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Black Soldiers in the Revolutionary War

According to the discharge certificate shown on the following page, a man by the name of Brister Baker served for six years in the Second Connecticut Regiment of the Continental Line - from 08 April 1777 to 08 June 1783.

This discharge certificate is not very different from any other discharge which was issued during the American Revolutionary War. From the looks of it, Brister Baker was just another soldier who had enlisted 'for the duration of the war', and ended up spending six years in the Second Connecticut Regiment of the Continental Line.

The thing that the discharge paper does not reveal is the fact that Brister Baker was a black man. The lack of visibility of Patriot Baker's skin color on the discharge paper emphasizes the lack of visibility that history has generally afforded the blacks who served as Patriots during the American Revolutionary War.

Although it comes as a surprise to most people when they initially hear it, the first colonial to die at the hands of the British was a man of African descent.

In Boston, where British troops had been quartered since 1768, open quarreling had broken out at various times, but nothing of any serious

consequence came of these clashes. On Friday, 02 March, 1770 a fist fight broke out between a town laborer and a soldier in the afternoon and developed into a small riot. By evening, bands of civilians and soldiers itching for a fight were roaming the streets, but the growing rabble was quieted down by the soldiers and other townspeople who were mindful of the approaching Sabbath, which the God-fearing New Englanders respected. Things were quiet until the following week began.

According to one tradition, on Monday, 05 March, five youths, passing through a narrow alley, came upon three soldiers striking their broadswords against a (brick or stone) wall for the sport of watching the sparks fly. One of the youths called out to the others to avoid the soldiers, and all of a sudden one of the soldiers quickly turned around and struck him on the arm with his sword. The youths returned blows and a squabble ensued. The soldiers escaped into their barracks and recruited between twelve and twenty others to follow them back to teach the boys a lesson. With their cutlasses and muskets in hand the band of soldiers swept through the streets striking and bullying any civilians they met. Some of the townsfolk returned blows and pelted the

black genetics. It simply referred to the color of the man's skin as being lighter than other's.

Although there were some free blacks in the colonies at the time, such as Crispus Attucks, most people of African descent were slaves to the white Euro-Americans. At the outbreak of hostilities the population of the colonies was between 2,500,000 and 3,000,000, of which it is believed that between 500,000 and 600,000, or between fifteen and twenty percent, were black. Assuming that a quarter of that number were men of age to serve, there would have been almost 150,000 men available for service in the American armies.

[*Note: The discussion which follows refers to the utilization of black men in the ranks of the Continental Army as compensated soldiers, rather than in the militia or in the duty of 'service troops' whose sole purpose was in building defenses.*]

One of the practices of the military system was the 'substitution' practice. A man was permitted to send a male servant, usually a black slave, but sometimes a white indentured servant, to serve in his place. This practice resulted in a number of black men serving in the army despite the fact that there was no provision for them to be enlisted.

The large pool of available soldiers was not tapped effectively, though. One of the possible reasons for their not being utilized was the fact that most of the black men were slaves, and every colony permitted the institution of slavery. The Continental Congress, composed mainly of wealthy landholders, many of whom were slave owners themselves, were not inclined to enlist a black man, and in so doing deprive the slave owner of his servant. As a side note to this, it might be noted that Thomas Jefferson, in the preliminary draft of the Declaration of Independence, had included a scathing comment on George III as continuing to promote the slave trade. According to Jefferson, in a letter years later, the passage had been "*ftruck out in complaifance to South Carolina and Georgia, who had never attempted to refrain the importation of flaves, and who on the contrary ftill wifhed to continue it.*"

Another reason for the general reluctance toward enlisting blacks into the army was the fact

that many of the white settlers did not trust placing guns and other weapons in the hands of the blacks for fear of insurrection.

A third reason weighing in against the enlistment of blacks in the army was voiced by General Philip Schuyler, who asked how the so-called 'Sons of Freedom' could countenance being defended by men who were slaves.

The majority of the opposition to enlisting blacks into the ranks of the Patriot armies came, quite understandably, from the southern colonies. None of the southern colonies, save Maryland and Virginia, permitted black men to be enlisted. In regard to the two exceptions, Maryland permitted slaves to be enlisted, but Virginia would allow only freemen to join her forces. The northern colonies, on the other hand, began quite early to actually enlist black men, whether slave or free. Massachusetts started enlisting blacks in 1777, Rhode Island began in 1778, and the rest of the northern colonies soon followed suit.

The Continental Congress was not eager to enlist blacks; in fact, on 26 September, 1775 Edward Rutledge, a delegate from South Carolina, made a motion to have all the blacks discharged who were then currently in the ranks of the Continental Army. Rutledge was supported by most of the southern delegates, but the opposition to his proposal was strong and it was defeated.

In regard to matters which concerned the army, the delegates to the Continental Congress placed much faith and trust in the opinion of General Washington and the army's other commanders. In the matter of enlisting blacks, the General and other officers were not inclined to approve the idea. The Continental Congress sent a letter dated 26 September, 1775 to General George Washington in which a number of subjects were questioned. Washington received the letter during his encampment at Cambridge. A meeting was held between Washington and his general officers on 08 October to discuss the various subjects, one of which regarded the enlistment of slaves or free blacks. The generals attending that meeting unanimously agreed that slaves should not be enlisted. They were not unanimous on the subject of enlisting free black men, but a majority voted against it.

Some historians have noted General Washington's change in attitude toward the idea

of black men serving in the army. In General Orders which he issued at Cambridge on 12 November, 1775, Washington stated:

“Neither Negroes, Boys unable to bare Arms, nor old men unfit to endure the fatigues of the campaign, are to be inlifted.”

In a letter dated 31 December, 1775 to the President of the Continental Congress, General Washington stated:

“It has been repented to me, that the free Negroes who have ferved in this Army, are very much difatiffied at being difcarded. As it is to be apprehended that they may feek employ in the Minifterial Army, I have prefumed to depart from the Refolution refpecting them and have given licence for their being enlifted, If this is difapproved by Congrefs I fhall put a ftop to it.”

The Congress responded to Washington by passing a resolution during its session of 16 January, 1776, which simply stated:

That the free negroes, who have ferved faithfully in the army at Cambridge, may be re-inlifted therein, but no others.

According to Mark M. Boatner, in his book, *Encyclopedia Of The American Revolution*, stated that *“Washington’s army is said to have averaged about 50 Negroes per battalion...”*

There were 755 blacks in the Continental Army according to a return dated 24 August, 1778. Unfortunately, the British were beginning to show success in the South and it was feared that many of the black men there would be tempted to join their side. There were a number of instances in which that had already happened. One theory for the attraction the British army held for the blacks, especially the slaves, was that between the Americans and the British, the British were the lesser of two evils. If you were a slave and escaped, there was the very real possibility that if you were taken into the British army, you would never have to go back to your previous master. Joining the American army did not carry with it the same possibility.

Perhaps the first instance of blacks serving in the British army was at the Battle of Great Bridge on 09 December, 1775. A force of Patriots

under Colonel William Woodford successfully marched against Governor Dunmore, who had set up fortifications at the one end of the Great Bridge near Norfolk, Virginia. Dunmore held, in reserve, a unit composed of two hundred and thirty ‘Ethiopians’ and ‘Loyal Virginians.’

In April of 1776, when British General Henry Clinton arrived at North Carolina, his army took in seventy-one runaway slaves. These black men were organized into a company called the *Black Pioneers* commanded by Lieutenant George Martin. The name came from the use of the word *pioneer* to refer to a non-soldier who assisted in the functioning of the army. The Black Pioneers accompanied Clinton when he headed northward to take command of New York City. Except for a period in which they were assigned to General Sir William Howe’s army when he occupied Philadelphia, the Black Pioneers remained under Clinton’s command and protection.

As was feared by many of the Americans, their black slaves were encouraged into running away by promises of freedom. Governor Dunmore issued *A Proclamation* on 14 November, 1775, in which freedom was promised to

...all indentured Servants, Negroes or others (appertaining to Rebels)..that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY’S Troops as foon as may be, for the more fpeedily reducing this Colony to a proper Senfe of their Duty...

Perhaps Dunmore’s *Proclamation* gave General Washington the motivation to reconsider his stance on the enlistment of black men into the Continental Army, and to write the letter to the Continental Congress on 31 December, 1775.

General Clinton issued the *Phillipsburgh Proclamation* four years later, on 30 June, 1779, in which he granted sanctuary and freedom to any black slaves who ran away from their white masters and made it to the British lines.

According to the records of Commissioner John Cruden, nearly 5,000 ex-slaves were placed in the employ of the British army after the taking of Charleston, South Carolina in 1780.

During the siege of Yorktown, it is believed that nearly 5,000 blacks left the region aboard British merchant ships bound for Jamaica.

When the British evacuated Savannah, Georgia in August, 1782, approximately 3,500 blacks were transported to first to Jamaica and then to St. Augustine in colonial East Florida.

Charleston's evacuation resulted in 5,300 blacks being transported in December, 1782 to Jamaica and then to East Florida.

When the war had formally ended with the Treaty of Paris signed, and the British were making preparations to evacuate New York City, the last city held by them, nearly 3,000 blacks, of which nearly 1,300 were men, waited to be transported along with the British from this country.

The foregoing figures from the various cities occupied by the British, reveal the effectiveness of Clinton's offer of freedom. Some of the members of the Continental Congress foresaw such an exodus of blacks to the enemy, and urged their fellow members to enact legislation that would enable them to reverse that trend.

During the 29 March, 1779 session of the Continental Congress, the report of *'the committee on the circumstances of the fouthern ftates, and the ways and means for their safety and defence'* was presented. In regard to the circumstances of South Carolina, it was stated:

That the State of South Carolina as repreftented by the delegates of the faid State and by Mr. Huger, who has come hither at the request of the governor of the faid State, on purpofe to explain the particular circumftances thereof, is unable to make any effectual efforts with militia, by reafon of the great proportion of citizens necefsary to remain at home to prevent infurrections among the negroes, and to prevent the defection of them to the enemy.

That the ftate of the country and the great numbers of thofe people among them expofe the inhabitants to great danger from the endeavors of the enemy to excite them, either to revolt or to defert. That it is fuggefted by the delegatea of the faid State, and by Mr. Huger, that a force might be raifed in the faid State from among the negroes which would not only be formidable to the enemy from their numbers and the difcipline of which they would very readily admit, but would alfo lefsen the danger from revolts and defections by detaching the moft vigorous and enterprizing from among the negroes... Whereupon,

Refolved, That it be recommended to the Governing Powers of the States of South Carolina and Georgia, to confider of the Necefsity, and Utility of arming (if they fhall with Congrefs think it expedient to take meafures for immediately} raifing a force of ---- able bodied Negroes, either for filling up the continental Battalions of thofe States, or for forming feperate Corps, to be command-ed by white Commiffioned and NonCommiffioned Officers, the commiffioned officers to be appointed by the faid governing Powers refpectively, or for both purpofes.

A South Carolinian, John Laurens, was dispatched by the Congress to go to his home state to drum up support for the raising of three thousand black men. The South Carolina planters gave Laurens the cold shoulder.

But what of the blacks, enlisted in the other states? The facts speak for themselves that black men contributed to the Patriot Cause as wholeheartedly as whites.

On 19 April, 1775 the 'shot heard round the world' was fired at Lexington, Massachusetts. The British moved on westward to the town of Concord, where they were engaged by rebel Patriots and repelled back to Boston. Following that encounter, a broadside was published. In that *List of the Names of the Provincials who were Killed and Wounded in the late Engagement with His Majefty's Troops at Concord, &c* was the name of Prince Easterbrooks (A Negro Man). He was enlisted in Captain John Parker's Company, which was the first to engage the British at Lexington that morning. Peter Salem of Framingham, freed by his master so that he could serve with the local militia, was at Lexington on that day in April, 1775 also. It is believed that there were perhaps a dozen or more black men who stood with their white comrades on the battlefields of Lexington and Concord. The ones for whom we have names included not only the two listed above, but also: Isiah Bayoman of Stoneham, Pomp Blackman, Cato Bordman of Cambridge, Samuel Craft of Newton, Pompy of Braintree, Job Potama of Stoneham, Prince of Brookline, Cato Stedman of Cambridge, Cuff Whitmore of Arlington, and Cato Wood of Arlington.

Two months after the engagement at Lexington and Concord, the British attacked the Patriot defences on Breed's and Bunker Hill. An episode that occurred during the battle was described by Dr. Jeremy Belknap in his diary:

"A negro man belonging to Groton, took aim at Major Pitcairne as he was rallying the difperfed Britifh Troops, & fhot him thro' the head."

That 'negro man belonging to Groton' was noted by the contemporary historian, Samuel Swett as being 'Salem, a black soldier'. The muster rolls taken at the time of the Battle of Bunker Hill contained notations beside fourteen men's names as either 'Negro' or 'Mulatto'.

On the night of December 25/26 1776, General George Washington ferried his troops across the Delaware River to attack the Hessian soldiers in the town of Trenton, New Jersey. Along with the Patriots traveled at least one black man, Prince Whipple. He had been the slave of William Whipple, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress from New Hampshire, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

A black regiment raised in Rhode Island under the command of Colonel Christopher Greene displayed '*desperate valor*' in effectively repulsing three attacks by Hessians during the Battle of Rhode Island at Newport on 29 August, 1778. The regiment's valor was described by a contemporary writer:

"There was a black regiment in the fame fituation. Yes, a regiment of negroes, fighting for our liberty and independence, - not a white man among them but the officers, - ftationed in the fame dangerous and refponfible pofition. Had they been unfaithful, or given way before the enemy, all would have been loft. Three times in fucefsion were they attacked, with moft defperate valor and fury, by well difciplined and veteran troops, and three times did they fucefsfully repel the afsault, and thus preferve our army from capture."

Greene's regiment was the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. Rhode Island had led the way in creating segregated black regiments when, in January of 1778 it reassigned the 1st Rhode Island Regiment of the Continental Line to the 2nd

Regiment, and then reestablished the 1st Regiment entirely of blacks, albeit with white officers and non-commissioned officers. In order to fill the regiment, the state government purchased any and all slaves who wished to enlist from their owners.

The promise of emancipation following the war was a great incentive to the slaves. During the course of the war between two hundred and twenty five and two hundred and fifty black men joined the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. This black regiment would not only distinguish itself in the Battle of Rhode Island but also at Red Point, at New York City in 1781, at Oswego and at Yorktown.

Rhode Island was not the only New England state to see the value in allowing its black residents to serve in the army. Connecticut, believed to have had the largest population of blacks north of the Mason-Dixon line, passed two pieces of legislation in 1777 to allow blacks to enter the army. The first stated that any two men who procured a substitute would be exempted from the draft. The second stated that masters who freed their slaves in order that they might serve in the army would be relieved of all future obligation to support those slaves. The legislation was welcomed by whites and blacks alike. A master and his son were guaranteed exemption, by providing a slave as a substitute in their place. The slave often regarded the deal as fair because it meant he would gain his freedom upon the conclusion of the war. The Second Company of the Fourth Regiment of the Connecticut Continental Line was composed entirely of black men.

Despite the need for more troops, and the apparent value they had brought to the Continental Army after some four or five years of service, there were still individuals in power, including General Washington, who were against allowing the blacks too much recognition. As noted previously, his attitude had changed, but even though Washington was not completely against blacks serving in the Continental Army, he just wanted to ensure that they did not gain too much freedom.

General Washington, sent a letter to Major General William Heath, dated 29 June, 1780, in which he was discussed the regiments of the

Continental Line from the province of Rhode Island. In that letter he noted:

"The objection to joining Greenes Regiment may be removed by dividing the Blacks in such a manner between the two, as to abolish the name and appearance of a Black Corps."

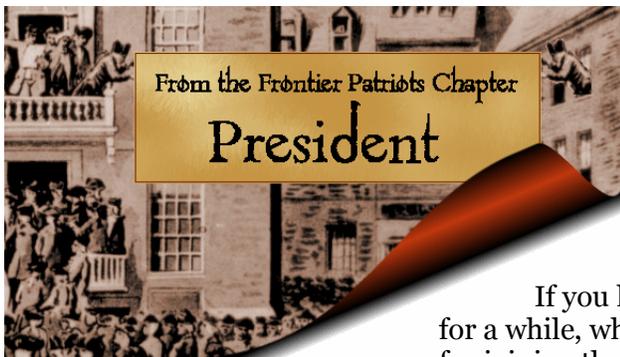
General Washington did not provide an explanation of his desire to 'abolish the name and appearance of a Black Corps' in the letter to General Heath. Washington would, six years later advocate abolition of slavery in another letter. On 09 September, 1786 he wrote a letter to John Mercer in which he stated, in reply to a previous question from Mercer:

"I never mean (unless some particular circumstance should compel me to it) to possess another slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by which slavery in this country may be abolished by flow, sure, and imperceptible degrees."

The Southern aristocrats / planters' objections to emancipating their slaves were not shared by their northern sister states. The first step was taken by the predominantly Quaker

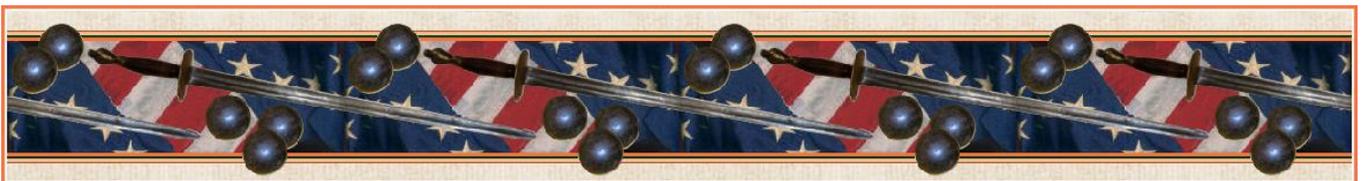
legislature of Pennsylvania when it enacted a law granting the gradual abolition of slavery within the state's bounds on 01 March, 1780. Although not abolishing slavery entirely and all at once, the law gave freedom to the children of then existing slaves when they would reach the age of twenty-eight, and no children born to slaves after that date would be considered slaves themselves. The state of Massachusetts followed Pennsylvania's lead by enacting a similar, but more far-reaching law when she abolished slavery altogether, later that same year. The other northern states in turn followed Pennsylvania and Massachusetts' lead with Vermont and New Hampshire passing legislation to abolish slavery completely, and Connecticut and Rhode Island calling for gradual abolition, all in 1784. New York would pass similar legislation in 1799.

It should lastly be noted that the black Patriots seldom received the compensation they were deserving of, other than the release of servitude to their previous masters. When, on 13 June, 1783 the 1st Rhode Island Regiment of the Continental Line was discharged, the men were simply told to go home. They would get no pay.



The next meeting of the Frontier Patriots Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution will be held on Saturday, September 2, 2017 starting at 12 Noon. ~ at Ed's Steak House restaurant, 4476 Business 220, Bedford, PA (Opposite to the I99 access road)

If you live in the area, and haven't been to a Chapter meeting for a while, why not consider joining us on the 2nd? A major reason for joining the Sons of the American Revolution is to socialize with others who have a kindred interest in their ancestry ~ especially of those ancestors who shared the same dream of liberation from Great Britain.



The Tea Act ~ passed 10 May 1773

This Act was cited as *13 Geo. III Cap. 44*. It is somewhat unique in the group of Acts which led to the American Revolutionary War, in that it was enacted for the primary purpose of helping the East India Company from falling into bankruptcy.

The East India Company was created by royal charter, granted by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600, as the *Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies*. As such, it was the oldest such company in existence, and counted many aristocrats and wealthy merchants as its share holders. It was a very powerful entity, rivaling the British government in that it possessed its own army and functioned outside of British rules and regulations in some cases. By the start of the 1700s, the East India Company had formed a lobby within the British Parliament, thereby being able to influence the sponsorship and passage of Acts beneficial to the Company. The East India Company initially competed against the Dutch East India Company (which had been established in 1602) for control of the spice trade. Importation of pepper to Great Britain and its colonies was the Company's initial item of trade.

In early 1773, the East India Company's stock prices (on the London Exchange) had dropped from 280 to 160 pounds. At the time, the Company had a surplus of nearly 17 million lbs of tea in its warehouses in England. In order for the Company to be saved from bankruptcy, it had to get rid of that surplus tea quickly.

It should be remembered that duties on tea were included in the Townshend Act. When that Act was repealed, the duties on tea were not removed. In effect, a new Act was not really necessary, but what the new Act did was reduce the import tax from 9 pence to 3 pence per lb. This allowed the East India Company to undercut the prices on tea being charged by the Dutch merchants. The Act also gave the East India Company the right to sell its tea directly to the merchants in the American Colonies, without going through any middlemen. Not only could the British East India Company sell its tea at prices lower than at the Dutch prices, but it was able to sell the tea at prices lower than those being charged by colonial smugglers, while still making a profit.

The straw that broke the camel's back was that the East India Company was authorized to sell half a million lbs of tea to selected merchants in the major port cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. This smacked of monopoly, and that is precisely to what the Americans (other than the selected few merchants) objected.

On 16 October, Philadelphians met, and produced a condemnation of the Act along with a call for the merchants who had been identified by the East India Company as its selected consignees to resign. On the 5th and 6th of November, Bostonians held their own meeting and used the Philadelphia resolves to write their own. New York held its own discussions on the matter on 10 November, resulting in the publication of a broadside warning ships carrying tea to not enter the harbor. Then, on the 29th, the Sons of Liberty demanded a boycott of any tea landed, and a call for the consignees in that city to resign. The people of Charleston waited until the first ship carrying tea arrived in their harbor on 02 December before they demanded the consignees' resignation. As a result of the meetings, the consignee merchants of Philadelphia, New York and Charleston bowed to the pressure and did, in fact, resign; those in Boston refused to. (Perhaps the reason for the Boston response was that two of the consignees were sons of Governor Hutchinson, while a third was his nephew.)

At Boston Harbor, on the 27th of November, the *Dartmouth* arrived. The result was the Boston Tea Party, in which, on the evening of the 16th of December, approximately 8,000 people gathered at Boston's Old South Church. From that crowd emerged a group of men disguised as Mohawk Indians; they headed to Griffin's Wharf, where the *Dartmouth* and two other recently arrived ships were moored. Boarding the ships, the group broke open and dumped into the harbor's waters all 342 chests of tea.

It would not be until 1778, in a feeble attempt by the British Parliament to end the American Revolutionary War, that the *Taxation of Colonies Act* was passed. Assuming that the passage of an Act declaring that Parliament would not impose any duties on items imported to the American Colonies would appease the Colonists and induce them to end the War, the Act of 1778 included the repeal of the Tea Act.

For those of you that receive this newsletter by US mail, if you have an email address, we would appreciate you sending it to us to use for future newsletters. Printing and mailing these newsletters is very expensive. Please send to our Secretary Melvin McDowell at melvin.mcdowell@gmail.com