

“Liberty to Slaves”: the black response

By Jeffrey J. Crow

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 32: 1 (fall 1992).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

The story of how the original thirteen American colonies broke away from Great Britain and formed the United States is well known. Less well known is how African-Americans felt and what they did during the War of Independence.

At the time of the American Revolution, slaves made up at least 25 percent of the population of North Carolina. In actual numbers, blacks totaled perhaps seventy thousand but no more than 5 percent of them were free. Most blacks, whether slave or free, lived in the countryside and worked the land, planting, harvesting, and preparing crops for market.

Those who lived in North Carolina’s few towns worked at trades or were servants to slaveholders. A few of them were “hired out” by their owners to work for others who needed their labor. All of their earnings, except perhaps for a small allowance, went to the slaves’ owners.

Skilled slaves worked as carpenters, coopers (making barrels), blacksmiths (making iron into tools and shoeing horses), wheelwrights (making and repairing wheels), and in many other skilled occupations. In coastal towns, such as Wilmington and New Bern, they worked in trades that were important to the shipping business. Also in these towns, they may have controlled parts of the local economy, for example, selling almost all the food staples, fish, and fowl (birds).

Just as whites were divided by the conflict between the colonies and England, so blacks faced difficult choices. African-Americans fought for both sides, providing manpower to both the British and the revolutionaries. Their actions during the war were often decided by what they believed would best help them throw off the shackles of slavery. Most believed that victory by the British would lead to the end of slavery.

Fears of a slave revolt gripped the South. Before the war, British military leaders recognized that the southern colonies could be greatly weakened by an uprising of slaves against their masters. The white colonists knew this, too. Joseph Hewes, one of North Carolina’s signers of the Declaration of Independence, accused the British of planning to “let loose Indians on our Frontiers” and to “raise the Negroes against us,” a plot that included arming slaves. James Iredell of Edenton charged the British with “exciting [the blacks] to cut our throats, and involve Men, Women and Children in one universal Massacre.” Edenton and Wilmington organized patrols to keep careful watch on black residents at night.

Slaves, however, did not need encouragement to strike for freedom. In every colony from Maryland to Georgia, slaves weighed their chances for freedom and seemed on the edge of

revolt. Massachusetts revolutionary John Adams commented on a “grapevine” that spread news among slaves: “The [N]egroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundreds of miles in a week or fortnight [two weeks].”

Aroused perhaps by British promises of freedom, slaves in Pitt and Beaufort counties tried to break the chains of bondage. In July 1775 the Pitt County Committee of Safety discovered a slave plot for an **insurrection** just before it was to start. A **posse** of one hundred men captured the suspected leaders and jailed more than forty blacks. The same month other blacks were captured along the Pitt-Craven county line. Their plan, according to the confessions (probably obtained through torture), was to “destroy the family where they lived” and then to march “from House to House (Burning as they went) until they arrived in the Back Country.” There they were to be welcomed by the British who would reward them by settling the former slaves “in a free government of their own.”

Meanwhile, in Virginia, the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to all the slaves and indentured servants of revolutionaries who would take up arms and fight for “His Majesty’s crown and dignity.” The effect was electric. Immediately, slaves rushed to Norfolk to join “Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment.” Across the chest of each black soldier appeared the words LIBERTY TO SLAVES. During the winter of 1775/1776, Dunmore commanded approximately 2,000 men, half of them black. At the Battle of Great Bridge near Norfolk in December 1775, North Carolina troops under General Robert Howe fought against the combined British-black army.

Along the North Carolina coast in the spring of 1776, slaves were going over to the British. William Hooper, another of North Carolina’s signers of the Declaration of Independence, sadly noted, “The [N]egroes are deserting from the Sea Coast....Three of mine were intercepted on their way and are now in Goal [jail].” The muster rolls (lists of people in military units or on ships) of British ships stationed off Cape Fear recorded the names of blacks who “deserted from the Rebels” or “fled for Protection.” The HMS *Scorpion* reported that thirty-six blacks, including at least eleven women, came aboard on March 3, 1776.

The stories of two blacks—one slave, one free—reveal clearly the African-American commitment to freedom and removal from a slave society. When John Provey, a free black from the lower Cape Fear River region, enlisted in the British army in June 1776, he left all his property behind. Provey filed a request with the British government for help in recovering his lost property. On his list were a “small dwelling House,” two horses, a small field of Indian corn and potatoes, a dozen fowl, a dozen ducks, and a bed and household furniture. Provey went to live in London, England.

Thomas Peters, a slave and also a native of the lower Cape Fear River region, joined the British army in 1776. He became a sergeant with the Black Pioneers, a unit of **support troops** for the British army. When the British evacuated New York in 1783, Peters went with them to Nova Scotia, Canada. There he became the leader of a large group of black loyalists. This group argued that the British had not lived up to their promises of land grants and fair treatment in exchange for their loyalty and service. Finally, Peters convinced the British to resettle 1,200 black loyalists in Sierra Leone, Africa, a British colony. There they had their own government,

they enjoyed equality as British subjects, and they lived free since slavery was outlawed. Peters's colony was the foundation of the modern African republic.

The problem of what to do about slaves and free blacks was a continuing concern for the revolutionaries. There was fear of armed blacks, especially in the South.

After Lord Dunmore's proclamation of freedom for slaves who joined the British army, the patriots had to consider offering freedom from slavery in exchange for service in their army. When General George Washington saw the brave performance of black soldiers at Bunker Hill, he took action to bring black troops into the army.

However, southern states, especially South Carolina, resisted efforts to arm blacks. Only Maryland permitted slaves to enlist, but free blacks joined the armies and navies in Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Delaware, and Connecticut. Perhaps as many as three-fourths of Rhode Island's Continental troops included slaves who exchanged their service for freedom.

At White Plains, New York, in August 1778, muster rolls for the Continental army recorded 755 blacks. Fifty-eight of them, probably free men, were with the North Carolina Continental Line. Black soldiers were more likely to serve as laborers and craftsmen. They built fortifications, made weapons and ammunition, cleared roads, and shod horses. They also acted as spies, guides, musicians, or servants to white officers.

North Carolina's most famous black soldier was John Chavis, who spent three years in the Fifth Virginia Regiment. After the war, he won fame as a Presbyterian minister and teacher of both black and white students in Raleigh. In 1832 he declared, "Tell them that if I am Black I am free born American & a revolutionary soldier & therefore ought not to be thrown intirely out of the scale of notice."

Blacks who fought with the revolutionaries included Jonathan Overton, who died in 1849 at the age of 101. A newspaper described him as "a soldier of the Revolution" who had "served under Washington, and was at the battle of Yorktown, besides other less important engagements." Another was Ned Griffen, who was purchased by William Kitchen to serve as his substitute in the army. But Kitchen refused to give the slave his freedom for this service as he had promised. Griffen petitioned the General Assembly, which granted him his freedom "forever hereafter" and gave him the right to vote. And there was the slave James of Perquimans County who served as a sailor on a Continental ship. He was captured twice by the British, and both times he "Embraced the Earliest Opportunity in Making his Escape to Return to this Country." The county court freed him because he had served on an "American Armed Vessel."

Many blacks looked to the British troops for their liberation. Wherever the British marched, slaves followed. When British General Cornwallis invaded the Carolinas in 1780/1781, slaves flocked to him. British officers put blacks to work in the service of the king's army performing many of the same duties they carried out in the American army.

During Cornwallis's advance through the Carolinas, he let blacks search for food and goods along the way. Their raids sent alarm through the farms and homesteads of the countryside.

Writing from eastern North Carolina in the spring of 1781, Jean Blair reported at least two thousand blacks in different parties had been “sent out by L[ord] Cornwallis to plunder and get provisions. It is said they have no Arms but what they find in the houses they plunder.”

Farther west in Rowan County, Cornwallis’s movements encouraged another slave uprising. Blacks there realized that “War was Coming on,” and they began to collect weapons. Their plan was to rise up against the “white people.” Slaves would have to decide “which side” they were for—“the Americans or the British.” Though the plot was discovered in time, it showed the feelings in the slave community.

That decision—which side to support—had no neat and simple answer. When the British evacuated Wilmington in November 1781, William Hooper’s slaves acted in different ways. Three of them left with the British. A fourth, Lavinia, “went on board the fleet...and much against her will was forced ashore by some of my friends, and returned to me,” Hooper explained. Lavinia’s brother, John, however, resisted British **bribes**. Though offered clothes, money, and freedom, John refused to leave his master. He “stole through British sentries” and traveled seventy miles to rejoin the Hooper family.

Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown in October 1781 found thousands of black refugees who had to be dealt with. On the one hand, the British military (and the patriot forces, as well) had promised freedom for blacks who had helped their cause. On the other hand, there were thousands of loyalist slaveowners. The Americans wanted to prevent a mass exodus of blacks from the United States. One British general wrote “...the slaves are exceeding unwilling to return to hard labour, and severe punishment from their former masters.”

As many as 5,000 blacks sailed with the British from Charleston in late 1782. In New York, the commander of the British army took the position that any black who was with the British army before November 30, 1782, would be considered free. American slaveholders tried to reclaim their slave property but had little success. Boston King, a black Baptist preacher, recalled, “This dreadful rumour [re-enslavement] filled us with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our old masters, coming from Virginia, North-Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New-York, or even dragging them out of their beds.”

In the end more than 3,000 blacks left from New York with the British, most bound for Nova Scotia in Canada. At least 8,300 blacks were taken to East Florida from Savannah and Charleston. Of course many remained in a state of slavery to loyalists who had fled. But many had earned their freedom during the war.

It is not surprising that when opportunities for freedom arose, more often than not slaves fled to the British. Lavinia’s liberty ship sailed without her, but thousands of other African-Americans seized their freedom. With the Revolution’s language of equality, independence, and liberty, slaves needed no introduction to the ideas at the heart of the struggle with Great Britain.

Definitions

An **insurrection** is an uprising against authority.

A **posse** is a group of citizens called together by government authority to maintain law and order.

An **indentured servant** is a person who is bound by a contract to serve another person.

Support troops are soldiers who fight in support of an army's troops but are not a part of that army's regular organization.

A **bribe** is a reward for doing something that a person would not do without the reward.