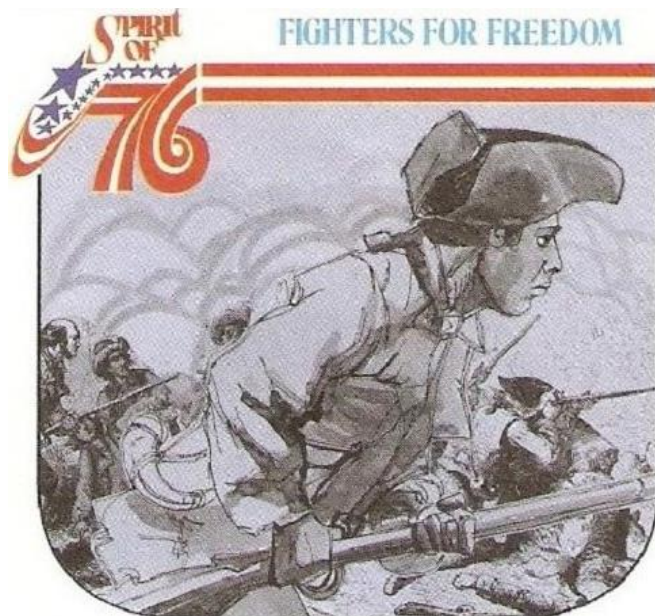


Salem Poor

“The Subscribers begg leave to Report to your Honble. House, (which wee do in Justice to the Character of So Brave a Man) that under Our Own observation, Wee declare ...”

“... that A Negro Man Called Salem Poor of Col. Fries Regiment Capt. Ames. Company in the late Battle at Charlestown behaved like an Experienced officer, as Well as an Excellent Soldier, to Set forth Particulars of his Conduct Would be Tedious, Wee Would Only begg leave to Say in the Person of this Sd. Negro Centers a Brave & gallant Soldier.”

“The Reward due to so great and Distinguisht a Character, Wee Submit to the Congress” (Petition, signed by thirteen Continental Army officers and a brigade surgeon, to the Massachusetts General Court, December 5, 1775)



Let's look back ...

Four days after the Battle of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775), the Massachusetts Provincial Congress resolved “that an army of 30,000 men be immediately raised” out of volunteers from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Taking Massachusetts' lead, the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, voted in turn on June 14 to raise “six companies of expert riflemen ... in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia.”

As soon as they were ready the men were to “join the army near Boston.” The racial and ethnic make-up of the army assembling near Boston mirrored largely the militias of the four New England states, where some 17,000 (in 1790) mostly free African-Americans constituted roughly 1.7 percent of the population. (Selig)

To prevent British soldiers from conducting further attacks on the countryside after the march to Lexington and Concord, 20,000 provincial militiamen encircled Boston in the spring of 1775. The Charlestown peninsula and Dorchester Heights, commanding both the city of Boston and Boston harbor, lie abandoned. This has been referred to as the Siege of Boston.

Hoping to make the British “masters of these heights,” General Gage, in conference with Major Generals William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne, planned to seize the neglected positions before the colonists do so.

News of Gage's intent filtered across from Boston and down from New Hampshire on June 15. Acting quickly on this intelligence, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety ordered General Artemas Ward, commander of the colonial militia surrounding Boston, to race the British to the Charlestown peninsula, capture Bunker Hill, and then seize the Dorchester hills.

The following day, Ward ordered Colonel William Prescott, with the aid of one thousand colonial troops, to take and fortify Bunker Hill. Unknown to the British, Prescott and his troops arrived at the Charlestown peninsula that same night.

Prescott and other officers ultimately decided to bypass Bunker Hill, rising 110 feet and situated near the only route back to Cambridge, and instead give "orders to march" to Breed's Hill, a smaller mount further south and within cannon range of Boston and British ships in the harbor. They built an earthen fortress 160-feet long and 30-feet high atop the hill. (Massachusetts Historical Society)

For generations many have argued over who ultimately chose where to fortify a position on the lower, more centrally located hill known today as "Breed's Hill," rather than the higher prominence known today as "Bunker Hill."

But on that night, construction began sometime around midnight as hundreds of colonial men with pickaxes and shovels constructed a fort atop the lower hill overlooking the settlement of Charlestown and the beaches along the Harbor. (NPS)

Astonished British generals woke on the morning of June 17 to discover the newly erected defenses. As the day continued, British ships bombarded the untrained militia as they worked, and Colonel Prescott walked the fortifications to raise morale. Thirsty and tired, the soldiers received "no refreshment."

At three o'clock in the afternoon, over 2,000 British soldiers, commanded by General Howe, landed on the Charlestown shore. Continental snipers fired at the British as they marched, and General Howe ordered a combustible shell launched on Charlestown. Amid smoke and flames, local inhabitants fled their homes in order to escape "Charlestown's dismal fate."

Then, British troops headed uphill, where they were frustrated by fences, pits, and tall grass. In dust and heat, the continental militia waited behind their walls. They hold fire until the British are in within 150 feet of the fortifications.

(Contrary to urban legend, there's no evidence anyone ordered the men to hold their fire until they saw "the whites" of the enemies' eyes. The writer Parson Weems seems to have invented this decades later.)

The Americans opened fired at about 50 yards, much too distant to see anyone's eyes. However, one commander did tell his men to wait until they could see the splash guards - called half-gaiters - that British soldiers wore around their calves.) (Smithsonian)

"Heavy and severe Fire" decimated the thick British ranks. Recoiling from the first attack, General Howe relies on "the Bravery of the King's Troops".

He immediately ordered his stumbling and disordered soldiers to make a second charge, this time only at the hill and rail fence. Again, the colonists slaughter the King's troops with their fire.



An hour passed as the British recover from the two attacks. They received 400 new troops from Boston. A third time, General Howe ordered his soldiers, with the help of the reinforcements, to charge the breastworks and the rail fence.

Prescott's men again waited until the last minute to fire. This time they are running out of ammunition and are soon overrun by the British; then they fought with rocks and the butts of their muskets.

No longer able to withstand the British attack, Prescott's men retreated north over the road to Cambridge, as General Stark's New Hampshire troops covered them in the rear.

In total, 140 colonists are dead and 271 are wounded. Before dark, the British again command the Charleston peninsula, though 226 British lie dead and 828 are wounded. Popularly known as 'The Battle of Bunker Hill,' as noted, the battle actually occurred on Breed's Hill.

Despite renewed British control of the peninsula, colonial forces still trapped the British in Boston. As supply issues and shortages plague them, the British prepared for further military commitment to defeat the "poor and ignorant" colonists. Meanwhile, the colonies scrambled to assemble more soldiers.

About Salem Poor

Born enslaved in Andover, Massachusetts, Salem Poor (~1747-~1802) worked on the farm of John and Rebecca Poor. In 1769, at 22 years old, he bought his freedom for 27 pounds, which equaled a working man's annual earnings.

In May of 1775, Poor enlisted in the interim Massachusetts Army. This last-minute army consisted of colonial forces primarily from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Thus, the troops that fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775 were under the command of Massachusetts and New Hampshire officers.

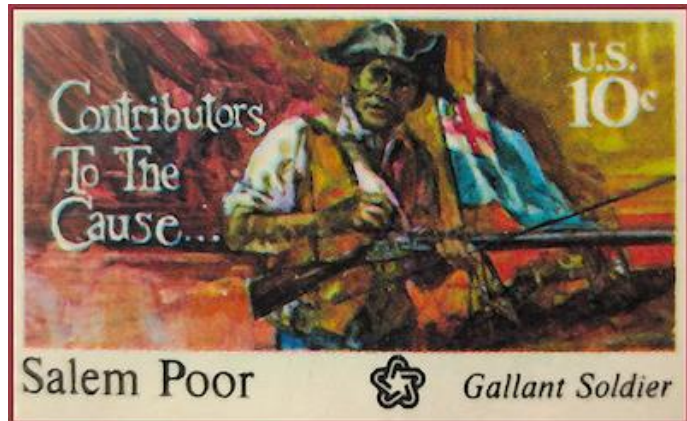
During the battle, Salem Poor served in an Andover unit commanded by Capt. Thomas Drury, whose company included several other African American minute men. Poor's unit arrived as a secondary force, in order to "assist in the building of fortifications."

Instead, due to the dire circumstances, they covered the retreating units that had constructed the barriers on Breed's Hill and had run out of ammunition. His unit received heavy fire; the British Regular Army killed five Andover men near him on the spot and left another six seriously wounded.

As he helped the wounded, Poor slowly retreated and fired one last shot that killed British Army Lt. Col. James Abercrombie. The British Regular army successfully drove the New England forces off the Charlestown Peninsula, but not without paying a heavy price in losses themselves. (NPS)

Salem Poor fought on with the Continental Army to the end of the American Revolution. He re-enlisted for a three-year term with Colonel Edward Wigglesworth's 13th Massachusetts Regiment, starting in mid-1777.

This brought him to Monmouth, New Jersey and Saratoga, New York. He also served at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and White Plains, New York. He returned home in 1780, free and with veteran status.



On the home front in Andover, he married four times: in 1771 to freed woman Nancy Parker, with whom he had a son in 1774; in 1780 to Mary Twing, no longer enslaved; 1787 to Sarah Stevens, White and therefore free; 1801 to Hannah Ayliffe, a Black woman of unknown status.

In 1802, at age fifty-five, Salem Poor died and was buried anonymously at Boston's Copp's Hill Burying Ground. What he went through after his years of enlistment and battles, we can only imagine. (NPS)

Information here is primarily from National Park Service; Journal of American Revolution; Massachusetts Historical Society; American Heritage Museum; Britannica

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young