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The Negro in the**American Revolution**

'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time. . . . Freedom hath been hunted around the Globe. . . . O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

THOMAS PAINE

THERE LIVED in Connecticut in the days preceding the Revolution a patriotic preacher who was given to making pretty speeches about liberty or death. This preacher owned a slave named Jack. The preacher preached and Jack slaved and listened and wondered. One day Jack went to his master and said:

"Master, I observe you always keep preaching about liberty and praying for liberty, and I love to hear you, sir, for liberty be a

good thing. You preach well and you pray well; but one thing you remember, Master—Poor Jack ain't free yet."

An irony of fate made Poor Jack and his master polar symbols of one of history's greatest paradoxes: the American Revolution.

Consider the background of that great event. A colony with a half-million slaves decides to go to war in support of the theory that all men are created equal and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Consider the prologue. A bold Negro decides to strike a blow for liberty and becomes the first martyr of the Revolution.

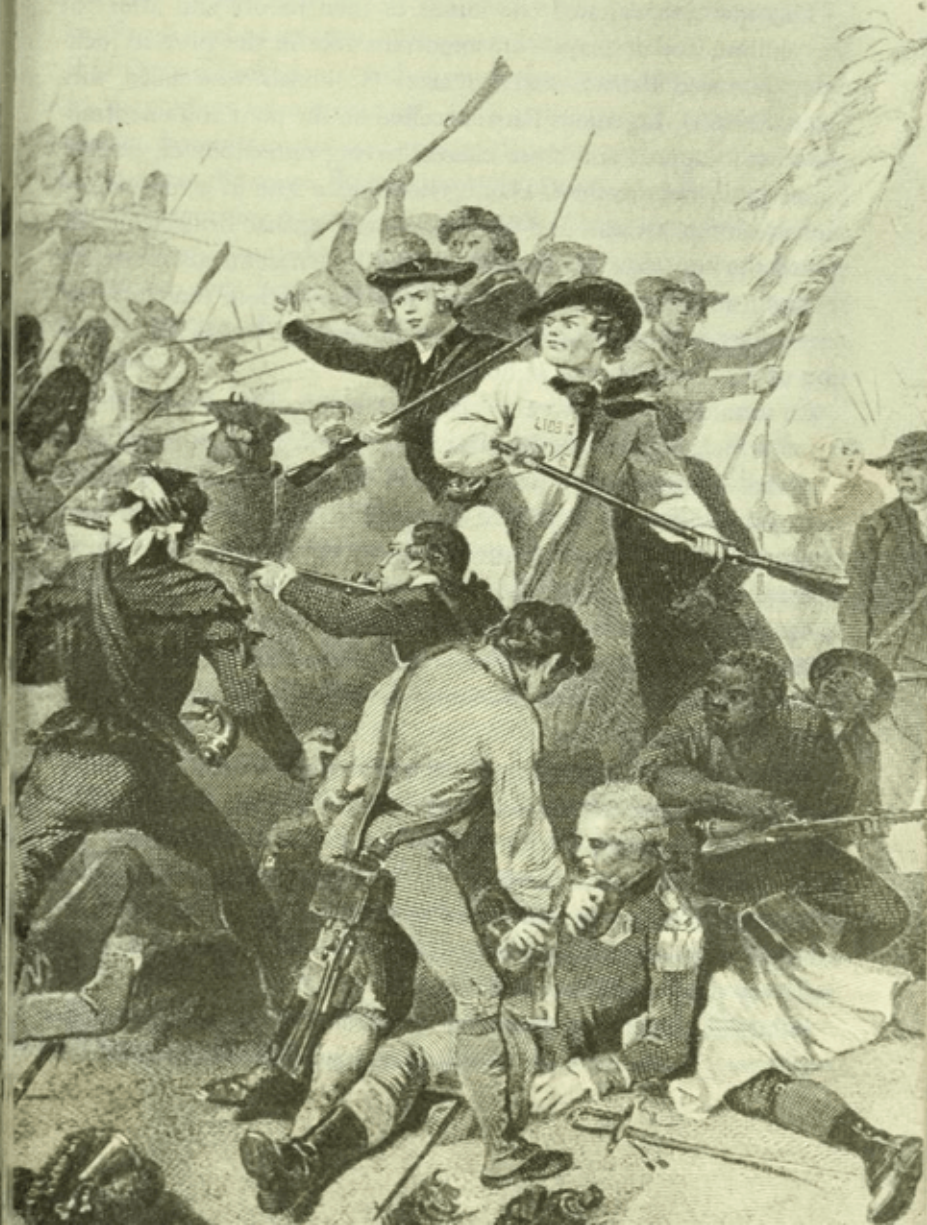
Consider the climax. Black men, some of them slaves, enter the lines and sign the Declaration of Independence with their blood. "It was not," Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "for their own land they fought, not even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. *Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit.*" [Emphasis supplied.]

Behind the Revolutionary rhetoric, behind the bombast, behind the living and dying and bleeding is the irony: black men toiled and fought so that white men could be free. This fact was not lost on the Revolutionary generation. It worried good men and women so much that they made Negro freedom an "inevitable corollary" of American freedom. James Otis and Tom Paine, the great propagandists of the Revolution, thundered against British tyranny and slaveholder tyranny. Abigail Adams told her husband John: "It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

Thomas Jefferson, a worried slaveholder, inserted a clause in the Declaration of Independence which indicted the King of England for promoting slavery: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the person of a distant people who never offended him, capturing and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur

Negro patriots were conspicuous in the fighting at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Two Negroes, Peter Salem and Salem Poor, were outstanding soldiers in the battle. Poor was later commended for his valor.

Boston Massacre was one of the events which led to Revolutionary War. Several Negroes were in the group which fought British soldiers on the night of March 5, 1770. Crispus Attucks (below, right) was the first person shot by the soldiers.



miserable death in their transportation thither. . . ." This clause was struck out in deference to slaveholders and slave-carriers who had grave doubts about the meaning of the sentence: "All men are created equal. . . ."

What precisely did the word "all" mean?

This question agitated the minds of men before and after the Revolution; and it played an important role in the prewar jockeying between Patriots and Loyalists (Colonials who sided with Great Britain). Ingenious Patriots called on the poor and unenfranchised for support and these classes, having tasted power, became increasingly independent. Having nothing to lose in a reshuffle of power, sailors, artisans and Negroes rioted against British officials, stoned the houses of Loyalists and voiced open demands for representation and property *in America*. "The Revolution," one historian noted, "was not merely a question of 'home rule'; it was also a question of who should rule at home."

An untold story of this era is the part Negroes played in the agitation which isolated the Loyalists and forced an open break with England. Negroes were prominent in the tumultuous Stamp Act riots. John Miller has described one of these riots. "For a fortnight, the tension in Boston continued to increase, until, on the night of August 28 [1765], boys and Negroes began to build bonfires in King Street and blow the dreaded whistle and horn that sent the Boston mob swarming out of taverns, houses and garrets. A large crowd immediately gathered around the bonfires, bawling for 'Liberty and Property.'"

When British troops were dispatched to Boston to awe the populace, Negroes and whites drove them out. Several months before the Boston Massacre, British soldiers tangled with Bostonians. One Boston newspaper commented: "In the morning nine or ten soldiers of Colonel Carr's regiment were severely whipped on the Commons. To behold Britons scourged by Negro drummers was a new and very disagreeable spectacle."

All through the long winter of 1769, soldiers and citizens fought a cold war. There were provocations on both sides and innumerable

street brawls and tavern fights. In the spring of 1770, tension reached the explosion point. On Friday, March 2, three soldiers got into a scrape with the ropemakers. The soldiers were driven off, but they returned with reinforcements headed by a lanky Negro man. A townsman upbraided the Negro. "You black rascal," he called out, "what have you to do with white people's quarrels?" The Negro replied sweetly, "I suppose I may look on."

The Negro looked on—and threw a few punches. Despite his help, the soldiers were driven off. They stalked away, nursing their wounds, shouting curses and threats. Rumors and predictions of disaster swept the town. By Sunday night, Boston was boiling.

Monday morning dawned cold and grey. There was a film of ice on the ground. Toward evening, the sky cleared and a young moon bobbed up over Beacon Hill. Lights and eerie shadows played across the streets which were filled now with boys and men spoiling for a fight.

A little after eight, soldiers emerged from a barracks near the center of town. They were armed with cudgels and tongs. Towns-men gathered in front of the barracks and waited to see what the hour would demand of them. In the center of this group stood a giant who was no stranger to "white people's quarrels." He was six-feet-two and looked taller. Although his "knees were nearer together than common," he moved gracefully. He had large powerful arms and big hands. His name was Crispus Attucks, but some men called him "the mulatto." He was a native of Framingham, Massachusetts, where he was born some time around 1723. A Negro with some Indian blood, Attucks had spent several years as a slave and had escaped. After his escape in 1750, he went to sea as a sailor. Tall, brawny, with a look that "was enough to terrify any person," Attucks was well known around the docks in lower Boston.

Attucks was not a proper Bostonian, a fact which has pained innumerable historians. He was a drifter of sorts, a man who loved freedom and knew what it was worth. He was about forty-seven, fearless and commanding. When he spoke, men listened. When he commanded, men acted.

"The mulatto" was the hero on the memorable night of the Boston Massacre. He moved among the people, urging them to stand their ground. They stood firm; so did the soldiers. Insults were exchanged. A fight flared. Attucks led a group of citizens who drove the soldiers back to the gate of the barracks. The soldiers rallied and drove the people back. The sound of clubs striking on human flesh could be heard for several blocks away. Someone ran to the Old Brick Meeting House and rang the fire bell. People poured out of houses.

A small boy ran through the crowd holding his head and screaming, "Murder! Murder!" He told the people that the sentry in front of the custom house had bashed him across the head with his musket. The furious crowd moved to the custom house in three groups. One group, holding clubs over their heads, huzzaing and whistling, followed the intrepid mulatto, Crispus Attucks.

The crowd gathered before the sentry in the square facing the custom house. The boy came up and said, "This is the . . . who hit me." Someone said, "Kill him. Knock his head off." Another voice said: "Burn the sentry box. Tear it up."

Backing off, the sentry climbed the steps of the custom house and called for help. Down King (now State) Street came seven soldiers, clearing the way before them with bayonet thrusts. The soldiers made a semicircle around the sentry box. Captain Thomas Preston joined them.

"Do not be afraid," Attucks and his group cried. "They dare not fire."

The people took up the cry.

"Fire! Fire! and be damned!"

Bells clanged. The air vibrated with curses and threats.

"Fire!" the crowd shouted. "Fire, and be damned!"

Attucks and the men following him gave three cheers and moved to the front of the crowd. A stick sailed over their heads and struck Private Hugh Montgomery who fell back, lifted his musket and fired. Attucks pitched forward in the gutter. Sam Gray, a rope-maker, made a step toward Attucks. Another soldier fired. Gray

spun around on his heel and fell on his back. When the smoke cleared several persons lay bleeding in the white snow.

The die was cast.

"From that moment," Daniel Webster said, "we may date the severance of the British Empire." John Adams, America's second President, said: "Not the Battle of Lexington or Bunker Hill, not the surrender of Burgoyne or Cornwallis were more important events in American history than the battle of King Street on the 5th of March, 1770."

One hundred and eighteen years later, a handsome monument was erected to the victims. Poet John Boyle O'Reilly contributed a spirited poem to the occasion.

*And honor to Crispus Attucks, who was leader and voice that day:
The first to defy, and the first to die, with Maverick, Carr, and Gray.
Call it riot or revolution, or mob or crowd as you may,
Such deaths have been seed of nations, such lives shall be honored for
ay . . .*

"Attucks little thought," wrote Dr. Samuel Green, "that in future generations a monument of granite and bronze on a public site would be erected in honor of himself and his comrades for the part they took in the State Street fight; and that his own name, cut in stone, would lead the list of those who fell on that eventful evening. 'Thus the whirligig of Time brings in his revenges,' and verifies the Gospel saying: 'But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.'"

Having played an important role in precipitating the conflict, Negroes were in the front ranks in the first battles. When Paul Revere galloped through the Massachusetts countryside, he alerted Negro and white minutemen. Negroes were at Lexington and at the bridge in Concord. Lemuel Haynes was there and Samuel Craft and Peter Salem and Pomp Blackman and Job Potomea and Isaiah Barjonah. Lemuel Haynes was also at Ticonderoga when Ethan Allen invoked Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress. So were Primas Black and Epheram Blackman, two members of the famous Green Mountain Boys.

When British troops stormed up Breed's Hill in the battle mistakenly called Bunker Hill, Negro Patriots were in the ranks with white Patriots. One of the heroes of that hot June afternoon was Peter Salem who shot Major Pitcairn when he popped up and announced, a trifle prematurely, "The day is ours." Among the many Negro soldiers who fought at Bunker Hill were Prince Hall, Pomp Fisk, Cuff Hayes, Caesar Dickerson, Caesar Weatherbee and Salem Poor. The two Salems—Peter Salem and Salem Poor—were among the great heroes of the war. Poor was later commended by fourteen officers who said he "behaved like an experienced officer, as well as an excellent soldier. To set forth particulars of his conduct would be tedious . . . in the person of this said Negro centres a brave and gallant soldier."

The Battle of Bunker Hill was fought in June. In July, George Washington took command of the American troops. An order went out immediately from his headquarters forbidding the enlistment of Negroes.

Several factors entered into the decision to bar Negroes. Despite the evidence of their eyes, some officers insisted that Negroes were poor soldiers. Others said it was shameful to ask Negroes to die for white men. Still others said it was dangerous to use Negro troops. If America used Negroes, they reasoned, so would England.

The argument raged through the fall of that year. It was debated in Congress and in coffeehouses and manors. General Washington summoned his general officers and they sat down in October to debate the question. It was decided finally to bar all Negroes, slave and free. Washington issued an order to this effect on November 12, 1775.

Seven days earlier, however, Lord Dunmore, the deposed royal governor of Virginia, had taken a step which eventually forced Washington to reconsider. From his ship in Norfolk harbor, Dunmore proclaimed freedom to all male slaves who were willing and able to bear arms. Thousands of slaves immediately deserted their masters to fight for *their* freedom. At Kemp's Landing in Virginia, they proved their mettle by defeating a group of Virginians. When

the white men broke ranks and retreated into the swamps, the former slaves gave chase. At this point occurred one of those little incidents that illuminate a whole era. One Colonel Hutchings, a proper Virginian, was cornered by a Negro man he recognized as one of his escaped slaves. Naturally, the colonel was indignant. He fired at his ex-slave. But the bullet missed. The ex-slave closed in and whacked his former master across the face with a saber. Then, in the greatest humiliation of all, Colonel Hutchings was led into the British lines by his own former slave.

Thoroughly alarmed by the Dunmore proclamation, Virginians attempted to pacify their slaves. One paper ran a long editorial under the heading: "CAUTION TO NEGROES." The *Virginia Gazette* said: "Be not then, ye Negroes, tempted by this proclamation to ruin yourselves . . . whether we suffer or not, if you desert us, you most certainly will."

General Washington was also alarmed. He reversed himself and permitted the enlistment of free Negroes who had fought in the early battles. Congress approved this order, but again refused to countenance the enlistment of slaves.

Circumstances, however, made this a moot point. For one thing, it was very difficult to coax white men into the Continental Line. Although there were some one million men of fighting age in the colonies, the Continental Line never exceeded fifty thousand soldiers at one time. Bounties of land and money were offered to volunteers. Some states even offered bounties of Negroes. Nothing, however, flushed the backsliders. "Such a dearth of public spirit," Washington said, "and want of virtue, such stock-jobbing and fertility in all the low arts to obtain advantage of one kind or another . . . I never saw before, and I pray God I may never be a witness to again. Such a dirty mercenary Spirit pervades the whole that I should not be at all surprised at any disaster that may happen." Washington went into the terrible ordeal of Valley Forge in December, 1777, with some nine thousand men. By March of 1778, more than three thousand men had deserted.

After Valley Forge, every able-bodied man, Negro or white,

slave or free, was welcome in the Continental Army. Washington sent an officer from Valley Forge in 1778 to ask the Rhode Island Assembly to authorize the enlistment of Negro slaves. In February, the Assembly took this precedent-shattering step. Two months later, Massachusetts followed. By the end of the war, some five thousand Negroes, slaves and freemen, had shouldered arms in defense of American liberty. There were Negro soldiers from every one of the original thirteen states, including South Carolina and Georgia. Most of these soldiers served in integrated units, although there were a few all-Negro groups, notably the ones from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Colonel Middleton, a Negro, commanded a group of Negro volunteers from Massachusetts.

Several witnesses remarked on the integrated character of the American Army. In the first months of the war, British writers taunted Americans with this jingle:

*The rebel clowns, oh! what a sight
Too awkward was their figure
'Twas yonder stood a pious wight
And here and there a nigger.*

A Southern soldier serving in the Army around Boston in 1775 wrote: "Such Sermons, such Negroes, such Colonels, such Boys and such Great Great Grandfathers." A few years later, a Hessian officer said: "The Negro can take the field instead of the master; and therefore, no regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance and among them there are able bodied, strong and brave fellows."

Negro soldiers fought in practically all the big battles of the war. They were at Monmouth, Red Bank, Saratoga, Savannah, Princeton, and Yorktown. Two Negroes, Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell, made the famous Delaware Crossing. Another Negro participated in the daring capture of General Prescott in Rhode Island.

Negro soldiers fought and they fought brilliantly. A memorable tableaux of the war is of the bloody battlefield at Eutaw, South

Carolina, where a Negro soldier and a British soldier were found dead, each impaled on the bayonet of the other. At the Battle of Rhode Island, a regiment of Negro soldiers repulsed the vaunted Hessians three times. "Had they been unfaithful," one soldier said, "or even given away before the enemy all would have been lost."

No less valiant were the heroic defenders of Fort Griswold in Connecticut. When the British officer, Major Montgomery, was lifted over the walls, Jordan Freeman ran him through with a pike. Then, when Colonel Ledyard was murdered with his own sword, Lambert Latham immediately avenged his death by slaying the British officer. The Redcoats pounced on Latham, who fell dead, pierced by thirty-three bayonet wounds.

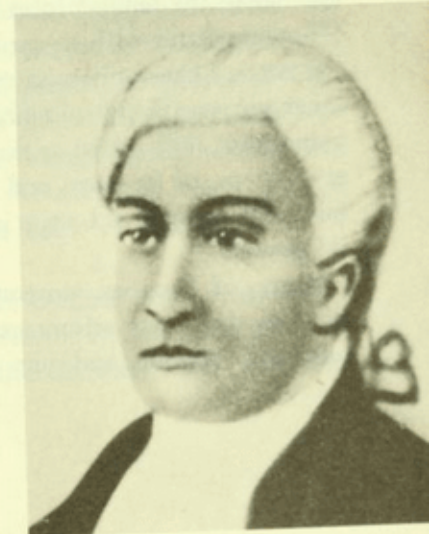
Negro seamen, sailors and pilots distinguished themselves in the infant Navy. Caesar Terront piloted the Virginia vessel, the "Patriot," and was cited for his gallantry in action. Captain Mark Starlin, the only Negro naval captain in Virginia's history, made daring night raids on British vessels in Hampton Roads. Starlin was reclaimed by his master after the war and died in slavery.

There were also Negro spies and undercover agents in the Revolutionary War. A slave named Pompey was largely responsible for Anthony Wayne's capture of the Stony Point, New York, fort in 1779. Feigning ignorance, he obtained the British password and helped a detachment of Americans overpower the British lookout. Perhaps the greatest of all Negro spies was James Armistead, a Virginian who helped trap Cornwallis. General Lafayette told Armistead to go into Cornwallis' camp and learn his strength and battle plans. Armistead was so successful that General Cornwallis asked him to spy on Lafayette. The Negro spy shuttled between the British and American camps, carrying false information to the Cornwallis camp and bona fide information to Lafayette.

Every schoolboy knows that Lafayette and Kosciusko answered America's call for help. Not so well known is the fact that Negroes from Haiti came to America to fight. The Haitians, who called themselves the Fontages Legion, did yeoman service at the siege of Savannah and helped prevent a rout of the American forces.

With Washington when he crossed the Delaware were at least two Negroes, Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell. Whipple was bodyguard to Washington's aide, General William Whipple of New Hampshire.

Richard Allen, Phillis Wheatley, and Prince Hall were outstanding Negroes in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods. Allen organized the AME Church. Wheatley became an internationally known poet. Hall (right) organized the first Negro Masonic Lodge.



More than 100,000 Negro slaves received their freedom as a direct result of this war for freedom. Aptheker believes that at least 100,000 voted with their feet. Some of these slaves made their way to Canada or Florida. Others took refuge in Indian camps. Still others were befriended by the British. When the Redcoats embarked in 1782 and 1783, several thousand Negroes went with them.

A large number of escaped slaves hid in the swamps and made guerrilla raids on their former masters. In 1781, a Virginia slaveholder wrote: "We have had most alarming times this Summer, all along the shore, from a set of Barges manned mostly by our own Negroes who have run off—These fellows are really dangerous to an individual singled out for their vengeance whose Property lay exposed—They burnt several houses." As late as 1786, a group of ex-slaves who called themselves the King of England's Soldiers were fighting guerrilla actions against slaveowners along the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina.

In addition to slaves who escaped or were freed for service in the American forces, thousands were manumitted by slaveholders infected by the magic of the Declaration of Independence. Philip Graham of Maryland freed his slaves in 1787 and said the holding of his "fellow men in bondage and slavery is repugnant to the golden law of God and the unalienable right of mankind as well as to every principle of the late glorious revolution which has taken place in America. . . ." In the same period, Richard Randolph, the brother of the famous John Randolph, came of age and wrote the following letter to his guardian. "With regard to the division of the estate, I have only to say that I want not a single Negro for any other purpose than his immediate liberation. I consider every individual thus unshackled as the source of future generations, not to say nations, of freemen; and I shudder when I think that so insignificant an animal as I am is invested with this monstrous, this horrid power."

Scores of Negroes, moreover, turned the Rights of Man movement to their own advantage. They peppered courts and legislatures with petitions and suits. A group of slaves told the Massachu-

setts Assembly in 1777 "that every principle from which America has acted, in the course of her unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, bears stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your humble petitioners."

Slavery died in the North as a direct result of forces set in motion by the Rights of Man movement. By legislative decrees and by court action, Negro slaves were declared free men. In some states, legislative emancipation was a gradual process extending over several years. The preamble of the Pennsylvania act for the gradual abolition of slavery accurately reflected the spirit of the age. The preamble said it was the duty of Pennsylvanians to give proof of their gratitude for deliverance from the oppression of Great Britain "by extending freedom to those of a different color by the work of the same Almighty hand."

It seemed for a time that slavery would die in the South, but the invention of the cotton gin and other mechanical devices cooled the Revolutionary ardor of Southern patriots.

The period in which slavery died in the North was a crucial period in the history of the American Negro. For a short spell in the North and for an even shorter spell in the South, it seemed that good men might solve the classic American Dilemma. Baptists and Methodists strongly condemned slavery. Negroes like Joshua Bishop of Virginia and Lemuel Haynes of New England pastored white churches. Haynes, who was probably the first Negro to preach regularly to white audiences, was a Congregationalist. The son of a white woman and an African native, he was fair-skinned and eloquent. When he was appointed pastor of a church in Torrington, Connecticut, a leading citizen was so displeased with "the nigger minister" that he decided to sit through the sermon with his hat on. "He had not preached far," the man said later, "when I thought I saw the whitest man I ever knew in that pulpit, and I tossed my hat under the pew."

During this period, Phillis Wheatley became an internationally-known poet and Benjamin Banneker became a celebrated mathematician. Banneker and Wheatley, in different ways and in different

places, dramatized the possibilities and limitations of the age. In an age in which few women—or men for that matter—read books, Phillis Wheatley wrote one. Her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was the first volume by a Negro woman and the second book by an American woman.*

Phillis Wheatley did not write as a Negro; she wrote as an eighteenth-century Bostonian, a *proper* eighteenth-century Bostonian. When George Washington was appointed commander in chief of the American Army, she celebrated the event in heroic couplets. Washington was delighted. On February 28, 1776, he acknowledged receipt of the poems in a letter addressed to "Miss Phillis":

"Thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyric, the style and manner exhibited a striking proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem, had I not been apprehensive that, while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity."

Phillis Wheatley visited the American commander at Cambridge and was entertained by the general and his staff.

Above everything else, the Boston poet sang songs of Thanksgiving. She was grateful for the gift of Christianity, grateful even that a slave ship brought her to it:

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.*

A delicate wisp of a woman, black, slight of build, with great glimmering eyes, a pert nose and a mystic air, Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa in an unknown place. She came to America in 1761,

* Jupiter Hammon, a New York slave, was probably the first Negro author. His poem, *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries*, was printed as a broadside in 1760.

remembering nothing save that her mother poured out water each morning "before the sun at its rising." She was seven or eight when the slave ship deposited her in Boston. John Wheatley, a rich merchant and tailor, saw her shivering on a Boston slave block, stark naked except for a dirty piece of carpet around her loins. Wheatley bought her and took her home to his wife, Susannah. Within sixteen months, the slave girl was reading and writing fluent English. She read every book she could lay hands on: the Bible, Milton and Alexander Pope's translation of Homer. Pope, the neoclassic Englishman, was her special favorite. Timidly at first and then with increasing confidence, she put down words in the Pope manner. Within six years after her arrival in America, Phillis Wheatley was writing poetry. Her first poem, written at the age of fourteen, was a blank verse eulogy of Harvard University. Six years later, the slim girl from Africa was an internationally-known poet. In 1773, she visited England and was hailed as a prodigy. An English publisher brought out her slim volume.

Her poems do not excite modern critics. The verdict is practically unanimous: too much Pope and not enough Wheatley. But her ease with words, her genius for sound and color and rhythm: these still excite awe and wonder.

Phillis Wheatley lived in the State Street house with the white Wheatleys and moved in a white world, apparently as an equal. Upon the death of her patron, Susannah Wheatley, the Negro poet came face to face with racial reality. She married John Peters, a handsome grocer who "wore a wig, carried a cane, and quite acted out 'the gentleman.'" The marriage didn't work. Proud and, some say, irresponsible, Peters alienated his wife's white friends. The couple drifted from place to place, carrying with them the first child and then the second child. Poverty and disease dogged them; the first child died and then the second. After the birth of the third child, Phillis was reduced to earning her bread in a mean boarding house. She had never been too strong and the exertion and the cold and the wretchedness were too much for her. On a cold day in December, 1784, mother and child died within a few hours of each other.

Phillis Wheatley said nothing of her personal griefs in her poems that survive; nor did she say much about the trials and tribulations of Negroes. But on at least one occasion she abandoned Pope and Homer and the Greeks and said words from a woman's heart. The poem was to the Earl of Dartmouth:

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

Benjamin Banneker, like Phillis Wheatley, was a child of an age of birth pains. He was born in Maryland, the grandson of an Englishwoman and an African native. The Englishwoman, Molly Welsh, came to America as an indentured servant, worked her time out and bought a farm and two slaves. She freed the slaves and married one of them. Banneker's mother, Mary, was one of four children born to this union. Banneker's father was an African native.

Banneker attended a local school with Negro and white children. Like Phillis Wheatley, he hungered and thirsted after books. His forte, however, was science—mathematics and astronomy. He became so proficient in these subjects that he was named to the commission which surveyed the territory which became Washington, D.C. The *Georgetown Weekly Ledger* of March 12, 1791, noted the arrival of the commission. Banneker, the paper said, was "an Ethiopian whose abilities as surveyor and astronomer already prove that Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson's concluding that that race of men were void of mental endowment was without foundation."

Beginning in 1791, Banneker issued an annual almanac which has been compared with Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

He also continued the study of astronomy and other scientific subjects.

His was an idyllic life. He lived on a farm, about ten miles outside Baltimore. A confirmed bachelor, he studied all night, slept in the morning and worked in the afternoon. He washed his own clothes, cooked his own meals and cultivated gardens around his log cabin. He had an early fondness for "strong drink," but later became a teetotaler.

His habits of study were odd, to say the least. Of a night, he would wrap himself in a great cloak and lie under a pear tree and meditate on the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. He would remain there throughout the night and take to his bed at dawn.

A contemporary has left a portrait of the stargazer. "His head was covered with a thick suit of white hair, which gave him a very dignified and venerable appearance. . . . His dress was uniformly of superfine broadcloth, made in the old style of a plain coat, with straight collar and long waistcoat, and a broad-brimmed hat. His color was not jet-black, but decidedly Negro. In size and personal appearance, the statue of Franklin at the Library of Philadelphia, as seen from the street, is a perfect likeness. Go to his house when you would, either by day or night, there was constantly standing in the middle of the floor a large table covered with books and papers. As he was an eminent mathematician, he was constantly in correspondence with other mathematicians in this country, with whom there was an interchange of questions of difficult solution."

Banneker, unlike Wheatley, boldly lashed out at the injustices of the age. In a famous letter of 1791, he reminded Thomas Jefferson that words were one thing and slavery was another. "Suffer me to recall to your mind that time, in which the arms of the British crown were exerted, with every powerful effort, in order to reduce you to a state of servitude; look back, I entreat you . . . you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings, to which you were entitled by nature; but, sir, how pitiable is it to reflect, that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of

Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges which he hath conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others."

Banneker and Wheatley demonstrated, in their own ways, latent possibilities in the burgeoning American Dream. To be sure, things were not rosy in this period. But some men, a very few men, had room to dream and dare and hope.

Then the roof caved in. When did this happen? No man can say. It happened at different times in different ways in different places. Caste lines hardened; racial hostility increased. Free Negroes were taunted, insulted, assaulted and driven off the streets. Slaves were hemmed in by restrictive rules designed to deny them even the rudiments of human personality.

Several factors entered into the change. There was, first of all, the conservative reaction which followed the Revolution. The increase in the number of free Negroes and the failure of various plans to get rid of them alarmed laborers and aristocrats. Then the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and the Gabriel conspiracy in Virginia frightened liberals and conservatives.

The Haitian Revolution, the invention of the cotton gin, slave conspiracies in America, the increase in the number of free Negroes—all these things played a part in the birth of the American Negro. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the American Negro, as a group, did not exist before the Revolution. The first Negro churches were founded in 1773 in South Carolina and in 1776 in Virginia. There then followed the conservative reaction which forced Negroes North and South to look around them and ask the question of the Jewish poet of captivity: "How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?"

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were trying to sing that song within the dominant society when they were pulled off their knees

in a white church in Philadelphia. They immediately organized the Free African Society. Out of this society came the African Methodist Episcopal Church. There was a similar development in New York City. The withdrawal of Negroes from the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church led to the establishment of the AME Zion church. Taunted, ridiculed, insulted and abused, Negroes in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other Northern centers withdrew and formed their own organizations.

What did it mean to be a Negro in the America of that period?

Listen to Prince Hall, son of an English father and a Negro mother, a Revolutionary War veteran who later became a Methodist and organized the first Negro Masonic Lodge. Listen to his charge to Boston's African Lodge.

"Patience, I say; for were we not possessed of a great measure of it, we could not bear up under the daily insults we meet with in the streets of Boston, much more on public days of recreation. How, at such times, are we shamefully abused, and that to such a degree, that we may truly be said to carry our lives in our hands, and the arrows of death are flying about our heads."

The arrows of death and humiliation whistled about the head of Colonel Middleton, another Revolutionary War veteran. During a Boston riot, a group of whites attacked Negroes in front of his home. The old soldier stuck a musket out of his door and threatened to kill any white man who approached. One of his neighbors, a white man, asked the whites to leave. Then he approached Colonel Middleton and begged him to put away his gun. Colonel Middleton stood silent for a moment. Then he turned and tottered off, dropping his gun and weeping as he went.

Colonel Middleton's America, Prince Hall's America and Thomas Jefferson's America tottered into the nineteenth century, divided and afraid.