

# Slavery and its Impact on the American Revolutionary War

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Slavery is a sensitive topic for some, many in today's society do not like to highlight the fact that innocent people were held captive against their will for many years in our nation's history. Yet, in recent times historians have started to take a second look at slavery and its impact during the American Revolutionary War. Slavery played a big part in the Revolutionary Era, and it affected and influenced policies on both sides during the war. This is true with North Carolina.

At the time of the American Revolution, enslaved people made up at least 25 percent of the population of North Carolina. Enslaved people totaled around seventy thousand. Only five percent of people of color had their freedom. Whether they were free or in captivity, many minorities tended to the land, the crops, and the harvest. Working in exchange for money that went directly to the people who were keeping them captive, or were entrusted with their wellbeing. If a person had a specific talent however, one might have worked as a carpenter, cooper, blacksmith, wheelwright, or in one of many other trades.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the Revolutionary War, many people were torn between the opposing sides. Many selected to fight for the side they believed would abolish slavery. The majority of them thought that if the British triumphed, it would mean the end of their captivity. News traveled fast of an uprising, not only with the slaves, but also among the enslavers. British leaders recognized this also and were accused of inciting the enslaved against the white colonists.

African-American soldiers that selected the Patriot side displayed amazing bravery

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<sup>1</sup> NCPedia

throughout the Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill battles. However, in November of 1775 the United States Congress decided to exclude minority people from further enlisting out of consideration for the opinions of southern slave owners; and rumors of a possible uprising.<sup>2</sup>

When North Carolina's patriots heard about the fighting at Lexington and Concord, they too began to long for independence as well. British commander, Lord Dunmore, made a promise of freedom to slaves who enlisted in the British Army. Thus, Congress was hesitant to change its mind about minority enlistments because they were concerned that black soldiers may enlist with the British Army.

American Revolutionaries were concerned on what to do and how to handle both the free and enslaved black people. Armed black people were feared, especially in the American South causing them to be unsure what actions to take. Following Lord Dunmore's promise of freedom Patriots began to consider letting the enslaved fight in the war again, in exchange for their freedom.<sup>3</sup> After the fact George Washington began to enlist more minority people into the army; especially after seeing their bravery and drive at Bunker Hill. Some 755 people of color were listed on the enlistment rolls for the Continental Army at White Plains, New York, in August 1778. Of those, 58 were with the North Carolina Continental Line and were most likely free men. It is a historic fact that free black people joined the army and navy in North Carolina throughout the war.

Not all selected that Patriot Path. There were several black men native to North Carolina who were influential and served in the British Army. One of which being John Provey who was a free black man from the lower Cape Fear River region (North

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<sup>2</sup> Digital History

<sup>3</sup> Also note, that this occurred in the American Civil War as well.

Carolina). He enlisted in the British Army in June 1776, abandoning all of his possessions. After serving during the entire war, Provey asked the British authorities for help in retrieving his lost belongings as a free man. On his list were a “small dwelling House,” two horses, a small field of Indian corn and potatoes, a dozen fowl, a dozen ducks, and a bed and household furniture.<sup>4</sup>

For freedom, many black people considered supporting the British. They followed them everywhere they went. These slaves flocked to British Commander Cornwallis even when he invaded the Carolinas in 1780–1781 because of his leadership. Black people were employed by General Cornwallis during this invasion to look for supplies and food along the way. Their raids caused a disturbance in the countryside, and encouraged other uprisings of enslaved people in Rowan County. With this, there was still disagreement and ambiguity on which side to support.

Thomas Peters was another man of color that fought for the British. He was a slave native to the lower Cape Fear River area. He enlisted in the British Army in 1776. He rose to the rank of sergeant with the Black Pioneers, a group of British army support troops. Peters left New York with the British when they left in 1783 and moved to Nova Scotia, Canada. There, he rose as the leader of a large black loyalist regiment. According to this group’s records, the British did not honor their pledges to provide land grants and equitable treatment in return for their allegiance and duty. In the end, Peters persuaded the British to relocate 1,200 black supporters in Sierra Leone, an African colony. There, they had their own government and were treated equally with British citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not known if this property suit was ever settled.

Though the most famous black soldier from North Carolina was still a Patriot, John Chavis. John Chavis was a preacher and teacher, he appeared to have lived in Sussex County, Virginia before he moved to Halifax in about 1766. He was enlisted in December of 1778 in the Fifth Virginia Regiment and served for three years in the Revolutionary War. A warrant was written in March of 1783 certifying that he had faithfully and honorably performed his duties and was entitled to all immunities. John Chavis was then listed as a free black man in Mecklenburg County, with his only possession being a horse. After the war, he began working for Robert Greenwood's estate as an orphans' instructor.

The American Revolution was significantly influenced by African-Americans. There were reportedly 5,000 free and enslaved black soldiers in the Continental Army during the war. Even George Washington's crossing of the Delaware was assisted by one. By serving on both sides of the war, thousands of slaves won their freedom. Although liberating for them it was disappointing and even enraging to some due to broken promises made on both sides.

On April 12, 1776 the Fourth Provincial Congress held a meeting in Halifax to pass a resolution for North Carolina's representatives. This was for the Continental Congress to join the members of the other colonies in announcing independence and establishing international alliances. Reserving North Carolina and the exclusive authority to create a constitution and laws for this colony. The resolution, known as the Halifax Resolves, is regarded as the first formal declaration of independence by an American colony.<sup>5</sup> Kelly Agan, writer of *the North Carolina Manual*, 2012 stated that

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<sup>5</sup> Note: Possibly the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

The Halifax Resolves was the first official move by a colony that advocated for the severing of links to Britain and independence for the colonies. The resolutions were the result of a year of debate in conferences at the county level throughout the colony.

Slavery was something established in the colonies long before the American Revolutionary War. North Carolina as the colony itself would, as others, have to consider slavery and its impact during the American Revolutionary War as never before. There is a moral and ethical shift that begins to take place during the Revolutionary Era, where enslaved black people (and other minorities) begin to have a sliver of hope of becoming free. They now have something to fight for, their freedom, literally and metaphorically. The hope that no longer having to work long hours tending to the land or trade with no benefits to their own person. North Carolina has a substantial amount of history and heart and has come a long way to create what it is now, the wonderful melting pot we call our home, North Carolina.

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