



## BLACK PATRIOTS FOR LIBERTY

It is a regrettable but true that Blacks during the Revolution were often the butt of scorn, derision and ridicule by many on both sides. Phrases like “boys, old men, and negroes,”<sup>1</sup> in describing some of the American rank and file were not intended as compliments. Although today we feel reassured in knowing that Blacks served as soldiers in the Continental Army, some even as NCOs, back then it was, as could be expected, a struggle gaining respect and due recognition. And yet it is, perhaps oddly enough, to its credit that war provided them with an opportunity to attempt to do so; and in this was one way in which the bitter and destructive conflict could be said to have produced beneficial results. Not results that were *of themselves* broad and far reaching, but as seeds of later growth and development and which, as part of a process ongoing over the course of generations, did significantly help to raise the American Black male from his hitherto servile and subsidiary class status.

Pre-Civil War abolitionists were not at loss to play up the contribution of Blacks in the Revolutionary War, and William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons* (1855), with introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, is one exemplary instance of such efforts. The ensuing is taken from pages 129-131 of that volume. The military action being described presumably refers to the battle at Newport, Rhode Island of 29 August 1778 in which the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment gallantly distinguished themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Orders of Gen. Washington, dated Head-Quarters, Cambridge, November 12, 1775. Initially, both Washington and the Continental Congress, evidently to avoid offending southern slave holder, discouraged the use of blacks as soldiers. But later in 1776, Washington was approached by black veterans, some of whom acquitted themselves as fighters in the siege of Boston, and who petitioned his continued support. For this and the obvious practical need of helping to keep the army manned, he came around to changing his position; ultimately persuading Congress to do the same. It thereafter became a common practice to enlist slaves or hire blacks as substitutes in order to meet a given individual’s recruitment obligations.

<sup>2</sup> See the “Narrative of Boyrereau Brinch: An Enslaved African American in the Revolutionary Army, 1777-1783 (1810) – EXCERPTS” which gives one Black soldier’s account of his experiences fighting in the American Army, and who by his own report also found himself within the thick of it; available at: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/makingrev/war/text6/aframerbrinch.pdf> For further reading, see *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961) by Benjamin Quarles, and also “Black in Blue: African Americans in the Continental Army,” *Patriots of the American Revolution* magazine, July/Aug. 2011, vol 4, issue 4, and “They were

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[William Cooper Nell:] I have received from Mr. George E. Willis, of Providence, the following list of names, as among the colored soldiers in the Rhode Island Regiment during the Revolutionary War:--

SCIPIO BROWN,  
PRINCE VAUGHN,  
GUY WATSON,  
PRIMUS RHODES,  
PRINCE GREENE,  
HENRY TABOR,  
REUBEN ROBERTS,  
CÆSAR POWER,  
THOMAS BROWN,  
SAMSON HAZZARD,  
RICHARD RHODES,  
CUFF GREENE,  
CATO GREENE,  
PRINCE JENKS,  
PHILO PHILLIPS,  
YORK CHAMPLIN,  
ICHABOD NORTHUP.

RICHARD COZZENS, a fifer in the Rhode Island Regiment, was born in Africa, and died in Providence. in 1829.

In this connection, the following extracts from an address delivered, in 1842, before the Congregational and Presbyterian Anti-Slavery Society, at Francestown, N. H., by Dr. HARRIS, a Revolutionary veteran, will be read with great interest:--

“I sympathize deeply,” said Dr. Harris, “in the objects of this Society. I fought, my hearers, for the liberty which you enjoy. It surprises me that every man does not rally at the sound of liberty, and array himself with those who are laboring to abolish slavery in our country. The very mention of it warms the blood in my veins, and, old as I am, makes me feel something of the spirit and impulses of ‘76.

“Then liberty meant something. Then, liberty, independence, freedom, were in every man’s mouth. They were the sounds at which they rallied, and under which they fought and bled. They were the words which encouraged and cheered them through their hunger, and nakedness, and fatigue, in cold and in heat. The word slavery then filled their

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good soldiers.’ African– Americans Serving in the Continental Army,” see <https://www.scribd.com/doc/123231213/They-were-good-soldiers-African-Americans-Serving-in-the-Continental-Army> -- both by John C, Rees

hearts with horror. They fought because they would not be slaves. Those whom liberty has cost nothing, do not know how to prize it.

“I served in the Revolution, in General Washington’s army, three years under one enlistment. I have stood in battle, where balls, like hail, were flying all around me. The man standing next to me was shot by my side--his blood spouted upon my clothes, which I wore for weeks. My nearest blood, except that which runs in my veins, was shed for liberty. My only brother was shot dead instantly in the Revolution. Liberty is dear to my heart--I cannot endure the thought, that my countrymen should be slaves.

“When stationed in the State of Rhode Island, the regiment to which I belonged was once ordered to what was called a flanking position,--that is, upon a place which the enemy must pass in order to come round in our rear, to drive us from the fort. This pass was every thing, both to them and to us; of course, it was a post of imminent danger. They attacked us with great fury, but were repulsed. They reinforced, and attacked us again, with more vigor and determination, and again were repulsed. Again they reinforced, and attacked us the third time, with the most desperate courage and resolution, but a third time were repulsed. The contest was fearful. Our position was hotly disputed and as hotly maintained.

“But I have another object in view in stating these facts. I would not be trumpeting my own acts; the only reason why I have named myself in connection with this transaction is, to show that I know whereof I affirm. There was a black regiment in the same situation. Yes, a regiment of negroes, fighting for our liberty and independence,--not a white man among them but the officers,-- stationed in this same dangerous and responsible position. Had they been unfaithful, or given way before the enemy, all would have been lost. Three times in succession were they attacked, with most desperate valor and fury, by well disciplined and veteran troops, and three times did they successfully repel the assault, and thus preserve our army from capture. They fought through the war. They were brave, hardy troops. They helped to gain our liberty and independence.

“Now, the war is over, our freedom is gained--what is to be done with these colored soldiers, who have shed their best blood in its defence? Must they be sent off out of the country, because they are black? or must they be sent back into slavery, now they have risked their lives and shed their blood to secure the freedom of their masters? I ask, what became of these noble colored soldiers? Many of them, I fear, were taken back to the South, and doomed to the fetter and the chain.

“And why is it, that the colored inhabitants of our nation, born in this country, and entitled to all the rights of freemen, are held in slavery? Why, but because they are black? I have often thought, that, should God see fit, by a miracle, to change their color, straighten their hair, and give their features and complexion the appearance of the whites, slavery would not continue a year. No, you would then go and abolish it with the sword, if it were not speedily done without. But is it a suitable cause for making men slaves, because God has given them such a color, such hair and such features, as he saw fit?”

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Wm. Thomas Sherman

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