

Slaves in the Revolutionary War

In the 15th century, Portugal became the first European nation to take significant part in African slave trading. (College of Charleston) By the 1480s, Portuguese ships were already transporting Africans for use as slaves on the sugar plantations in the Cape Verde and Madeira islands in the eastern Atlantic. (Britannica)

By the 16th century, the Portuguese dominated the early trans-Atlantic slave trade on the African coast. As a result, other European nations first gained access to enslaved Africans through privateering during wars with the Portuguese, rather than through direct trade.

When English, Dutch or French privateers captured Portuguese ships during Atlantic maritime conflicts, they often found enslaved Africans on these ships, as well as Atlantic trade goods, and they sent these captives to work in their own colonies. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

When Portuguese, and later their European competitors, found that peaceful commercial relations alone did not generate enough enslaved Africans to fill the growing demands of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they formed military alliances with certain African groups against their enemies. This encouraged more extensive warfare to produce captives for trading. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

The Portuguese developed a trading relationship with the Kingdom of Kongo, which existed from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries in what is now Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Civil War within Kongo during the trans-Atlantic slave trade would lead to many of its subjects becoming captives traded to the Portuguese. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

Angola is a country on the west coast of southern Africa. Like other areas there, portions had been colonized by the Portuguese. The Portuguese established several settlements, forts and trading posts along the coast. Despite Portugal's territorial claims in Angola, its control over much of the country's vast interior was minimal. (Hashaw)

During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, Angola was the leading exporter of slaves. Starting in the early 1500s to the mid-1800s, nearly six million captives were embarked for the Americas from West Central African ports. (Slave Societies)

The Catholic Church has a long history in Angola. Catholic missionaries had been active in Angola an entire century before 1619 and had won thousands of voluntary converts. In 1621, the Portuguese campaigns went deep into Kongo, and thousands were captured at the battle of Mbumbi at the very end of the year. These would all have been Christian, indeed, probably third or fourth generation Christian. (Hashaw)

The first Africans in Virginia in the 17th century came from the Kongo/Angola regions of West Central Africa. They were part of a large system established by the Portuguese in Africa to capture and supply slaves to the Spanish colonies in Central and South America. (Marks)

The first Africans in English North America were those pirated in 1619 by the White Lion and the Treasurer from the Spanish frigate San Juan Bautista in July, and delivered to Jamestown six weeks later at the latter end of August.

John Rolfe confirms their arrival saying, "About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunes arrived at Point-Comfort, the Comandors name Capt Jope, his Pilott for the West Indies one Mr Marmaduke an Englishman. ... He brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w[hich] the Governo[r] and Cape Merchant bought for victuall[s]." ("Rolfe's reporting the White Lion as a Dutch warship was a clever ruse to transfer blame away from the English for piracy of the slave ship to the Dutch.") (NPS, Historic Jamestowne)



The Angolans arrived in Virginia in 1619 when Jamestown still teetered on the brink and seemed about to disappear like the many doomed Spanish and English colonies before it. Their arrival coincided with the Virginia Company's decision to change its course from seeking treasure to building communities.

In 1648, there were three hundred Africans in Jamestown among the fifteen thousand European settlers; and by then the first malungu communities of Angolan Christian free men, many of whom had arrived via the Black Mayflower, were beginning to pop up in half a dozen places in Tidewater Virginia.

As early as the 1650s, enslaved Africans escaped into the American wilderness to form their own separate communities -- a New World adaptation of an African form of resistance.

These maroons (or outlyers, as they were often called in North America) set up small communities in swamps or other areas where they were not likely to be discovered.

Although most focused on their own survival - building homes, raising crops and livestock, fortifying the community against attack - others engaged in guerilla warfare against neighboring plantations and provided a base to which other fugitives could flee. (PBS)

Because of extensive settlement and cultivation, maroonage in Virginia and the northern colonies was mostly limited to the Great Dismal Swamp, on the Virginia and North Carolina border. The lower South, however, provided ample territory for sanctuary.

Newly imported African slaves fled South Carolina to establish maroon communities in Florida in the late 1600s, a tradition that was continued by American-born fugitives from South Carolina and Georgia well into the nineteenth century.

American Revolution

Slave resistance escalated along with colonial struggles for liberty.

In Georgia, a group of enslaved men, women and children took advantage of the confusion created by the Stamp Act by fleeing into the swamps and managed to elude capture for four years - prompting the Georgia assembly to send a detachment of militia after them. (PBS)

By 1775 more than a half-million African Americans, most of them enslaved, were living in the 13 colonies. Both the British and the colonists believed that slaves could serve an important role during the revolution.

African American soldiers served with valor at the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill.

In April 1775, Lord Dunmore (1732-1809), the royal governor of Virginia, threatened that he would proclaim liberty to the slaves and reduce Williamsburg to ashes if the colonists resorted to force against British authority.

In November, he promised freedom to all slaves belonging to rebels who would join "His Majesty's Troops ... for the more speedily reducing the Colony to a proper sense of their duty...."

Some eight hundred slaves joined British forces, some wearing the emblem "Liberty to the Slaves." (University of Houston)

In November 1775, the American Congress decided to exclude blacks from future enlistment out of a sensitivity to the opinion of southern slave holders. But Lord Dunmore's promise of freedom to slaves who enlisted in the British army led Congress reluctantly to reverse its decision, fearful that black soldiers might join the redcoats. (University of Houston)

When the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, people of African descent made up approximately one-fifth of the population of the new United States of America.

The vast majority of them were enslaved, many by Revolutionaries. Other Revolutionaries, while not holding people as property themselves, profited indirectly from the system. (Museum of the American Revolution)

African Americans played an important role in the revolution. They fought at Fort Ticonderoga and the Battle of Bunker Hill.

A slave helped row Washington across the Delaware.

Altogether, some 5,000 free blacks and slaves served in the Continental army during the Revolution. By 1778, many states, including Virginia, granted freedom to slaves who served in the Revolutionary war. (University of Houston)

Most black soldiers were scattered throughout the Continental Army in integrated infantry regiments, where they were often assigned to support roles as wagoners, cooks, waiters or artisans. Several all-black units, commanded by white officers, also were formed and saw action against the British. (Jamestown)

Unlike the Continental Army, the Navy recruited both free and enslaved blacks from the very start of the Revolutionary War - partly out of desperation for seamen of any color, and partly because many blacks were already experienced sailors, having served in British and state navies, as well as on merchant vessels in the North and the South.

To both the enslaved and free, privately-owned vessels were more attractive than the Continental or state navies.

For runaway slaves, there was less chance of being detected by slavecatchers, and for all crew members, there were greater financial rewards. Philadelphia's free blacks, for instance, were more inclined to serve on privateers than in Pennsylvania navy.

One of the most famous black seamen was James Forten, who enlisted on the privateer Royal Louis as a powder boy, was captured along with his ship's crew, and spent time on a British prison barge before being released in a prisoner exchange. Forten went on to become a successful businessman and a leader of Philadelphia's African American community.

Although Black seamen performed a range of duties, usually the most menial ones, they were particularly valued as pilots. Others served as shipyard carpenters and laborers.

Both Maryland's and Virginia's navies made extensive use of blacks, even purchasing slaves specifically for wartime naval service. Virginia's state commissioner noted that it was cheaper to hire blacks than whites, and that whites could get exemption from military service by substituting a slave.

In his memoirs, U.S. Navy Commodore James Barron, who served as a captain in the Virginia navy during the war, recalled several black men among the "courageous patriots who ... in justice to their merits should not be forgotten."

He mentions four slaves: Harry, Cupid, Aberdeen (who subsequently befriended Patrick Henry and was freed by the Virginia General Assembly) and the "noble African" pilot known as "Captain" Mark Starlins.

In 1775, Jeremiah Thomas, a pilot, fisherman, "and Free Negroe of considerable property," was hanged and burned in Charleston for allegedly plotting an insurrection, timed to coincide with the arrival of the new British governor.

Henry Laurens, a slave trader and the president of South Carolina's patriotic First Provincial Congress, reported that Thomas was "puffed up by prosperity, ruined by Luxury and debauchery and grown to an amazing pitch of vanity and ambition."

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Two slaves, one of them Thomas's brother-in-law, testified that Thomas had urged other blacks to assist the British Royal Navy in capturing Charleston harbor, assuring them that "the War was come to help the poor Negroes."

Thomas was not the only African American seaman to ally himself with the British. Historians estimate that between 5,000 and 8,000 African-descended people participated in the Revolution on the Patriot side, and that upward of 20,000 served the crown. (history-com)

Many royal naval vessels were piloted by blacks - some of them runaways, other enslaved to loyalist masters, and still others pressed into service.

During the Revolutionary War, most enslaved Africans believed that a British victory would bring them freedom. An estimated 100,000 took advantage of the disruption caused by the war and escaped from bondage, many of them making their way to the British forces. Others fled to Canada, Florida, or Indian lands. Thomas Jefferson believed that Virginia lost 30,000 slaves in one year alone. (PBS)

Possibly a quarter of the slaves who escaped to the British made their way onto ships, some signing onto the ships' crews or joining marauding expeditions of bandits commonly referred to as "Banditti." (PBS)

Others ran away to join the patriot militias or Continental army. Washington and other military officers received numerous requests to recover runaways who had enlisted.

Charles, a man who had escaped from slavery with his wife and daughter, only to be captured and sold back into slavery, offered to fight “in defense of Liberty and the Rights of Mankind” in exchange for his family’s freedom. (PBS)

The American Revolution had profound effects on the institution of slavery.

Several thousand slaves won their freedom by serving on either side of the War of Independence. As a result of the Revolution, a surprising number of slaves were released from slavery, while thousands of others freed themselves by running away.

In Georgia alone, 5,000 slaves, a third of the colony’s prewar total, escaped. In South Carolina, a quarter of the slaves achieved freedom.

The British appeal to slave unrest outraged slave holders not only in the South but in New York’s Hudson Valley. Later, Sir Henry Clinton (1738-1795) promised protection to all slaves who deserted from the rebels.

Clinton’s promise may well have contributed to the collapse of the British cause in the South. By suggesting that the Revolution was a war over slavery, he alienated many neutrals and even some loyalists. (University of Houston)

By the winter of 1777-78, the Continental Army had dwindled to 18,000 from disease and desertion. This, together with the active recruitment of enslaved blacks by the British, finally convinced Washington to approve plans for Rhode Island to raise a regiment of free blacks and slaves. (PBS)

The First Rhode Island Regiment, the first Continental Army unit largely comprised of Black New Englanders, showcased African Americans’ skill as soldiers and commitment to their brethren on the battlefield.



Different men of war, including a member of the First Rhode Island Regiment on the far left

In the late 1770s, dwindling manpower forced George Washington to reconsider his original decision to ban Black people from the Continental Army. So in 1778, a Rhode Island legislature declared that both free and enslaved Black people could serve. To attract the latter, the Patriots promised freedom at the end of service. (history-com)

Colonel Tye was perhaps the best-known of the Loyalist black soldiers. An escaped bondman born in Monmouth County, New Jersey, he wreaked havoc for several years with his guerrilla Black Brigade in New York and New Jersey. At one time he commanded 800 men.

For most of 1779 and 1780, Tye and his men terrorized his home county - stealing cattle, freeing slaves, and capturing Patriots at will. On September 1, 1780, during the capture of a Patriot captain, Tye was shot through the wrist, and he later died from a fatal infection. (PBS)

Boston King was an escaped slave who joined up with the Loyalists. When he reached the black Loyalist encampment, it was a rife with smallpox. King became ill himself, and discovered that the British removed sick runaways from camp to die or heal on their own.

King survived, and rejoined General Cornwallis' troops at Camden, South Carolina, where he served as a military messenger and an orderly. But while fighting for the Crown, King was kidnapped by a band of southern Loyalists who tried to sell him back into slavery. He escaped and again rejoined the army.

In October 1781, as Patriot and French ground forces and the French fleet surrounded Cornwallis' men at Yorktown, Virginia, the British sent their black allies to face death between the battle lines.

After Cornwallis' surrender, the Americans rounded up the surviving blacks for re-enslavement. For the next year, as Loyalists withdrew from southern ports, scores of black refugees sought passage to New York - the last British stronghold. (PBS)

Many thousands of African Americans who aided the British lost their freedom anyway. Many of them ended up in slavery in the Caribbean. Others, when they attempted to leave with the British, in places like Charleston and Savannah, were prevented.

And there are incredible letters written by southerners of Africans after the siege of Charleston, swimming out to boats, and the British hacking away at their arms with cutlasses to keep them from following them.

So it was a very tragic situation. And of the many thousands of Africans who left the plantations, not many of them actually got their freedom. (PBS, Margaret Washington, historian)

In November 1782, Britain and America signed a provisional treaty granting the former colonies their independence.

As the British prepared for their final evacuation, the Americans demanded the return of American property, including runaway slaves, under the terms of the peace treaty. Sir Guy Carleton, the acting commander of British forces, refused to abandon black Loyalists to their fate as slaves.

With thousands of apprehensive blacks seeking to document their service to the Crown, Brigadier General Samuel Birch, British commandant of the city of New York, created a list of claimants known as The Book of Negroes.

Boston King and his wife, Violet, were among 3,000 to 4,000 African Americans Loyalists who boarded ships in New York bound for Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and Britain. (PBS)

Although the rise of the free black population is one of the most notable achievements of the Revolutionary Era, it is important to note that the overall impact of the Revolution on slavery had negative consequences.

In rice-growing regions of South Carolina and Georgia, the patriot victory confirmed the power of the master class. Doubts about slavery and legal modifications that occurred in the North and Upper South never took serious hold among whites in the Lower South. Even in Virginia, the move toward freeing some slaves was made more difficult by new legal restrictions in 1792.

In the North, where slavery was on its way out, racism still persisted, as in a Massachusetts law of 1786 that prohibited whites from legally marrying African Americans, Indians, or people of mixed race.

The Revolution clearly had a mixed impact on slavery and contradictory meanings for African Americans. It failed to reconcile slavery with these new egalitarian republican societies, a tension that eventually boiled over in the 1830s and 1840s and effectively tore the nation in two in the 1850s and 1860s. (Lumen Learning)

Information here is primarily from Museum of the American Revolution; University of Houston; Slavery and Remembrance; PBS; Jamestown Settlement & American Revolution Museum; Lumen Learning; Tim Hashaw, Hampton History Museum, Marks; McCarthy; NPS, Historic Jamestowne

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