The waging of the Revolutionary War, a conflict of liberty and independence fought primarily by white colonials, personified the struggle of African Americans seeking their own measure of freedom. While colonials sought economic, political, and religious independence, blacks viewed it as a personal matter steeped in individual freedom from slavery and racial advancement. The war set precedents for whites and blacks alike that would continue for centuries. For blacks, service in the conflict provided a pathway to liberty and rights and the enhancement of opportunities. Unfortunately, the white majority also set a pattern for this and future wars—to call upon African Americans only in time of great need and then to ignore them and their contributions once peace resumed.

The first Africans to arrive in the English colonies in North America landed at Jamestown as slaves in 1619. Over the next several decades, their numbers remained so few that the colonists saw no threat of a slave rebellion and armed their slaves to fight the Native Americans. Black slave and white master stood side by side to defend their homes and farms against their domestic adversaries. Freemen and slaves were welcomed into the local militias for the first several decades in the American colonies. The only reward for the black man was his self-survival albeit in continued slavery.

As the slave population increased, white colonials became concerned about a possible rebellion by their chattel—especially if they continued to familiarize them with arms and military procedures. The General Assembly of Virginia was the first to react when it passed an act in 1639 declaring, “All persons except Negroes to be provided arms and ammunition or be fined at the pleasure of the Governor and Council.” Massachusetts passed a similar resolution in 1656, and Connecticut did likewise after a brief rebellion of slaves in 1661. By the end of the seventeenth century, all thirteen colonies officially banned blacks from their militias, the only exceptions being those freemen and slaves that served as fifers, drummers, cooks, and laborers—with the stipulation that they remain unarmed.

Black slaves, who had little or no control over their own lives, did not accept this situation willingly or peacefully. By the mid-18th century more than two hundred fifty slave revolts had occurred throughout the colonies. All ended with the ruthless torturing and killing of the participants. Except for a few slaves who escaped to remote mountain and swamp villages, no slaves secured their freedom from these efforts.
Prior to the outbreak of the American Revolution, the official policy continued to prohibit the arming of blacks in militias. When need exceeded regulation, white colonials overlooked it. They continued to arm their slaves to assist them when Native Americans resisted white expansion in King William’s War in 1689, Queen Anne’s War in 1702–1713, and in smaller campaigns.

During the French and Indian War of 1756–1763, the British called upon their American colonists to support their military efforts by providing militia units. When faced with manpower shortages and resistance from whites to serve, militia leaders once more allowed blacks to join their ranks. Yet again, however, black males were mostly limited to positions as wagoners and laborers with very few acting as scouts or regular soldiers. The slaves in uniform did receive equal pay to that of white militiamen, but they had to surrender all or part of their wages to their owners. A few, those who displayed remarkable bravery, received their freedom for their service, while the vast majority returned to their masters as chattel.

This “called upon when needed” practice of employing blacks as soldiers remained an unwritten policy from the beginning of the Revolutionary War and continued more than a century and a half later. Left out and ignored in peace, the black man returned to the battlefield once manpower needs of the nation demanded it.

Despite the official policy of excluding blacks from the colonial militias, African Americans played a role in several of the events leading up to the Revolution and its early battles. Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave who had eluded capture for more than twenty years, was one of the key figures in the confrontation that led to the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. Several blacks were in the ranks of the local militias that fought in the war’s initial clash in Lexington with Minuteman Prince Estabrook being one of the first to fall to British bullets. With the beginning of actual hostilities, the rebellious colonials realized that they needed to further define the role of blacks in their military. Meeting in May 1775 and responsible for coordinating the early efforts of the Rebellion, the Committee of Safety, also known as the Hancock and Warren Committee, determined that while free African American men could serve, slaves remained prohibited from enlisting because their service would be “inconsistent with the principles that are to be supported, and reflect dishonor on this Colony.”

Field commanders, always short of fighting men, simply ignored the order and enlisted slaves with the permission of their masters—or in some cases to serve as substitutes for their owners. At the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, Peter Salem, a former slave freed shortly before the engagement, was credited with killing the British assault force commander, Major John Pitcairn, with a musket shot. Fellow black soldier Salem Poor fought so well in the same battle that the Massachusetts Bay General Court commended him stating, “We would beg leave to say, in the person of this said Negro centers a brave and gallant soldier.”

Shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Continental Congress assumed control of the colonial militias to form the Continental Army. Each of the colonies was fiercely independent and somewhat reluctant to fully cooperate on a united front. The New England colonies, where the revolution had begun, were much more in favor of fighting the British than were their southern neighbors. As a means of uniting the efforts of the colonies, the Continental Congress selected a Virginian as the Continental Army’s commander. George Washington, a slave owner who did not like the idea of armed blacks in uniform, quickly excluded them from the Continental Army’s ranks. On July 9, 1775, his adjutant general issued orders to recruiters not to enlist “any deserer from the Ministerial (British) army, nor any stroller, Negro, or vagabond.”

In the early months of Washington’s command, he saw the number of troops in his army diminish because of the completion of enlistment commitments, battlefield casualties, and desertions. On October 8, 1775, Washington met with his staff to consider the authorization of black enlistments, but prejudice continued to prevail over practicality. They agreed to continue to
exclude both slave and free blacks from enlisting. A few weeks later, the Continental Congress backed its commanding general by stating that blacks were to be “rejected altogether” from the army. On November 12, Washington issued official orders preventing the enlistment of blacks and forcing the discharge of those currently serving upon completion of their enlistments. Local and state militias followed suit and adopted the same policy.  

Racial prejudice as well as economic considerations buttressed white colonial reluctance to accept African Americans into their ranks. Many whites, particularly southern colonials, considered blacks to be inferior and cowardly sub-humans more suited to slave labor than to stand as equals in the military or colonial society. Although blacks, both freemen and slaves, had served honorably and bravely in the early battles of the Revolution, white soldiers refused to consider them equals. They particularly resented the taunting of the opposing British soldiers who shouted jingles at their American counterparts including:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The rebel clowns, oh! what a sight} \\
\text{Too awkward was the figure} \\
\text{‘Twas yonder stood a pious weight} \\
\text{And here and there a nigger.}\end{align*}
\]

Slave owners also remained hesitant to risk their valuable property to the dangers of the battlefield. They were not entirely convinced that the fledgling rebel government could or would pay for their loss if a slave died in combat or was emancipated for his honorable service. Owners also had to consider that slaves removed from their plantations or other jobs would reduce production and resultant profits.

Not all Americans opposed blacks serving in uniform, but they were in the minority—especially in the early days of fighting. General John Thomas, who commanded a Massachusetts brigade in the siege of Boston, wrote on October 24, 1775, “We have some Negroes; but I look on them, in general, equally serviceable with other men, for fatigue and in action; many of them proved themselves brave.”

On the other side of the lines, the British recognized that they could take advantage of American prejudice. In doing so they could exploit their divisiveness concerning blacks, while at the same time solving some of their own manpower needs. Because the military commitments of the British Empire reached around the world, rebellion in the American colonies did not always receive priority in manpower assignments. As a result, John Murray, the earl of Dunmore and the royal governor of the colony of Virginia, issued a proclamation, “I do hereby declare all indentured servants, Negroes, or others (pertaining to the rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s troops, as soon as you may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to proper dignity.”

Hundreds of slaves, with no loyalty to their masters or to their rebellious colony, immediately risked the dangers of flight from bondage to cross English lines. Their motivation was as simple as it was driving—freedom. The added motivation of being promised arms and ammunition to fight their former owners must have also played a role. After all, once on the battlefield, musket balls had no prejudices or favorites as they killed with no regard for race, ownership, or political or military ranking.

Within a month, three hundred escaped slaves joined what Dunmore called his Ethiopian Regiment. Each new soldier’s uniform sported the slogan, “Liberty to Slaves.” Over the next few months, more than thirty thousand slaves rallied to the English promise of freedom. While many fought the rebels, others assumed support roles as wagon masters, horse handlers, cooks, servants to officers, and laborers. Some took on more unusual jobs. Bill Richman, described as
a “man of color,” acted as the hangman in the 1776 execution in New York City of rebel spy Nathan Hale.\(^\text{15}\)

With his losses on the battlefield and the exodus of runaway slaves to Lord Dunmore, General Washington had to reconsider his exclusion policy. Once again, however, prejudice prevailed over good judgment. On December 30, 1775, the Continental Army commander-in-chief issued orders allowing the enlistment of free blacks but continued his ban on recruiting slaves. On February 21, 1776, he issued general orders restating and confirming this policy.\(^\text{16}\)

Despite Washington’s orders, not all of his subordinate commanders complied. Always short of willing manpower, some commanders enlisted black men without worrying about the status of “free” or “slave.” In other instances, male slaves reported for duty as substitutes for their owners, who supported the Revolution but preferred to do so from the front porches of their homes rather than on the arduous and dangerous battlefields.\(^\text{17}\)

Overall, however, black enlistments in the Continental Army remained few until the needs of the army overcame individual prejudices. By the fall of 1776, the British had defeated the colonials at the Battle of New York and had Washington’s army in full retreat. Washington, his fellow officers, and the founding fathers of the newly declared United States of America not only faced defeat but also the very real threat of hanging if the revolution failed. The Continental Army needed more soldiers for the revolution to continue—and for its leaders to survive.

In September, the Continental Congress asked the states to provide an additional eighty-eight battalions to reinforce the Continental Army. Three months later, they requested an additional sixteen battalions with the added stipulation that the states could fill their quotas “by drafts, from their militias, or in any other way.”\(^\text{18}\) This rather innocuous phrase of “in any other way” opened the way for black enlistments. Northern and Mid-Atlantic states opened their ranks to freemen as well as slaves. The latter were promised their freedom for their service and slave owners promised compensation for the loss of their property. Southern states remained reluctant to enlist blacks as fighters, but did permit them to serve in non-combat support positions.\(^\text{19}\)

By the end of the first year of the revolution, blacks had joined the Continental Army as infantrymen, support personnel, and personal servants. These African Americans stood side-by-side with their fellow white soldiers in integrated units. Although there certainly must have been lingering and overt prejudices, most common soldiers were much more interested in the fighting abilities of their fellow warriors than in the color of their skin. Their opponents also recognized the soldier ethos of the African Americans. On October 23, 1777, a Hessian mercenary officer in the service of the British wrote in his personal journal, “. . . no regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance; and among them are able-bodied, strong, brave fellows.”\(^\text{20}\)

With so much official action and individual resentment against blacks serving in the military, the question arises as to why they stepped forward despite these adversarial attitudes to fight for the liberties of their white masters. Part of the answer is as old as warfare itself. From the beginning of history, military service—particularly in battle—has offered young men the opportunity to prove themselves, both to themselves and to those around them. Once in the ranks, each soldier fought for self-survival and for his fellow soldiers—black or white. This opportunity for self-validation and fighting as a member of a team—mixed with a sense of adventure and an escape from the boring, backbreaking labor on farms and factories—appealed to slaves. Military service also promised, although it did not always deliver, adequate food, clothing, and blankets.

The idea of fighting for an independent United States or for any cause was mostly foreign to black slaves. Other than the feelings of newly arrived slaves from Africa who longed for their former villages and homeland, blacks had no reference to a sense of belonging in their present state. Some may have felt some loyalty to their masters—especially if they were reasonably fair and caring. However, most blacks had no affinity for their colony or future state, or for national
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unity. For the majority of slaves, those who never left the plantation, let alone allowed to learn how to read or write, the idea remained foreign. Communications between slave quarters with the outside world were limited. It was not that slaves did not care about such things; many did not know about them.

All of these factors played a role in African Americans joining the fight for independence, but one major factor trumped all the others. The primary motivation behind black service in uniform in the American Revolution was that they fought for their individual freedom. While the conflict and its Declaration of Independence did not promise an end to slavery or freedom for their race, individuals who fought and served honorably were in most cases promised their personal liberty. That was more than sufficient motivation for blacks, at least for those who knew of the promise and could secure their owners’ permission to enlist, to line up at the recruiting offices.

While the colonists grappled with the question of allowing African Americans to serve in uniform, they faced the even larger question of how they could rebel against Great Britain in the quest for their own liberty when they were continuing to deny it to their black slaves. By the outbreak of the revolution, fully one-fifth of the colonial population of two and a half million were black—and nearly all were chattel of their masters. Indeed, when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” In earlier drafts, the Virginian included a clause condemning British King George III for interfering with colonial efforts to halt further import of slaves. Southern colonists, however, so opposed the verbiage that Jefferson deleted it. There is no evidence that either he or any of the other founding fathers had any intention of having the Declaration of Independence and the resulting revolution bring an end to slavery.

Regardless of the debate on the future of African American slaves, the rebel white colonists remained concerned that their revolt might fail and that they would pay the ultimate consequence of the hangman’s rope. Prejudice and opinions of the worth of black soldiers were placed aside as manpower needs overcame all other considerations. Even Washington welcomed blacks, as several accompanied his crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas 1776 to win a decisive victory over Hessian mercenaries at Trenton, New Jersey. Although its accuracy is debatable, later paintings of the crossing even placed a black soldier in Washington’s personal boat.

Other Continental Army leaders also recognized the need for black enlistees if the rebellion were to prove a success. Alexander Hamilton, a member of Washington’s staff who would become the first United States Secretary of the Treasury, wrote on March 12, 1779, to the president of the Continental Congress, “I have not the least doubt, that the Negroes will make very excellent soldiers,” then continued in his letter with a thoughtful summary of the overall question of enlisting African Americans. Hamilton wrote:

The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability or pernicious tendency of a scheme which requires such a sacrifice. But it should be considered that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will; and that the best way to counteract the temptations they will hold out will be to offer them ourselves. An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, to open the door for their emancipation.

Need soon provided additional opportunities for blacks to join the Continental Army. African Americans continued to be enlisted as individual replacements in infantry units and as laborers.
Michael Lee Lanning

in rear areas. In November 1777, at the Continental Army’s long winter bivouac at Valley Forge, General James Varnum approached Washington with a proposal. Varnum’s home state of Rhode Island had a small population, and the British occupied two-thirds of its territory, causing great difficulties in the manning of its two infantry battalions. He suggested the combination of currently diminished units into one battalion, and that officers return to Rhode Island to enlist an all-black battalion. Washington agreed, as did Governor Nicholas Cooke of Rhode Island. The state’s Assembly followed suit by passing a resolution authorizing a black battalion along with measures to grant payment to owners who provided their slaves. Washington and Cooke had both admitted that they backed the measure because of the need for manpower. The Rhode Island Assembly did not mention need but rather attempted to cloak their actions in nobility by stating, “History affords us frequent precedents of the wisest, freest, and bravest nations, having liberated their slaves and enlisted them as soldiers to fight in defense of their country.”

Over the next several months, five companies with an operating strength of two hundred twenty-six men under the command of white Colonel Christopher Greene came into existence. Blacks made up about one hundred forty members of the unit with the rest filled by Native Americans and former white indentured servants. Shortly after their formation, and before they were properly trained, the Rhode Island Black Regiment, as they were known, joined white units in defense of their state. In what became their most significant battle, the black regiment held the line for four hours against repeated assaults by British and Hessian infantry resulting in twenty-two casualties.

Because of battlefield losses, disease, and the reluctance of some Rhode Islanders to provide their slaves, the numbers in the black regiment never exceeded one hundred fifty for the remainder of the conflict. After participating in fights in New Jersey, the unit faced tragedy. On May 14, 1781, Loyalists during the Battle of Pines Bridge, near Yorktown Heights, New York, killed the regiment’s commander, Colonel Green. Colonel Jeremiah Olney assumed command of the regiment and led it to the end of the war. He hailed his troops for “unexampled fortitude and patience.”

Other states also continued to recruit African American soldiers, but efforts to form all-black units were extremely limited. A Boston militia company of blacks, known as the Bucks, briefly took the field. Connecticut fielded a black unit of fifty-two slaves and freemen who served until November 1782 before disbanding with its veterans integrated into white units for the remainder of the war.

In addition to the Continental and British armies, blacks served in the ranks of their allies as well. During the efforts to retake the Port of Savannah from the British in September and October 1779, a French force of thirty-five hundred soldiers supported the Americans. About six hundred of these troops were freemen or slaves recruited in the French Caribbean colonies. Among these was Henri Christophe, who later used the skills he learned as a soldier to lead the slave rebellion that took over the island nation of Haiti.

The Spanish governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Galvez, also employed black soldiers in his campaigns against British forces in the Mississippi Valley and the Gulf Coast. Estimates of the numbers of blacks in his ranks range from ten to fifty percent. Galvez allowed African Americans to become officers, and six were cited for bravery with the King of Spain awarding them valor medals.

African Americans played a significant role at sea as well as on land during the revolution. From the beginnings of the colonization of North America, duty at sea was extremely hazardous.
Fishing boats and merchant vessels were always short of crewmen and paid little attention to a man’s color or whether he was slave or free if he was willing to serve. This continued into the revolution with the newly formed U.S. Navy and state navies welcoming black sailors. At no time during the war did the Continental or state governments forbid the enlistment of African American sailors.

Whites prohibited blacks from becoming officers, but many served as pilots for ships entering harbors and the inland waterways. A slave named Caesar, property of Carter Tarrant of Hampton, Virginia, was at the wheel of the schooner *Patriot* when it captured the British brig *Fanny* to secure a much-needed cargo of arms and supplies. The Virginia legislature finally recognized his service by purchasing his freedom on November 14, 1789. Meanwhile, the U.S. Marine Corps, in its infancy, also welcomed black enlistees. At least thirteen served in the Corps aboard U.S. and state flagged ships with one killed in action aboard the brig *Reprisal* in 1777. ³²

There is no doubt that blacks served in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps during the American Revolution. Their exact numbers, however, are impossible to calculate or confirm. Enlistment records, when kept at all, rarely noted the race of soldiers. From the available official and unofficial records, most scholars agree that about five thousand African Americans served. This is out of a total of three hundred thousand men who joined the ranks of the Continental Army and the state militias. ³³

This shows that only about one in sixty, or two percent, of the enlistments were black. These numbers, however, are not incisive because many African Americans enlisted, or were volunteered by their masters, for the duration of the war. ³⁴ Most whites enlisted for shorter periods. During the long conflict, the Continental Army never had more than thirty-five thousand soldiers in the field at any one time, resulting in a higher percentage of blacks being in the ranks than their enlistment numbers reveal.

Only one surviving document confirms the numbers of black soldiers. It is a single-page report signed by Adjutant General Alexander Scammell titled “Return of Negroes in the Army, 24th Augt. 1778.” ³⁵ It states that on that date, 755 blacks were serving in the various brigades of the Continental Army. At that time, the Continental Army was at one of its lowest manpower levels with only about 7,600 soldiers in its ranks—ten percent of whom were black. Meanwhile, the records of the numbers of African Americans, free or enslaved, in the American Navy are even less reliable. According to Naval records, about 1,500 blacks served aboard Continental and state flagged vessels—about ten percent of the total of rebel sailors. ³⁶

Many black revolutionary soldiers and sailors earned their freedom through their service and sacrifice in uniform. Interestingly, however, more enslaved blacks earned their freedom during the revolution to gain American liberty by fighting on the side of the British. At the end of the war and despite American protests, the Crown evacuated loyal black personnel. More than a thousand escaped slaves who joined Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment earned their freedom as did about two-thirds of those who crossed the lines into British camps to act as support personnel. Many moved to Canada, three thousand of them settling in Nova Scotia. In 1792, others sailed to West Africa to establish the colony of Sierra Leone. ³⁷ The majority of the blacks, though, departed for the British West Indies. Upon landing, many remained free, but at least a thousand returned to slavery against their will.

After signing the Treaty of Paris that formally ended the war on September 24, 1783, George Washington reduced the number of regular army soldiers. Neither he nor the new leaders of the United States had any desire to have a standing army. Within a matter of months, the Colonial Army had fewer than eighty men. The new nation’s navy, which had begun discharging sailors after the victory at Yorktown, had sold all its ships by mid-1785. During this period, the Marine Corps reduced its numbers until all were out of the service by September 1783.
It did not take long for U.S. officials to realize that they needed a larger armed force than this to protect the country against uprising by Native Americans and from foreign threats. The army slowly increased to 1,200 soldiers, but there were ample white volunteers to fill the ranks, leaving no opportunities for blacks. On May 8, 1792, the U.S. Congress formalized the exclusion of African Americans, free or enslaved, by resolving that military service was restricted to “free able-bodied white male citizens.” State militia laws generally followed federal regulations with the exception of Georgia and South Carolina that continued to employ blacks as laborers in their militias. North Carolina allowed freemen to enlist in their militia but limited their service to musicians.

On July 11, 1798, the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Marine Corps but excluded “negroes, mulattoes, or Indians” from its ranks. The U.S. Navy issued a similar order the following month but, unlike the Marine Corps, did not enforce it. While the Army and Marines had no competition for enlistees, the Navy faced manpower shortages because many sailors, both black and white, joined the better paying merchant and fishing fleets. As a result, captains signed any able-bodied seaman on board regardless of race; blacks appear on the rosters of most naval warships of the period.

Black participation in the American Revolution resulted in some improvements for their race. Many of the former colonists recognized that slavery was inconsistent with the objectives of freedom and liberty fought for on the battlefield and promised in the Constitution. Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire completely abolished human servitude. Other Northern states instituted plans to slowly eliminate slavery. The vast majority of America’s slaves, however, resided in Southern states where innovations in agriculture and manufacturing increased the demand for their labor. In fact, the number of enslaved African Americans increased by sevenfold from five hundred thousand to three and a half million from the end of the Revolutionary War until their emancipation during and after the Civil War.

Upon the war’s conclusion, most Americans viewed blacks as property to increase the wealth of their owners rather than as soldier-partners. Indeed, white historians ignored African American participation when remembering the war, while few outlets existed for blacks to recall their side of the story. The earliest and best summary of African Americans in the revolution appeared during the Civil War, a conflict that finally granted them their freedom. An article entitled “Negro Soldiers in the Revolution” in the September 16, 1863 issue of the Army and Navy Journal observed:

The record is clear, that from the beginning to the conclusion of the war of the Revolution, Negros served in the Continental Armies with intelligence, courage, and steadfastness; and that important results in several instances are directly traceable to their good conduct.

Notes
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11 Foner, Blacks in the American Revolution, 4.
12 Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution, 12.
13 Fishel and Quarles, The Negro American, 56.
14 Gelb, Less Than Glory, 178.
15 Ibid., 212.
16 Wilson, The Black Phalanx, 40–41.
17 Foner, Blacks in the American Revolution, 58.
18 Ibid., 55.
20 Foner, Blacks in the American Revolution, 58.
21 David Colbert, Eyewitness to America (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 82–83.
24 Wilson, The Black Phalanx, 52.
28 Foner, Blacks in the American Revolution, 58.
29 Nalty, Strength for the Fight, 17.
33 Foner, Blacks in the American Revolution, 67.
34 Charles Royster, A Revolutionary People at War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 241.
36 James B. Farr, Black Odyssey (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 113.