

Section 4

African Americans in the War for Independence

The Revolutionary War

When it came to fighting between Patriots on one side and the British and their **Loyalist** American allies on the other, African Americans joined the side that offered freedom. In the South, where the British held out the promise of freedom in exchange for military service, black men eagerly fought on the British side as Loyalists. In the North, where white Patriots were more consistently committed to human liberty than in the South, black men just as eagerly fought on the Patriot side (see Map 4–2).

The war began in earnest in August 1776 when the British landed a large army at Brooklyn, New York, and drove Washington’s Continental Army across New Jersey into Pennsylvania. The military and diplomatic turning point in the war came the following year at Saratoga, New York, when a poorly executed British strategy to take control of the Hudson River led British general John Burgoyne to surrender his entire army to Patriot forces. This victory led France and other European powers to enter the war against Britain. Significant fighting ended in October 1781 when Washington forced Lord Cornwallis to surrender another British army at Yorktown, Virginia.

When Washington had organized the Continental Army in July 1775, he forbade the enlistment of new black troops and the reenlistment of black men who had served at Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, and other early battles. Shortly thereafter, all thirteen states followed Washington’s example. Several reasons account for Washington’s decision and its ratification by the Continental Congress. Patriot leaders feared that if they enlisted African-American soldiers, it would encourage slaves to leave their masters without permission. White people—especially in the South—also feared that armed black men would endanger the social order. Paradoxically, white people simultaneously believed black men were too cowardly to be effective soldiers. Although apparently contradictory, these last two beliefs persisted into the twentieth century.

Black Loyalists

Because so many Patriot leaders resisted employing black troops, by mid-1775 the British had taken the initiative in recruiting African Americans. From Maryland southward, during the spring of that year,

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What roles did African Americans play in the War for Independence?
- ▶ What spurred some African Americans to support the Loyalist cause?
- ▶ What spurred some African Americans to support the Patriot cause?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ Loyalist, p. 123
- ▶ privateers, p. 126

▶▶ Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher’s Resource Manual*.

▶▶ Teaching Notes

In the words of historian Benjamin Quarles, “The Negro’s role in the Revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle.”

▶▶ Recommended Readings

Sylvia R. Frey. *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991. This book portrays the War for Independence in the South as a three-way struggle among Patriots, British, and African Americans. It emphasizes the role of religion and community in black resistance to slavery.

Ellen Gibson Wilson. *The Loyal Blacks*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976. This book discusses why many African Americans chose the British side in the War for Independence. It also focuses on the fate of those loyal blacks who departed Nova Scotia in Canada for Sierra Leone.



MAP 4-2 Major Battles of the American War for Independence, Indicating Those in Which Black Troops Participated

Black troops fought on both sides during the American War for Independence and participated in most of the major battles.

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Why is it significant that most of these battles were in the North?

rumors circulated that the British would instigate slave revolt. However, no such uprisings occurred. Instead, many slaves escaped and sought British protection as Loyalists. The British employed most black men who escaped to their lines as laborers and foragers. Even so, many black refugees fought for British or Loyalist units.

Black Loyalists were most numerous in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia. At the end of the war in 1783, approximately twenty thousand African Americans left with the British forces as they evacuated Savannah and Charleston. A few who remained carried out guerrilla warfare there until 1786.

The most famous British appeal to African Americans to fight for the empire in return for freedom came in Virginia. On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of the Old Dominion, issued a proclamation offering to liberate slaves who joined “His Majesty’s Troops . . . for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their duty to His Majesty’s crown and dignity.” Among those who responded to Dunmore’s offer was Ralph Henry, a twenty-six-year-old slave of Patrick Henry. Perhaps Ralph Henry recalled his famous master’s “Give me liberty or give me death” speech.

Dunmore recruited black soldiers out of desperation, although he became the strongest advocate—on either the British or American side—of their fighting ability. When he issued his appeal, Dunmore had only three hundred British troops and had been driven from Williamsburg, the colonial capital. Mainly because Dunmore had to seek refuge on British warships, only about eight hundred African

Americans managed to reach his forces. Defeat by the Patriots at the Battle of Great Bridge in December 1775 curtailed his efforts.

But Dunmore’s proclamation and the black response to it struck a tremendous psychological blow against his enemies. Of Dunmore’s six hundred troops at Great Bridge, half were African Americans whose uniforms bore the motto “Liberty to Slaves.” As more and more Virginia slaves escaped, masters blamed Dunmore. Throughout the war, other British and Loyalist commanders followed his example, recruiting thousands of black men who worked and sometimes fought in exchange for their freedom. In all, more African Americans became active Loyalists than Patriots during the war.

Five hundred of Dunmore’s black troops died of typhus or smallpox. When he had to abandon Virginia, the remainder sailed with his fleet to New York City (which had become British headquarters in America).

African Americans and the War for Independence

APRIL 18, 1775	Black Minutemen participate in Battle of Lexington and Concord.
MAY 10, 1775	The Second Continental Congress convenes in Philadelphia.
JUNE 15, 1775	Congress appoints George Washington commander in chief of the new Continental Army.
JUNE 17, 1775	Black men fight with the Patriots at Bunker Hill.
NOVEMBER 7, 1775	Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, offers freedom to slaves who will fight for the British.
JULY 9, 1775	George Washington bans African-American enlistment in the Continental Army.
DECEMBER 30, 1775	Washington allows black reenlistments in the Continental Army.

One of them, the notorious Colonel Tye, conducted guerrilla raids in Monmouth County, New Jersey, for several years. Until he was killed in 1780, Tye and his interracial band of about twenty-five Loyalists plundered villages, spiked cannons, and kidnapped Patriot officers. When the war ended, many black Loyalists, like those in Charleston and Savannah, joined white Loyalists in leaving the United States. Some of them went first to Acadia (now Nova Scotia) and then on to Sierra Leone, the British West African colony for former slaves that was founded in 1787. Others went to the British West Indies, where some of them faced reenslavement.

Black Patriots

Washington's July 1775 policy to the contrary, black men fought on the Patriot side from the very beginning of the Revolutionary War to its conclusion. Black Minutemen distinguished themselves at the bloody Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775. Among them were Peter Salem, Caesar Dickerson, Pomp Fisk, Prince Hall, Cuff Hayes, Barzillai Lew, Salem Poor, Caesar Weatherbee, and Cuff Whittemore. Lew was a veteran of the French and Indian War; Hall became a prominent black leader; and Poor, who wintered with Washington's army at Valley Forge in 1777–1778, received a commendation for bravery at Bunker Hill.

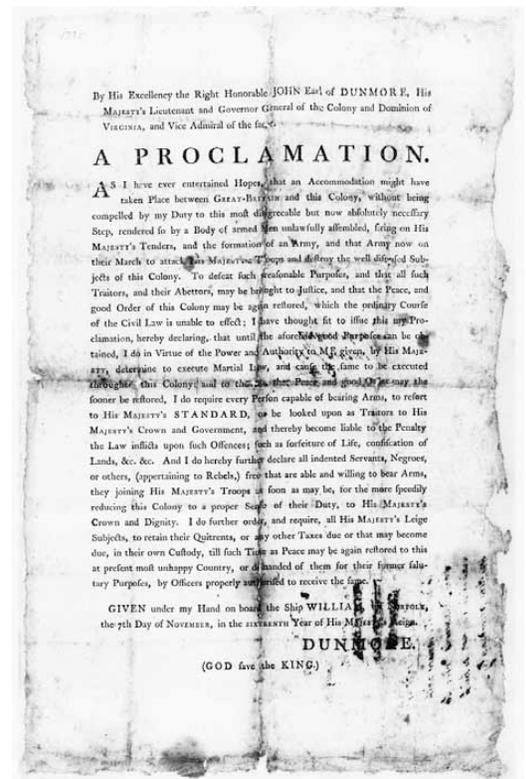
It was Dunmore's use of African-American soldiers that prompted Washington to reconsider his ban on black enlistment. "If that man, Dunmore," he wrote in late 1775, "is not crushed before the Spring he will become the most dangerous man in America. His strength will increase like a snowball running down hill. Success will depend on which side can arm the Negro faster." After having received encouragement from black veterans, Washington, on December 30, 1775, allowed African-American reenlistment in the Continental Army. Congress, fearful

► Map 4-2, p. 124

The northern Patriots were more consistently committed to human liberty and were more determined to defeat the British and end British rule.

► Recommended Reading

Benjamin Quarles. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. 1961; reprint, New York: Norton, 1973. This classic study remains the most comprehensive account of black participation in the War for Independence. It also demonstrates the impact of the war on black life.



Lord Dunmore's November 7, 1775, proclamation called on black men in Virginia to fight on the British side in the American War for Independence in return for their freedom.



The black soldier in this detail from John Trumbull's painting *The Battle of Bunker Hill* is presumed to be Peter Salem.

► Reading Check

African Americans fought on both the Patriot and Loyalist sides. In 1775, Washington forbade the enlistment of new black troops and the reenlistment of existing ones. However, as the war proceeded, necessity compelled the repeal of this policy. Black Patriots fought in nearly every major battle of the Revolutionary War.

► Teaching Notes

Enrollment officers often did not specify a man's race when he enlisted, so it is difficult to know how many black men actually served in Patriot armies. Five thousand black soldiers out of a total of three-hundred thousand is the figure usually given.

of alienating slaveholders, initially would not allow him to go further. By the end of 1776, however, troop shortages forced Congress and the state governments to recruit black soldiers in earnest for the Continental Army and state militias. Even then, South Carolina and Georgia refused to permit black men to serve in regiments raised within their boundaries, although black men from these states joined other Patriot units.

The Patriot recruitment policy changed most quickly in New England. In early 1777 Massachusetts opened its militia to black men, and Rhode Island formed a black regiment. Connecticut enabled masters to free their slaves to serve as substitutes for the masters or their sons in the militia or Continental Army. New York and New Jersey adopted similar statutes.

Also in 1777, when Congress set state enlistment quotas for the Continental Army, state recruitment officers began to fill those quotas with black men so white men might serve closer to home in the militia. With considerable reluctance, the southern states of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina began enlisting free black men. Of these states, only Maryland allowed slaves to serve in return for freedom, but the others sometimes allowed slaves to enlist as substitutes for their masters, and this usually led to freedom.

Black men asserted that if they were to fight in a war for liberty, their own had to be ensured. When one master informed his slave that both of them would be fighting for liberty, the slave replied "that it would be a great satisfaction to know that he was indeed going to fight for his liberty." Once an agreement to serve the Patriot cause in return for freedom had been reached, some black soldiers took new surnames.

Except for Rhode Island's black regiment and some companies in Massachusetts, black Patriots served in integrated military units. A few black men, such as Salem Poor, became junior officers. Others were drummers and fifers, sailors on **privateers** (merchant vessels armed and authorized by a government to raid enemy shipping) commissioned by the Continental Congress, and informants and spies. Like others who gathered intelligence behind enemy lines, African Americans who informed and spied risked being hanged if they were captured.

Black men fought on the Patriot side in nearly every major battle of the war (see Map 4-2). Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell crossed the Delaware River with Washington on Christmas night 1776 to surprise Hessian mercenaries (German troops hired to fight on the British side) at Trenton, New Jersey. Others fought at Monmouth, Saratoga, Savannah, Princeton, and Yorktown. There were also black women who supported the Patriot cause. As did white women, black women, such as James Reid's wife, sometimes accompanied their soldier husbands into army camps, if not into battle. A few black women also demonstrated their sympathy for the Patriots in defiance of British authority.



Reading Check What roles did African Americans play in the War for Independence?