

**Did any men of color from Massachusetts fight with the British? What would enslaved men hope to gain by fighting for the British, a distant imperial power conceived by the revolutionaries to be enslaving all colonists?**

Historians estimate that more than 20,000 runaway slaves joined the British during the American Revolution. The experiences of the “Black Loyalists” represent the largest exodus of North America slaves before the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

Enslaved men of color supported the British cause for a number of reasons. First, many slaves believed slavery had already been abolished in Great Britain. In 1772, James Somerset, an enslaved man owned by customs official Charles Stuart, brought suit against his owner in a London court in order to obtain his freedom. The presiding judge, Lord Mansfield, ruled in Somerset’s favor and barred Stuart’s attempt to sell Somerset to West Indian planters. Although Lord Mansfield did not explicitly outlaw the practice of slavery, he found chattel slavery incompatible with English common law when issuing his ruling. Somerset’s case dealt a severe blow to the institution of slavery within the kingdom of Great Britain and the trial and subsequent ruling were widely reported in American newspapers. Many individuals in America interpreted the case as an indictment of slavery and evidence from runaway advertisements indicates that slaves themselves understood the case as having abolished slavery in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Second, from the beginning of the Revolutionary War, the British Army established itself as a bastion of freedom for enslaved peoples with a series of proclamations promising liberty to runaways. The first of these was Dunmore’s Proclamation, issued on November 14, 1775, in which the last royal governor of Virginia offered freedom to “all indented Servants, Negroes, or others... that are able and willing to bear Arms.” More than 1,500 slaves fled to the Dunmore’s sanctuary, where sadly more than two-thirds of them succumbed to disease. The following year, Sir William Howe extended Dunmore’s promise to those slaves living in the vicinity of British Army posts in New York and New Jersey. These various proclamations and slave desertions eventually culminated in Sir Henry Clinton’s Philipsburg Proclamation, issued on June 30, 1779, which offered freedom to all slaves owned by rebelling Americans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The best estimate supported taking into account the weight of primary source evidence is: Cassandra Pybus, “Jefferson’s Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, v. 62, no. 2 (April 2005), p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> Background information on Somerset’s case is from: Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009). Background on the “Black Loyalists,” see Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006) and Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). For one example of the slave belief in Great Britain as a free land, see runaway advertisement for Bacchus, in *Virginia Gazette*, June 30, 1774. The editors believed that Bacchus might “attempt to get on Board some Vessel bound for Great Britain, from the Knowledge he has of the late Determination of Somerset’s Case.”

<sup>3</sup> For Dunmore’s Proclamation and its impact, see Benjamin Quarles, “Lord Dunmore as Liberator,” *The William & Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, v. 15, no. 4 (October 1958), pp. 494-507. For background on Dunmore, Howe, Clinton, and the various proclamations issued by the British military, see: Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). It should be noted that the British government respected and defended the rights of loyalists to own slaves and routinely returned runaways to loyalist owners.

The British policy of offering freedom to enslaved people owned by rebellious colonists ensured that British military camps functioned as a magnet for slave refugees. Unsurprisingly, slave runaways were most numerous in areas under direct control of the British Army or in close proximity to British military forces. The black loyalist exodus that began in 1775 with Lord Dunmore's proclamation reached its peak in South Carolina during the British campaigns between 1779 and 1781 and in Virginia during the fighting there between 1780 and 1781. Given the combined promises of freedom offered by Somerset's case and the army's proclamations, slaves in the southern colonies may have preferred the risk of running away and an uncertain future with British military forces rather than remain in the great slave centers of Virginia and South Carolina.<sup>4</sup>

But how did these policies affect enslaved people in Massachusetts? While some Massachusetts slaves certainly did avail themselves of the freedoms offered by the British Army, it is virtually impossible to arrive at an accurate estimate of how many. Given that the British Army was unable to maintain a dominant presence in the state after the evacuation of Boston, the final total may amount to fewer than one hundred. After 1776, enslaved people of color in Massachusetts who wished to take advantage of British promises of freedom would have been forced to make their way to British forces stationed in either Newport or to New York City. The difficulties inherent in making this journey no doubt dissuaded many from attempting it.<sup>5</sup>

There is no indication that any enslaved men from Massachusetts actively fought with British forces during the Revolutionary War. Of the handful of predominately-black units known to have served with the British Army during the war, only a few records listing the names of black soldiers have survived. Perhaps the most famous of these—and the best documented—was the Black Company of Pioneers. The Pioneers served in Rhode Island, in New York, and in the southern colonies between 1776 and 1783. Many of the company's members left New York City with the British in 1782 and settled in Nova Scotia but it does not appear that any people of color from Massachusetts were among their number. Similarly, a cursory assessment of the rolls for other British units known to employ black soldiers did not reveal any names with a clear connection to Massachusetts. But a more thorough search of primary sources available in British manuscript repositories may reveal more information.<sup>6</sup>

The best source for information about enslaved people from Massachusetts who sided with the British is the so-called "Book of Negroes." As the war drew to a close and the British military

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<sup>4</sup> For numbers of black runaways in Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, see Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math," pp. 258-259.

<sup>5</sup> British forces captured Penobscot Bay, in present-day Maine, in June 1779 and occupied the region until the end of the war. It is possible that enslaved men and women living in Maine and Massachusetts fled to the region in order to obtain their freedom. See James S. Leamon, *Revolution Downeast: The War of American Independence in Maine* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), chapter 4 for background on the Penobscot occupation and disastrous relief expedition mounted by Massachusetts.

<sup>6</sup> Muster rolls for the Black Company of Pioneers are in the National Archives of Canada, Ward Chipman Papers, MG23 D1, Series I, v. 25, pp. 86-121. For further information on black soldiers serving with British forces during the American Revolution, see Todd W. Braisted, "The Black Pioneers and Others: The Military Role of Black Loyalists in the American War of Independence", in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Press, 1999), pp. 3-37.

prepared to evacuate New York City in November 1783, thousands of emancipated slaves requested to leave with them. For formerly enslaved men and women of color, the British government offered the best source of protection against potential re-enslavement by the victorious Americans. To their credit, British military officials chose to honor the promises of freedom offered to enslaved people and agreed to transport them to Nova Scotia. To facilitate the process, naval officers prepared an “Inspection Roll” to document those African men, women, and children who wished to join thousands of white loyalists in exile in British-controlled Canada. The three volumes that make up what is colloquially referred to as the “Book of Negroes” contains the names, brief physical descriptions, and places of origin for approximately 3,000 formerly enslaved people who left New York with the British in 1782. Of these, the vast majority came from the southern colonies. Only eighteen people gave their place of origin as Massachusetts.<sup>7</sup>

Within this small number, though, are several stories of Massachusetts slaves and their families. The “Book of Negroes” lists Lot Slade, his wife Freelove, and their son Roger as passengers on the ship *Apollo*, bound for Port Roseway, Nova Scotia. All three had been owned by different owners: Lot and Roger by different members of the Slade family in Swansea, Freelove by a Freetown loyalist named George Chace. Before boarding the *Apollo* in New York harbor, naval clerks recorded the family’s details into the “book of negroes.” Lot was a “stout fellow” with “a scar on his forehead;” Freelove “a stout wench;” officials thought Roger was “a fine boy.” The family told the inspecting officers that they had fled their Massachusetts owners in 1779, indicating that they may have gone to British-occupied Newport. Like many of the “Black Loyalists” who left New York City with the British, the Slades helped establish the refugee settlement in Birchtown, Nova Scotia in 1783. And in 1792, the Slades appear on a list of settlers who agreed to travel to Sierra Leone to build a new community in Africa.<sup>8</sup>

The largest group of enslaved Massachusetts people to join the British is also the most elusive. Various sources indicate that a “company of negroes” accompanied the loyalist refugees who left Boston for Nova Scotia in March 1776, but little is known about their numbers or composition. Given British practices in Virginia and later proclamations issued by army generals, it seems likely that this errant company consisted of slaves left in Boston by rebel colonists who fled the town when the siege began. The names of at least two individuals probably included in this “company” are known from other sources: Newton Prince, a freeman and minor merchant in Boston, left town with the British army, perhaps because he had become unpopular with townspeople after testifying in defense of the soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre. Pompey Fleet also fled Boston in March 1776. Before the Revolution, Pompey worked in the print shop of his owner, Thomas Fleet, the Boston printer responsible for publishing the *Boston Evening-Post* newspaper. From Halifax, Pompey eventually made his way to New York where he

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of the “Book of Negroes” has been transcribed and edited and is available in: Graham Russell Hodges and Susan Hawkes Cook, eds., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile After the American Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996). Hodges also provides an introduction to the manuscript sources and an overview of Black Loyalists in the post-war world.

<sup>8</sup> Information on the Slade family is from: Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, p. 45. The Slades also appear in the “Muster Book of Free Blacks, Settlement of Birchtown,” in the Shelburne Historical Records Collection, MG9 B9-14, Item 71, v. 1, pp. 112-113, National Archives of Canada.

continued in the printing business, working with James and Alexander Robertson to publish the *Royal Gazette*.<sup>9</sup>

Although small in number, the lives of the men and women of color who sided with the British during the Revolutionary War offer an alternate narrative to explain the relationship between revolution and freedom. Theirs is a story that links freedom with exile, migration, and empire in the changing Atlantic World that emerged in the wake of American independence.

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<sup>9</sup> Reference to the “company of negroes” is from: Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, p. xxi. For Newton Prince, see: Schama, *Rough Crossings*, p. 10. Background on Pompey Fleet from, Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, p. 28. Information on the Robertsons from: F. L. Pigot, “James Robertston, (1747-1816),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 5, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed August 13, 2014, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robertson\\_james\\_1747\\_1816\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robertson_james_1747_1816_5E.html).