

African-Americans in the Revolution

In “*The Negro in the American Revolution*,” Benjamin Quarles said the African-American was “a participant and a symbol. He was active on the battlefronts and behind the lines . . . 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. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those ‘unalienable rights’ of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken.”

African-Americans served in the Massachusetts companies and in the state militias of northern states. The Rhode Island regiment at Yorktown was three-fourths black. African-Americans also served in the navy. It is estimated that about 5,000 African-Americans served in the war.

Many African-Americans fought with the British since the British commander, Sir Henry Clinton, offered freedom to slaves who would fight for the King. The British used the runaway slaves as guides, spies and laborers (carpenters, blacksmiths, etc.). By using the African-Americans as laborers, whites were free to be soldiers.

Many slaves left when the British evacuated after the end of the war. Quarles says. “Thousands of Negroes were taken to other islands in the British West Indies . . . Practically all the black immigrants were slaves. Many had been brought in as slaves, but many others who came expecting to be free were seized by those holding no legal title . . .”.

The Continental Army had two all-black units and a third unit came from Haiti. The First Rhode Island Regiment had ninety-five ex-slaves and thirty freedmen. This unit served throughout the entire war. Another unit was Boston’s Bucks of America, led by George Middleton. Very few facts are known about this group. They gave Boston merchant’s property as recognition for protection and Governor John Hancock awarded them a special medallion and flag.

A number of black soldiers fought in the patriot ranks at the Battle of Kings Mountain. Pension records indicate that five and possibly six African-Americans fought for the Patriot cause.

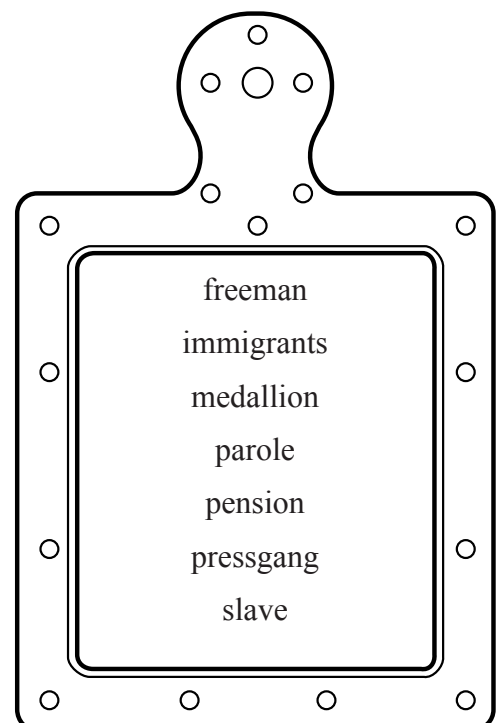
Five African-American participants at Kings Mountain:

Essius (Esaius) Bowman - a free man, served in Captain Joel Lewis’ company from Virginia. He is said to have been one of the men who shot Patrick Ferguson, commander of the Loyalist force

OBJECTIVES

The student will be able to:

- 1) list the responsibilities of African-American soldiers in the Revolution, and;
- 2) discuss the contributions of at least three African-Americans of the era.
- 3) identify duties most often performed by African-Americans.



at Kings Mountain.

John Broddy - a servant, was with Colonel William Campbell of Virginia. Although he did not bear arms, he was near enough to the battle to observe the action and while riding horseback nearby was fired upon by Loyalists mistaking him for Colonel Campbell.

Andrew Ferguson - a freeman of Virginia stated that both his father and mother were free persons. He was drafted early in January 1780 at the age of fifteen. Two weeks prior to being drafted, while with his father, Andrew Peeley, he was taken prisoner by a British pressgang. After escaping, he and his father were under the command of Captain William Harris and Colonel William McCormick. The first engagement in which Ferguson took part was the battle at Allegheny. He recalled that Colonel Morgan, Colonel McCormick, Captain Harris, and the two British officers who had captured him were in the battle. Ferguson was in the battles of Maumie, Brandywine (as was Major Patrick Ferguson who was the Loyalist Commander killed at Kings Mountain), a battle in Rowan County, North Carolina, Camden (not in the main action, but nonetheless was shot in the leg), Musgrove's Mill, Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and Guilford Courthouse. He was wounded in the head at Guilford Courthouse (which was treated by insertion of a plate made of hammered silver coins) but went on to fight in the battle of Ninety Six and Eutaw Springs. He was granted a pension on his application executed on August 16, 1838 while residing in Monroe County, Indiana. In 1851 he stated he was aged about ninety-six years. A well-known and widely respected citizen of the state, Ferguson was granted 160 acres of bounty land on an application filed in 1855.



Illustrations by Frieda Collins

Primes (also called Primus) - a free man, applied for pension December 16, 1846 while residing in Roan County, Tennessee, and aged eighty-six years. He said that he enlisted during 1777. Part of the time he was under Captains Garter, Abbot, Locke, and Colonel Williams. He was taken prisoner at Charleston, was paroled, violated his parole, and rejoined the army. Primus was again taken prisoner, this time at Gum Swamp, and was again released. He was in the battle at Camden (where he was wounded in the head), Kings Mountain, Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse, Eutaw Springs, and the siege of Yorktown. Primes left no widow at his death, but one son, Primes, Jr., survived him.

Ishmael Titus - was born a slave and when aged about thirteen years was sold to John and Richard Marr who lived on the Dan River in North Carolina and owned an interest in Troublesome Iron Works. He lived with them a long time and was then sold to Lawrence Ross.

While residing with Ross in Rowan County, North Carolina, Titus substituted for Ross who had been drafted for a one year tour. Titus was promised his freedom in exchange. During this service Titus was stationed at Fort Independence and was in several encounters against Indians and Loyalists. Thereafter, he enlisted, and arrived at Gates' defeat just as the American force began to withdraw. Titus was under Captain John Cleveland and Colonel Cleveland in the battles of Deep River and Kings Mountain. Later he enlisted under General Greene and was in the battle of Guilford Courthouse. Titus filed a pension application on October 10, 1832 while residing in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and aged eighty-nine years.

Some African-Americans who played a significant role in the American Revolution were:

Crispus Attucks - an African-American member of the Sons of Liberty who was the first person killed in the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770.

Prince Easterbrooks - a slave in Lexington who had enlisted in Captain John Parker's militia and who was wounded at Concord, April 19, 1775.

Peter Salem - a slave who was one of about 20 black soldiers at the Battle of Bunker Hill. John Trumbull (who witnessed the battle) painted Salem in his "Battle of Bunker Hill." Salem is credited with killing the British leader, Major Pitcairn, in the battle.

Salem Poor - a freeman who enlisted in the militia and fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He also served at Valley Forge and White Plains.

William Lee - a slave bought by George Washington in 1768, he served with Washington throughout the war and returned to Mount Vernon where he lived the rest of his life. He is pictured in John Trumbull's "George Washington, 1780." The will left by Washington freed him and gave him \$30 a year.

Oliver Cromwell - enlisted in a company attached to the Second New Jersey Regiment. He was at the Battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Monmouth, and Yorktown. He served with Washington for nearly 7 years. His discharge was written by Washington. He lived to be 101, dying in 1853.

Thomas Peters - Born in Africa, he was kidnapped and became a slave on a plantation perhaps in Louisiana. He was in North Carolina when the war began. He fought during the entire war and was wounded twice. After the war, the British took him to Nova Scotia but did not keep the promises of land grants to Peters and others. He went to London to complain to the government. While there, he was approached by a company to lead a group back to Africa. In 1792, he took eighty-four people, including his wife and six children to Freetown, Sierra Leone. He is considered one of the founders of Sierra Leone even though he died shortly after returning to Africa.

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