Substitutes, Servants and Soldiers:

The Black Presence at New Windsor Cantonment in the Massachusetts and New Hampshire Lines

By Matt Thorenz


On the morning of April 19th, 1775, Cato Bordman, a “negro” from Cambridge, Massachusetts, answered the call to arms as a member of Captain Samuel Thatcher’s Co. of militia. Facing him was a column of 700-1500 British redcoats under the command of General Thomas Gage. Although his service lasted one day, Bordman nonetheless participated in; what is arguably, the most important day in American history. Two months later, on June 17, another African American, Philip Abbot of Captain Benjamin Ame’s Company, Colonel James Frye’s Regiment of militia, was killed while defending Breed’s Hill from the frontal assault of General William Howe’s army of over 3,000 British soldiers. Philip was believed to have been a servant of Nathan Abbot and was acting as substitute in his master’s stead. From the first shots being fired at Lexington Green in the spring of 1775, to the final discharge of troops at New Windsor and West Point in the summer of 1783, African Americans played an important part in defending a revolution that championed freedoms and independence to some, while justifying the subjugation and enslavement of others. The stories that can be gleaned from the historic record of those Black soldiers that served in the Massachusetts and New Hampshire Lines at the New Windsor Cantonment of 1782-1783 are just some examples of how African Americans found common ground among their white comrades in the service of their country while living in a time of prejudice and inequality.

In an October 5, 1775 letter from Philadelphia to General Heath, Massachusetts representative John Adams wrote of the American Army around Boston: “It is represented in [Philadelphia] by some persons, and it makes an unfriendly Impression upon Some Minds, that in the Massachusetts Regiments there are great numbers of Boys, Old Men and Negroes, Such
as are unsuitable for service....I should be glad to know if there are more of these in Proportion in the Massachusetts Regiments, than in those of Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire, or even among the Rifle Men"². Adams’ feelings reflected those of his fellow representatives in Congress, who feared they were paying for troops who, because of age, infirmity or race, were otherwise unable to effectively fight and defend the Revolution from the might of the most powerful army in the world. In the colonies, Blacks were de-humanized, using enlightened rhetoric and pseudo-science, in order to place them at the bottom of the “social ladder” and justify the trade and use of them as slaves³. However, the individual “rights” afforded to slaves and freed blacks varied from province to province. In Massachusetts, where more money was made off the importation and sale of slaves than the use of them as labor, slaves were given the right to own property, testify in court against whites and Blacks and even sue for freedom⁴. However, one cannot assume that slavery in New England was less harsh and more liberal than southern practices. Slaves were still treated as property and status symbols of their owners⁴ ⁵. Slaves caught as runaways were subject to the same forms of brutal punishment that characterized Southern plantation culture⁶ ⁷. However, there were ways by which slaves could “win” their freedom.

Despite living in a harsh institution, New England slaves were able to obtain their freedom, under master’s consent or otherwise. Jude Hall of Kensington, New Hampshire, ran away from his new master, Nathaniel Healy because; according to historian Glenn Knoblock, he “resented being sold”⁸. Cato Fisk of Epping, New Hampshire possibly won his freedom via manumission; being legally set free. Upon the death of his master, Dr. Ebenzer Fisk, Cato was appraised at 25 British pounds on January 2, 1777. In May of that year, he enlisted in Captain William Rowell’s Company, 2nd New Hampshire Regiment for three years. Both Jude Hall and Cato Fisk were members of this regiment while it was garrisoned at New Windsor, New York in 1782-1783.

The enlistment and arming of free and enslaved blacks was looked upon with suspicion by members of the Continental Congress and patriot sympathizers, who feared Blacks lacked a basic knowledge of the “virtues of liberty” as they were born into slavery and would have a natural inclination to incite violence against whites once they were armed³. Several months
before the shots at Lexington and Concord were fired; two blacks by the names of “York” and “Joe” conspired to murder the inhabitants of Kingston, New York while setting several fires throughout the city with the help of neighboring slaves and Native Americans\(^9\). The plot was later found out by Joe’s owner, resulting in the imprisonment of 20 conspirators. In May 1775, the Town Council of Newburgh, New York, fearing a slave revolt as a result of white pre-occupation with the war resolved that “any person owning Negroes in this precinct shall not on any account whatever, suffer them to be absent from his dwelling...the daytime off their farm without a pass; and in case any house or farm after sundown... Negroes be found abroad, contrary to the above...they shall be apprehended and caused to receive 35 lashes or any number less as the said committee shall deem proper”\(^9\).

However, as the war progressed, more Continental army recruiters looked to free and enslaved Africans as an alternative pool of enlistees to fill the depleted and under strength ranks of Washington’s forces\(^3\). The army that had grown to over 20,000 troops “Fit and Present for Duty” in July, 1775 had dwindled to around 7,556 by February 1778\(^10\). Up until June, 1778, the American army had only a pair of moral victories at Trenton and Princeton, NJ to show for the loss of Long Island, New York City and Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress convened and delegated. The army’s first winter encampment at Valley Forge also “thinned the herd” of over 800 troops, lost through sickness and starvation. Worse still, Britain herself was offering slaves an opportunity to gain their freedom by enlisting in the British armed forces. This strategy used Congress’ reluctance to arm blacks to undermine the rhetoric of the Revolution’s most ardent supporters. With the cause of independence in question and without strong, able bodied men to raise the strength of Washington’s beleaguered army, the hopes of America winning its independence were dire.

The Congressional fixation of troop quotas in 1777 induced officers to actively seek Black recruits, and a 1779 passing of legislation to give recruiters a $10.00 bounty per head further increased Black enlistment. By April 1778, Massachusetts only exempted Quakers from being drafted, legally allowing Blacks to serve in the Continental Army\(^11\). Towns throughout New England established enlistment committees that actively drafted African Americans to meet
their quotas; as their low social status made them relatively easy and cheap to obtain. Towns such as Wallingford and Stratford, CT were able to bring in 13 and 14 Black recruits out of a pool 132 and 114 enrollees, whereas 200 soldiers of African descent would be recruited in Rhode Island to furnish that state’s famous 1st Rhode Island Regiment. This shift in the character of the American Army can be seen in the observations of a diarist in central Massachusetts in 1777, stating he encountered no regiment without “a lot of Negroes”. In return, Black enrollees were promised their freedom (if presently enslaved), as well as monetary compensation and land bounties. One such example was that of five Blacks from New Hampshire, who were paid 20 pounds in addition to a mileage allowance of 16s., 8d. in return for their enrolments. Cato Freeman of Andover, Massachusetts was promised “Freedom in three years”, and duly enlisted in the 9th Massachusetts for three years to meet the January 1, 1781 quota. Nineteen year old Drummer Jabez Jolly; a sailor and/or farmer from Barnstable, MA, enlisted “For the War” in Rufus Lincoln’s Company of the 7th Massachusetts in either November or December 1779 by Lieutenant Freeman. It is interesting to note that while at New Windsor, the same officer was implicated in several charges of assault on a fellow officer and noted as beating a Sergeant Howard of the 7th Massachusetts Regiment in Private Thomas Foster’s diary.

The training regime Washington’s soldiers underwent at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-1778 built the foundations of a strong professional army that would prove itself throughout the latter half of the American War of Independence. Despite this, the actions of some officers and soldiers continued to challenge this newly instilled sense of discipline. During the winter encampment of 1782-1783 at New Windsor, both white and black soldiers found themselves before general court-martials for infractions ranging from being absent without leave to insubordination, assault and theft. Cato Fisk, now re-enlisted in the 2nd New Hampshire, had been charged with overstaying his furlough and was listed as “Deserted” on his company’s muster rolls for February 16th, 1783. Prosecution for such a crime could carry a sentence of death. However by this stage of the war, when prospects of a spring offensive were uncertain and with many war weary soldiers wishing to return home, Fisk’s crime went unpunished. Prior to his regiment’s arrival at New Windsor, Drummer Jolly had been arrested.
and tried in June 1782 at a regimental court-martial near West Point for “abusing another soldier” and sentenced to receive 30 lashes, but was soon pardoned. Private Robert Green of Captain Day’s Company wasn’t so lucky. After being tried at regimental court-martial on January 4, 1783 for leaving his post while on sentry duty, he was duly sentenced to receive 60 lashes.  

Soldiers of both ethnic backgrounds not only shared the same crimes and punishments, but also the responsibilities of maintaining order and discipline. These duties ranged from standing on guard and retrieving supplies, to building winter quarters and digging latrines. Shortly after enlisting for three years in February, 1781, Private Cato Everet of Captain Green’s Company, Colonel Vose’s (1st Massachusetts Regiment) was listed “Joined Lines on Guard”. The “Lines” were a string of fortifications and guard posts that stretched from the area around West Point to as far south as Westchester County, the main purpose of which was to defend the Highlands from British attack from New York City, and protect the citizenry from the criminal elements of the region (known as “Cowboys”). Another duty that appears prominently in service records is that of “Servant”. This role was filled by privates, who were adjoined to high ranking officers, such as Colonels and Generals, and required to tend to their officer’s personal needs. Polishing boots, cooking, running messages and even emptying chamber pots were some of the many chores these soldier/servants would have to perform while on detached service. Perry Cesar of Rufus Lincoln’s Co. 7th Massachusetts Regiment, was a servant to “Col. Gimat” from June to November 1781. Jean-Joseph Sourdader Gimat arrived in America as a member of the Marquis de Lafayette’s staff in 1777 and was given a commission as a Major in the Continental Army. By 1781 he was promoted to Colonel and placed in charge of a light infantry battalion that served under Lafayette’s command throughout the Yorktown Campaign. As his service record notes, Perry would have been with Gimat during the time of Yorktown, while the rest of his regiment remained protecting the Hudson Highlands. As Perry Cesar marched south to Yorktown, Virginia, Boston Black, from Joseph Barte’s Company, 7th Massachusetts Regiment, was sent “on extra duty” as a servant to General John Glover at West Point. Glover had made a name for himself early in the war as the commander of the 14th Massachusetts Regiment, which helped Washington’s Army evade capture by ferrying them to
Manhattan after the disastrous Battle of Long Island in August, 1776, as well as bringing Washington’s army cross the Delaware to surprise the Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey on December 25, 1776. Although they contributed to the structural hierarchy of the Continental Army as servants, the Black soldiers of the Massachusetts and New Hampshire lines would also prove their worth on the battlefield which would lead to the eventual defeat of Britain.

The sacrifices African American troops made for the cause of independence cannot be emphasized enough. Black soldiers took part in every major action of the American Revolutionary War, as Continental and Redcoat, servant and soldier. Thus, it is not surprising that the service records of those Black soldiers in the Massachusetts and New Hampshire lines at New Windsor Cantonment were extensive and showed experience equal, and in some cases surpassing, that of their white comrades. Jude Hall’s first taste of battle occurred at Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, when he reported being “thrown headlong by a cannonball striking near him”19. As a member of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment from December, 1776 to the end of 1783, he was present at many of the actions in which his regiment participated. After the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778, Hall earned the name “Old Rock” as a testament to his endurance and courage during one of the hardest fought battles of the war20. The following year, Hall and his regiment took part in the Sullivan-Clinton expedition against the Iroquois and at the end of his second term of service in December, 1779, Hall re-enlisted for a third time for the duration of the war and was with his regiment at New Windsor during the final cantonment. Another New Hampshire soldier, John Reed, had served from 1776 to 1784. First in three New Hampshire militia regiments that took part in the Battles of Trenton, Princeton and Bennington, Reed would re-enlist in the 1st New Hampshire regiment just before taking part in the Battle of Bemis Heights in October 1777, which led to the defeat of General Burgoyne’s army at Saratoga. Reed spent the remainder of his service guarding the Hudson Highlands and was eventually discharged after the disbandment of his regiment in January, 178421.

One of the more famous actions involving Black troops took place in nearby Pines Bridge, New York (now Yorktown) on May 14th, 1781, when a detachment of 200 men of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment (also known as “The Black Regiment”), was surprised by a force of 260
mounted and dismounted loyalists under the command of Oliver Delancey. Colonel Christopher Greene, Major Flagg and 10 men were killed and 23 taken captive. Those soldiers of African descent were sent to the West Indies where they were sold into slavery. The First Rhode Island would later encamp briefly at New Windsor in late October, early November 1782 prior to their being sent north for the abortive attack on Fort Ontario.

Towards the end of the American War of Independence, General Washington proposed the awarding of “Badges of Honorary Distinction”, to recognize those soldiers who served faithfully and continuously from their enlistment to the cessation of hostilities. These badges came in the form of an inverted chevron worn on the left arm of the regimental that represented three years faithful service. Private Cuff Leonard, of Captain Hastings’ company of the 7th Massachusetts Regiment, who served from March 24, 1777 to June 10, 1783, was “entitled to 1 and 2 stripes”17. Cato Fiske, along with fellow New Hampshire soldiers London Dailey and Caesar Wallace received Badges of honorary distinction for serving six, four and five years respectively. An August, 1782 register of Captain Lincoln’s Company, 7th Massachusetts Regiment to determine which privates and noncommissioned officers were eligible to receive these badges lists Cesar Perry, an African American, as one of the most qualified22. One of the more remarkable Black recipients was Nantucket resident Michael Pease. Pease enlisted in May 1777 for the duration of the war and by the end of his enlistment on June 10, 1783, he, like Cuff Leonard, was “entitled to 1 and 2 stripes”. What makes Pease’s story interesting is that he was born in Portugal, the circumstances of his arrival in North America are still unknown.

By April, 1783, news of a general cessation of hostilities had reached the troops of Washington’s army at New Windsor. Later that June, the remnants of the Continental Army were marched to West Point where the troops would be given their discharge papers and sent home to resume the lives they had postponed when they enlisted. With the end of the war, the now 13 United States had no purpose for black troops, and White Americans in general picked up the banner of prejudice just as quickly as they cast aside the idealism of their revolution after it had been won. Despite their personal sacrifices and the courage they displayed while fighting one of the most powerful armies in the world, the Black soldiers of Washington’s army
returned to home to find the same hostility and racism they hoped military service would free them from. On February 7, 1787, Cato Fisk, along with 18 other Blacks, was warned to leave Exeter, New Hampshire for reasons unknown. Fisk would spend the rest of his life as a pauper and itinerant laborer, trying to support his wife and three children. Three of Jude Hall’s sons were kidnapped and sold into slavery, while his son-in-law, Ben Jake, was viewed as a “troublemaker” and, along with his family, run out of town and their house demolished. Jude’s other son George lived long enough to celebrate the abolition of slavery in New Hampshire in 1820 with his father and took center stage in the festivities.

London Daily ran into severe financial trouble when several court actions were brought against him for unpaid debts, leading to his imprisonment in October 1820 for a judgment of $50.75 in addition to $5.62 damages. Despite these financial and judicial setbacks, on July, 22, 1818, London, along with the son of fellow Black veteran Tobias Cutler, attempted to form a “Society beneficial for [Blacks living in Exeter]”. London and his wife were positive fixtures in the Black community of Exeter for the remainder of their lives. Other soldiers, like Cicero Swett, remained slaves after returning home, only to use their compensation to buy back their freedom. Although the war for American Independence was over, it would take another war to finally end the enslavement of Black Americans.

Eighty-six years after Jude Hall escaped to freedom to answer the call to arms against the “enslavement” of the 13 colonies by Great Britain, Aaron and Moses Hall enlisted in the 3rd U.S. Colored Infantry and 54th Massachusetts Regiments, to fight in another war against the institution of slavery itself. Unlike their illustrious grandfather, Aaron and Moses would, ironically, serve in a segregated army. However one cannot help but feel they were instilled with the same sense of duty and obligation to prove themselves as worthy defenders of American freedoms and for the release of their fellow African Americans from the bonds of slavery. The American War of Independence was unique in that it would be the only conflict until the Korean War in which white and Black soldiers fought alongside each other. It also laid the foundations for African Americans to fight on the battlefield and in the meeting halls for principles of liberty and equality they rightfully deserved. The deeds of these men would resonate in the hearts and minds of Black soldiers in every American conflict from the War of
Independence to the present day. The words of American poet laureate and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier in his essay *Black Men in the Revolution and War of 1812 a Review*, summarizes the need for us to never forget the deeds of these brave soldiers, who sacrificed body and spirit for the cause of independence, and personal freedom:

“The return of the festival of our national independence has called our attention to a matter which has been very carefully kept out of sight by orators and toast--drinkers. We allude to the participation of colored men in the great struggle for American freedom. It is not in accordance with our taste or our principles to eulogize the shedders of blood even in a cause of acknowledged justice; but when we see a whole nation doing honor to the memories of one class of its defenders to the total neglect of another class, who had the misfortune to be of darker complexion, we cannot forego the satisfaction of inviting notice to certain facts which for the last half century have been quietly elbowed aside, as no more deserving of place in patriotic recollection than the descendants of the men to whom the facts in question relate have to a place in a Fourth of July procession.” 25


6 Ibid, 8-10.

7 Gross, 96-97.
8 Knoblock, 119.


11 Quarles, 54.

12 Ibid, 55.


14 Quarles, 77.


19 Knoblock, 119.

20 Ibid, 120.

21 Ibid, 161-162.

22 Quarles, 78.

23 Knoblock, 121-122.

24 Knoblock, 102-103.