# Black Americans and the War for Independence

by Rachel Walman
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Freedom! Tyranny! Slavery! These were words you would have heard all the time in the Revolutionary Era. This Veterans Day, let's think about what it might have felt like as a person of African descent to choose sides in that crucial moment: whether to gamble on a European power promising you freedom, or to agree to fight for a people who hold you in bondage.

To get everyone in the spirit of '76, we thought we'd tackle some frequently asked questions about this topic. The answers may surprise you.

**FAQ #1: Crispus Attucks, a Black man, was the first person to die for the patriot cause. Does that mean Black people fought in the Continental Army from the start?**

Sort of. It was actually not uncommon in the colonial period for people of African descent to join militias or even be forced into efforts to defend colonial settlements, particularly from Native Americans. But when George Washington took over the Continental Army in July 1775, he banned all Blacks from enlisting, free or enslaved. Some Black patriots had already fought for the rebel cause, like Salem Poor, a Massachusetts freeman who distinguished himself at the Battle of Bunker Hill, earning citations for heroism from 14 officers. Washington's decision was based on his experience as a slave owner in the South, where 75 percent of the colonies' roughly 450-500,000 enslaved people were concentrated. Slave owners feared the prospect of arming slaves, empowering free Blacks, losing valuable human property in battle, and forging any type of path to the end of slavery. At the same time that white colonists complained of the British tyranny "enslaving" them, all 13 colonies continued to practice human bondage. While many saw this terrible irony, too few stood up to it.

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*Despite banning Black enlistment in the army for part of the war, Washington always brought his trusted horseman and slave William Lee into battle with him. In this folk art copy of a famous image, the man on horseback second from the right may be Lee.*

## FAQ #2: Did free and enslaved Black colonists fight for the British?

Early in the war, the British sought to engage slaves to the crown's benefit. Lord Dunmore, Royal Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation on November 7, 1775, declaring martial law in the colony and offering freedom to any slaves held by rebels (not by loyalists) who would take up arms against the patriots. A few months later, Dunmore had assembled about 800 Black soldiers, including an elite "Ethiopian Regiment" of 200-300 who emblazoned their linen smocks with the phrase "liberty to slaves."  One of these initial soldiers became a distinguished hero of the Revolution on the British side.

Titus Cornelius, known today as Colonel Tye, self-emancipated in 1775 and found his way to the British Army. He fought bravely at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778 and commanded the Black Brigade in defending New York City from patriot forces in 1779. Lord Dunmore's successor Henry Clinton issued his own proclamation in 1779 ordering that ""every NEGRO who shall desert the Rebel Standard, [is granted] full security to follow within these Lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper."  This prompted thousands of slaves to escape to British encampments. Even though the British lost the war, they negotiated to follow through on the promise of freedom for at least some of the Black soldiers who fought for them. These men and their families could not stay free in America though-they were transported to other British colonies, such as Nova Scotia.
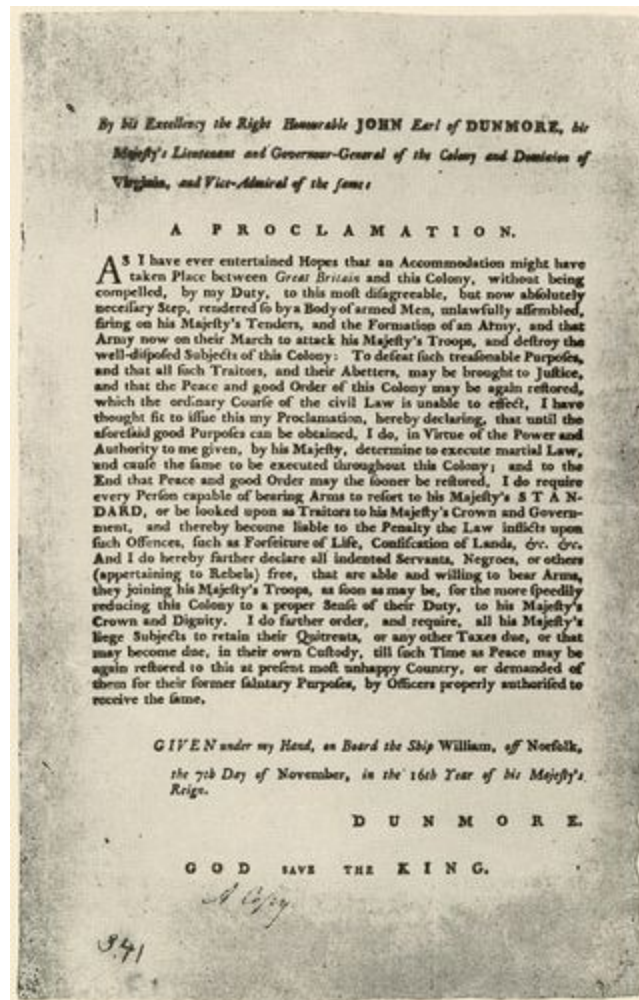
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*If you read Dunmore's Proclamation carefully, you'll note he is only inviting slaves held by rebels to earn their freedom behind British lines. The British government was not attempting to infringe on the property rights of loyal British citizens or make a broad statement about slavery.*

## FAQ #3: So why did the Continental Army eventually recruit Black soldiers? Did many join, or only a few?

As the war continued, the Continental Army turned to Black colonists to fill its shrinking roster of soldiers. In 1777, Washington permitted the enlistment of free Blacks. That same year, a New Jersey act allowed slave masters to substitute their service with that of their slaves. Then New Hampshire actively recruited slaves to all-Black regiments. Besides for those enlisted forcibly by their enslavers, the Continental Army also purchased the freedom of some in exchange for their service, and some slaves self-emancipated and volunteered (though technically, the Army was supposed to return runaway slaves to their masters, if the masters were patriots). By 1778, Connecticut and Rhode Island also had sizeable Black regiments, with Maryland following suit in 1780 and New York in 1781. By that point, some estimate that about 25 percent of the Continental Army were men of African descent. The First Rhode Island Regiment was considered by some on both sides of the war to be among the best, most skilled regiments in the entire army. Unlike northern colonies, southern states like Virginia remained reluctant to arm enslaved Black people. In 1780 Virginia even tried to recruit white soldiers with the promise of 300 acres of land and either a male slave between the ages of 10

and 30 or £60.



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Also not to be forgotten are the many civilian Black participants in the war effort. Most wagoners were Black, carrying supplies and provisions from camp to camp. Black people also did both forced and paid labor for the army, including building fortifications, digging trenches, and more. Perhaps the most forgotten of these civilian participants are the many Black female "camp followers"-wives and daughters of soldiers who tended camp while their male relatives fought.

**FAQ #4: If Black people fought for America, why didn't slavery end after the war?**

The many ways people of African descent were forced into, allowed into, or excluded from the Continental Army shows us how deeply the colonies relied on slavery and how ambivalent they were about the institution. The Army acknowledged and depended on Black manpower, bravery, and skill on and off the battlefield. It also feared Black vengeance, thereby recognizing that slavery was something to be angry about. But as colonists, white Americans built their economy largely on the foundation of slave agricultural labor, enshrining it in the Constitution. Influenced in part by Black participation in the patriot cause, states gradually divided in their attitudes towards slavery.

Nevertheless, some northern states like New York took their time freeing slaves and continued to rely indirectly on slave labor by building their economies on trading and shipping slave-grown cash crops, like cotton and sugar. New York didn't truly abolish slavery until 1827. We know from our standpoint today that American slavery lived and expanded for almost 100 years after our independence, with many of the same debates about Black soldiers reappearing during the American Civil War of the 1860s. Would those thousands of Black patriots have fought so hard if they had known that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" would not apply to them for generations? We'll never know, but this Veterans Day weekend, we'll be honoring their heroism, their strength, and their sacrifices nonetheless.

Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger, Soldiers in Uniform, ca. 1781-84. Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.

*In 1781, French soldier Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger sketches, from left to right, a Black soldier of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, a New England militiaman, a frontier rifleman, and a French officer.*

# Vocabulary

## bondage

noun

definition:    a state of servitude or slavery to another.
*Born into bondage, the slaves had never known freedom.*
*She viewed her abusive marriage as a form of bondage.*

Spanish:    esclavitud, cautiverio

## regiment

noun

definition:    a troop of infantry consisting of at least two battalions.

Spanish:    regimiento

## tyranny

noun

definition:    the oppressive or abusive exercise of power, or the government or authority that uses power in this way.

Spanish:    tiranía

forms:    tyrannies