

PREFACE

In the Revolutionary War the American Negro was a participant and a symbol. He was active on the battlefronts and behind the lines; in his expectations and in the gains he registered during the war, he personified the goal of that freedom in whose name the struggle was waged. 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. Whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American or British, could count on a ready response from the blacks.

On the American side the Negro saw only limited military service until the war dragged on into its third year. This negative attitude toward enlisting the colored man sprang from a reluctance to deprive a master of his apprenticed servant or chattel slave, and from the fear of putting guns in the hands of a class of persons most of whom were not free. In the main, the Negro was thought of as a servile laborer rather than as a potential warrior. But when manpower needs became acute, whether in the volunteer forces, the militia, or the Continental troops, hesitations and fears were put into the background and the Negro was mustered in.

This procedure typified an attitude toward Negro enlistment that would prevail in America's future wars. From colonial times until the twentieth century, the Negro would be bypassed in the early stages of conflict. But as the struggle grew arduous, civilian authorities and military commanders would turn to the one great remaining manpower pool, and the Negro would emerge from his status as a rejected inferior to become a comrade in arms.

Some twenty months after the war broke out between England and her former colonies—by the close of 1776—grim necessity

forced the states to reconsider the decision to exclude Negroes from their armies. Bound by the necessity of conciliating Southern views, Congress still refused to sanction Negro enlistments, but the states went ahead. Early in 1777 Massachusetts included Negroes in the list of draft eligibles, and the legislature of Rhode Island, at its February 1778 session, voted to raise two battalions of slaves. The substitute system encouraged the enlistment of Negroes; a man summoned to service was permitted to get someone to take his place, and to procure a Negro was easier and less expensive than to procure anyone else. In Virginia and in Maryland the change in attitude toward Negro soldiers was a consequence initially of the difficulty of mobilizing white manpower, and later of the southward shift of the main theatre of war.

Unlike their sister states, South Carolina and Georgia steadfastly refused to legalize slave enlistments. South Carolina's heavy Negro population made her fearful of such a step, and Georgia shared these misgivings. When these states remained adamant even after the fall of Savannah late in 1778, Congress recommended that they raise 3,000 Negro troops, but these two states declined to reverse their stand, and maintained it to the end.

The Negro welcomed the resort to arms. Although not very strong on theory, he fulfilled the pragmatic requirements of a revolutionary. He had little to lose in goods or lands, and he lacked a sentimental or blood tie with England. At any rate, black Americans quickly caught the spirit of '76. In the words of Frederick Douglass, the most prominent colored American of the nineteenth century, the Revolutionary War announced to Negroes "the advent of a nation based upon human brotherhood and the self-evident truths of liberty and equality." There were portents of a new era. Individual slaves petitioned for their manumission; groups of slaves memorialized state legislatures to abolish slavery. For the first time, a gallery of distinguished Negroes made their appearance, among them Phillis Wheatley, precocious poet; Prince Hall, founder of Negro Masonry; and Benjamin Banneker, mathematician and astronomer.

Negro soldiers served in the minutemen companies of Massachusetts in the early weeks of the war, in the state militia of the Northern states, and in the state and Continental forces. They saw action in the Continental army at Monmouth, the last major battle in the North. At Yorktown, where on July 9, 1781, the Continental army passed in review, Baron von Cloisen, an aide-

de-camp to General Rochambeau, made note that "three-quarters of the Rhode Island regiment consists of negroes, and that regiment is the most neatly dressed, the best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers."

Negroes served on sea as well as land. In the Chesapeake waters of Virginia and Maryland the use of Negro pilots (often impressed slaves) was not uncommon, and the Massachusetts legislature ordered that captured slaves be made to serve on state vessels. Negroes were numbered among the more than twenty thousand seamen aboard the armada of American privateers.

It is not possible to give accurate figures as to the number of blacks in the American armies. Not more than a third of the Negroes who bore arms were racially labeled; moreover, colored combatants were interspersed with whites in what today might be called unsegregated units. It has been estimated, however, that 5,000 Negro soldiers served in the patriot forces, a respectable figure particularly since so many were not free to act.

Although manpower shortage was the paramount factor, the changed American sentiment toward drawing Negroes into the war effort and thus conceding them a higher status was in part a reflection of the humanitarian impulse which inspired the Revolution and was engendered by it. Anti-slavery sentiment mounted rapidly, and action was taken on both Continental and state levels. Above the Potomac, public opinion turned strongly against slavery; by March 1780 Pennsylvania was ready to lead the way by passing an act for its gradual abolition.

War's end brought further gain to the Negro. To the slave soldier, who had borne the responsibilities of citizenship before he could enjoy its rights, it brought freedom and in some instances a land bounty. In New Jersey, slaves belonging to Tories were freed by act of the legislature. Waged in the name of liberty, the war caused many Americans to give a hard look at their own domestic practices. Abolitionist societies multiplied, often under Quaker sponsorship; Northern states, following Pennsylvania's lead, took action to abolish or circumscribe the slave trade and slavery. In the South the wartime decline of the staple crops—tobacco, indigo, and rice—decreased both the value of the slave and the reluctance to give him his freedom.

Thousands of Negroes gained their freedom by joining His Majesty's forces. Faced, like their opponents, by a manpower shortage, the British were receptive to the use of blacks, and in

1779 Commander-in-Chief Sir Henry Clinton issued a proclamation offering freedom to Negroes who would join the royal standard. The British move was countered by the Americans, who exercised closer vigilance over their slaves, removed the able-bodied to interior places far from the scene of war, and threatened with dire punishment all who sought to join the enemy. To Negroes attempting to flee to the British the alternatives "liberty or death" took on an almost literal meaning. Nevertheless, by land and by sea they made their way to the British forces. In the South the British employed hundreds of runaways as shock troops; others served as guides and spies. It was as military laborers, however, that they found their widest use. Negro carpenters, hostlers, blacksmiths, axemen, and miners markedly increased the striking power of His Majesty's armed forces. The British discovered, as had the Americans, that a Negro laborer could perform a service that otherwise would have to be done by a white soldier. When the war ended, hundreds of Negroes were evacuated from Savannah, Charleston, and New York with the departing British forces.

The establishment of American independence did not bring all that many Negroes had hoped for. The idealism of the Declaration of Independence gave way to the conservatism of the Constitutional era. But if the Negro felt that the cause of liberty had lost momentum, his mood was somewhat brightened by the conviction that the Revolutionary era in which he lived had marked out an irreversible path toward freedom, that henceforth there could be no turning back even if there was a slowing down.

The present study proposes to investigate the role of the Negro in the American Revolution and thereby fill a gap in historical knowledge. Some attempt will be made to explore the extent to which changes occurred in the status of Negroes. It is hoped that this work will also throw some light on race relations, or more broadly, human relations, by describing the development of attitudes and practices, civilian and military, toward an American minority in a period of crisis.

Battle narrative has not been presented in any detail. Unlike the Civil War, the War of Independence had no all-Negro units; hence the military history of the Negro soldier in the Revolution is one with the general history of the American soldier in action. Except perhaps at the Battle of Rhode Island, in which the Rhode Island regiment of predominantly Negro composition took part,

the colored soldier of the Revolutionary War does not stand out as a racial entity.

I have tried to present a group portrait rather than a study of individuals. If, however, an often related story has not been included, it may be simply because it is not true. The female combatant and former schoolteacher Deborah Sampson who, disguised as a man, served for a year and a half in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, was not a Negro. Other episodes which I have discarded seem to owe their existence mainly to local legend. Such is the story, told in the Joseph Walker family of Virginia, about slave cook Dinah who, on a June morning in 1781, prepared such a succulent fried chicken breakfast for British officer Banastre Tarleton and his staff, and served it in such leisurely fashion, that a messenger had time to ride to Charlottesville and carry the warning that Tarleton's mounted force was on its way to seize Governor Jefferson and capture the state legislature. Still other tales have been omitted because the supporting evidence is weak. It is doubtful, for example, that a Negro slave, Pompey, guided the assaulting parties commanded by Anthony Wayne at Stony Point. Similarly, the contention that at Bunker Hill the shot that killed marine officer John Pitcairn was fired by former slave Peter Salem must be handled cautiously.

Another difficulty which arises in dealing with the Negro past stems from the nature and inherent limitations of the source material. It is not easy to know what Negroes were thinking; they were not articulate in a literary sense. Unlettered, they put very little down on paper. If they are to be understood, it must be primarily by what they did. Hence, especially in the pages of this work which deal with the Negro acting on his own volition, my approach has been to state the facts about his activities, indicate the documentary sources, and as far as possible avoid conjecture as to his unrecorded thought.

A final problem has been the determination of Negro identity. Since most of the participants in the Revolutionary War were racially anonymous, on what basis may a person be identified as a Negro? In this work I have designated an individual as a Negro only when the source specifically states it or where the source is referring only to Negroes. I make only one assumption: if the first or last name of a person was "Negro," he was not likely to be white. And although there are certain names largely

confined to Negroes, I have not assumed that persons with such names were necessarily colored. Thus, although three of the Americans on the sloop *Charming Polly*, captured by the British on May 16, 1777, bore the typically Negro names of William Cuff, Prince Hall, and Cuff Scott (and all came from Massachusetts coastal towns where Negro seamen were common), I have not assumed that they were Negroes. Similarly, although the owner of the famed Fraunces Tavern, scene of Washington's farewell to his soldiers on December 4, 1783, was called "Black Sam," more conclusive evidence than the adjective "black" may be needed to establish a Negro identity. Many Negroes had only one name, whereas few whites did; yet a person with but one name cannot be classified with certainty on that basis alone.

* * *

In making this study I have had many benefactors. I am grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for a generous fellowship which freed me for a year. To the Social Science Research Council, I am indebted for a military policy grant extending over the summers of 1955 and 1957. Morgan State College readily gave me a leave of absence.

I owe much to the staffs of research libraries: in Boston the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, and the Massachusetts State House; at Harvard University the Houghton and Widener libraries; in New York the New-York Historical Society and the New York Public Library, its 42nd Street center and its Schomburg Collection branch in Harlem; in Philadelphia the Pennsylvania Historical Society and the American Philosophical Society; in Virginia the University of Virginia at Charlottesville and the Virginia State Library at Richmond; in Chicago the Newberry Library and the Chicago Historical Society; and at the University of Michigan, the William L. Clements Library. My obligations in Washington, D. C., include the National Archives, the Moorland Foundation Collection at Howard University, headed by Mrs. Dorothy Porter, with her extensive knowledge of Negro bibliography, and the Library of Congress, especially the Manuscripts Division personnel.

I have had the good fortune to be located in Baltimore with its own good libraries, notably the Enoch Pratt Free Library, the Peabody Library, and those of Johns Hopkins University

and the Maryland Historical Society. The staffs of these libraries have been most graciously helpful. To the library personnel at Morgan State College I have compounded a long-standing debt for their "second-mile" assistance in arranging inter-library loans and in permitting me the fullest use of Morgan's own Negro materials.

My deepest gratitude goes to Mr. Howard H. Peckham, historian of the Revolutionary War and Director of the William L. Clements Library. Mr. Peckham read seven of the chapters, making penciled comments and calling attention to points to be checked. This study is much freer of flaws for his preliminary reading. I am greatly indebted to the readers to whom the original manuscript was sent and, above all, to the editorial staff of the Institute, for many good suggestions as to style, organization, and content.