

The onset of the American Revolution disrupted the social and economic order and offered unprecedented opportunities for freedom.

When **Caesar Robbins*** marched to war in 1776, enslaved and free people of African descent had been fighting in New England's armies for generations. Throughout the 18th century, black Yankees served shoulder-to-shoulder with their white neighbors in the colonial wars that forged Britain's North American empire. Patriots of color such as **Caesar Robbins**, along with about 1,000 other Massachusetts men of color, seized on these circumstances and waged their own battles for independence.

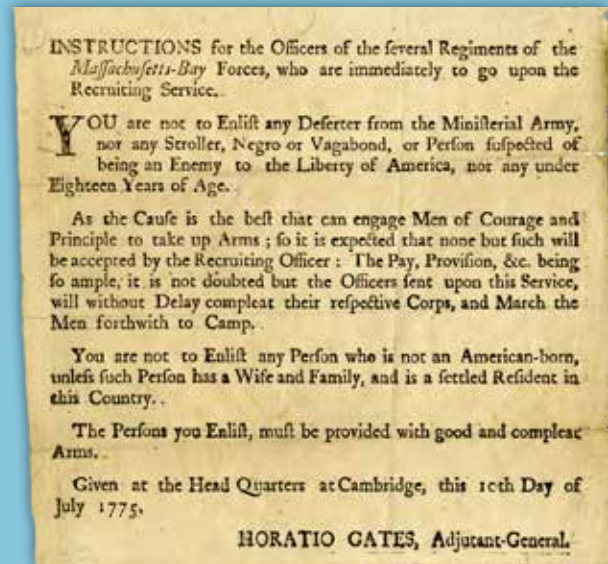


▲ During the Revolution, black men served side by side with white soldiers in integrated units. This recreation of a soldier in the 6th Connecticut Regiment demonstrates the typical uniform and equipment of New England soldiers. (Don Troiani, Bridgeman Images)

Early in the conflict, black New Englanders had to fight for the right to fight.

In the South, thousands of enslaved men and women found freedom by fleeing to the British Army, lured by promises of emancipation from British military leaders. Although fewer in number than their counterparts in the South, enslaved men and women in New England were just as capable of turning the war to their advantage. In particular, men of African descent in Massachusetts drew on the colony's long martial tradition to enter the fray as soon as the Revolution began: Prince Estabrook, an enslaved man from Lexington, was wounded in the war's first exchange of shots on April 19, 1775.

Initially, New England's white leaders readily enlisted men of color in the armed forces. But pressure from southern leaders led General George Washington to dismiss soldiers of African descent from the army gathered in Cambridge at the end of 1775. Following strong protests from white officers and black soldiers in



▲ In 1775, George Washington issued orders instructing army recruiters not to enlist people of color into the Continental Army. But pressure from white officers and black soldiers alike forced him to reverse this order by the end of the year. (Massachusetts Archives)

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Throughout American history, people of African descent have demanded the right to define their racial identity through terms that reflect their proud and complex history. African Americans across greater Boston used the terms "African," "colored," and "negro" to define themselves before emancipation, while African Americans in the early 1900s used the terms "black," "colored," "negro," and "Afro-American" - which later became "African American" to identify themselves and their ancestors. In our brochures, the terms "**people of color**," "**people of African descent**," "**black**," and "**African American**" are used interchangeably to reflect the identities claimed by African Americans over time.

These and the terms "**enslaved**" (versus "slave") and "**enslaver**" (versus "master" or "owner") are used to reflect the humanity of the millions of black men, women, and children who claimed their personhood, in various ways large and small, despite the laws and systems that bound them.



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Patriots of Color in Revolutionary New England (1775-1790)



What were they fighting for?

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CONCORD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

*NOTE: names in bold are associated with the Robbins House.

New England, he relented and reopened military service to free men of color. By the end of the war's first year, black soldiers had cemented their place in a racially integrated Continental Army.

The bar on enlisting enslaved men eventually fell. Manpower shortages forced Washington to modify his stance. During the harsh Valley Forge winter of 1777-78, the General authorized the Rhode Island government to recruit a regiment of enslaved men, with a promise of freedom for all who enlisted. By the time the First Rhode Island Regiment disbanded in 1780, over two hundred enslaved soldiers had served in its ranks.

While the New England governments never explicitly authorized the enlistment of men in bondage, recruiting officers proved reluctant to turn away willing recruits, enslaved or free. As a result, New England regiments mobilized a larger proportion of black soldiers than did other states. By the time **Caesar Robbins** served his final tour of duty in 1779, nearly six percent of Massachusetts soldiers serving in the army were black. In total, more than 3,000 enslaved and free New Englanders of color served in the American army by the war's end.

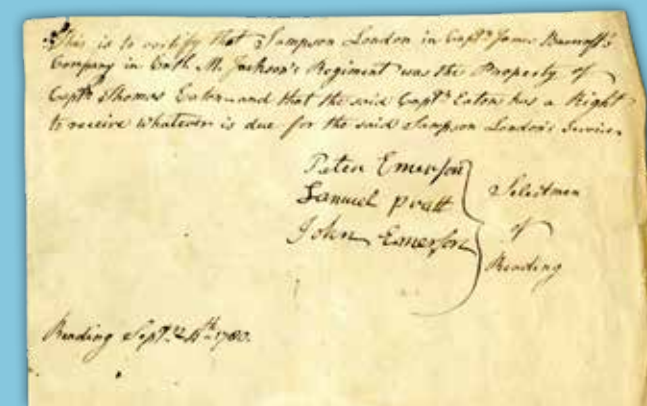


▲ An all-black military company from Massachusetts, called the "Bucks of America" was celebrated in Boston. Governor John Hancock presented the flag "as a tribute to their courage and devotion in the cause of American Liberty." (Massachusetts Historical Society)

Military service was not necessarily a path to freedom.

Some black men were forced into the army as substitutes for white enslavers eager to pocket the bondsmen's enlistment bounties and wages for themselves. Other enslaved men purchased freedom through military service, exchanging their pay for manumission. Still other enslaved men acted on their own; absconding from their enslavers to join the army, they enacted their own declarations of independence. Some of these soldiers marked their new status with original surnames, as did Concord's Brister Freeman.

Whatever their path to war, patriots of color served in an army that – at least on paper – offered a measure of equality to all its recruits. The New England regiments were fully integrated, with black soldiers serving side-by-side with whites. Men of color received the same bounties, wages, and rewards as did all other soldiers. Black and white troops shared food, tents, and clothing as well as the privation and hardship of the harsh winters at Valley Forge and Morristown and the blood and terror of the battles at Saratoga and Monmouth.

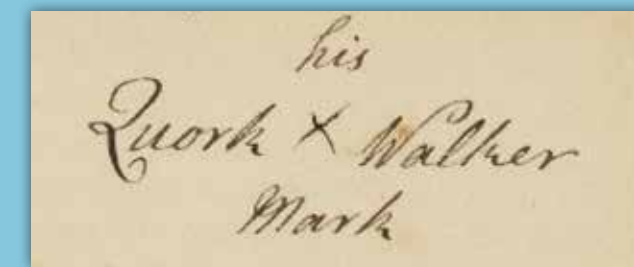


▲ Joining the Continental Army did not always guarantee freedom for men of color. Sampson London remained enslaved during his military service and his white enslaver, Thomas Eaton, collected his wages. (Massachusetts Archives)

Fighting in the American army was just one avenue of escape offered by the Revolution from a lifetime of slavery.

Beginning in 1773, Boston's black community petitioned the Massachusetts legislature asking the government to end the slave trade, abolish slavery, and provide support for enslaved men and women in the state. Often employing the same republican rhetoric used by white Revolutionary leaders in their challenges to British tyranny, black petitioners argued that freedom was "the natural right of all Men." Although their pleas went nowhere, this nascent political movement served as an important catalyst in the post-war struggle to end slavery.

Elsewhere in Massachusetts, enslaved men and women seized on the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 to press their case for freedom. This frame of government – ratified by the white male citizenry – affirmed the Revolutionary ideal that "all men are born free and equal." Invoking this principle, bondspeople turned to the courts and sued for their freedom. Not all were successful but a few, notably Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman (known as "Mum Bett"), did manage to obtain their freedom in the state's courts.



▲ Quock Walker was one of many enslaved people who sued for freedom in MA state courts during the Revolution. In 1782, he signed his mark to this petition asking the state legislature to affirm the judicial decision to grant his freedom. (Massachusetts Archives)

At the war's end, black soldiers returned to a state struggling to understand slavery's place within its new republican government. Even though census takers recorded no slaves in Massachusetts and New Hampshire during the first federal listing in 1790, the vast majority of people of color still lived with white families as if nothing had changed. But some free people of color sought to realize independence, even if that meant living on the margins of their towns, as did **Caesar Robbins** at the edge of Concord's Great Field. Nevertheless, these people were part of the vibrant African American community emerging in post-Revolutionary Massachusetts.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Concord deeds, censuses, town and vital records, etc.

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