THE SLAVE'S CAUSE

A History of Abolition

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To African Americans, abolition was an important component of the revolutionary agenda. In 1782, "A Black Whig" published a pamphlet, *A Sermon on the Present Situation of the Affairs of America and Great-Britain*, in Philadelphia that called for nationwide abolition. It was dedicated to the "Americans in General But to the Citizens of South-Carolina in Particular." This anonymous black patriot claimed he had "taken the liberty of a citizen" to make his case. Firmly identifying himself with the American cause and viewing Britain as "the low abyss of tyranny and despotism," he even decried British attempts to arm slaves. But in confidently predicting American success, he requested, "And now my virtuous fellow citizens, let me intreat you, that, after you have rid yourselves of the British yoke, that you will also emancipate those who have been all their life subject to bondage." "Though a descendant of Africa," he hoped in the end "may we be a free people for ever!" A truly free American republic, he avowed, would come about only with the demise of slavery.[7]

Revolutionary black abolitionists also developed the Christian critique of slavery. In his published religious sermons, Haynes did not address slavery specifically. Yet starting with his first published piece, "A Sermon on John, 1776" until his valedictory to his Rutland congregation, "The Sufferings, Support, and Reward of Faithful Ministers, Illustrated, 1820," he stressed the theme of spiritual regeneration. Christian redemption and his own life as a model clergyman were a standing rebuke to slavery and racism.

Unlike Haynes, who wrote most of his explicitly antislavery remarks in his political essays, Jupiter Hammon published two pamphlets in Hartford during the

war that dealt with the problem of slavery and freedom from an Afro-Christian perspective, or what one scholar has called "biblical hermeneutics." In the first, "A Winter Piece," published in 1782, Hammon addressed those "who have had the advantage of studying" and objected to his writings. Here he made clear that only education, not inherent racial difference, separates him from his white critics. He refers to Africans as a "poor despised nation" brought by God to a "Christian land." But rather than warrant that Christianization was a justification of their enslavement, Hammon wrote that thousands of slaves "have been born in what are called Christian families," questioning the Christianity of their enslavers. He criticizes his "objectors" for failing to baptize and educate their slaves. Hammon subtly casts aspersions on the Christian nature of masters and encourages slaves to become exemplary Christians. While concerned with the spiritual well-being of slaves, Hammon approved of their longing for freedom from slavery: "Many of us are seeking a temporal freedom and I wish you may obtain it." Denying the rumor that he had petitioned a court "against freedom," he explicitly denied that blacks should restrict their quest to spiritual freedom. In his second pamphlet, "An Evening's Improvement," Hammon reiterated that "we are many of us seeking for a temporal freedom, and I pray that God would grant your desire." At the "advanced age of seventy-nine years," he did not "desire temporal freedom" for himself. Hammon rejected racial hierarchy by insisting that Christ died for the sin of all humankind. God was "no respecter of persons" and embraced black slaves even as he did enslaved Jews.[2]

Antislavery pervaded black writing during the revolutionary era. While steeped in the idioms and ideas of their times, black abolitionists developed alternative and oppositional understandings of Christianity and revolutionary republicanism to criticize both slavery and racism. African American actions on the ground complemented these views.

THE BLACK REVOLUTION

A black revolution, if not the white one, confronted racial slavery. Taking advantage of the chaos engendered by the Revolutionary War, African Americans sought freedom in various ways: by running away, taking up arms, and abandoning the land of their enslavement. The revolution facilitated slave rebelliousness and black military action. African Americans, slave and free, participated in the crowd action against British rule as early as the Stamp Act crisis. They were a part of the revolutionary mob led by the Sons of Liberty that took down King George III's statue in New York. Even in the heart of slavery in the Deep South, Charleston, South Carolina, African Americans marched to the revolutionary

slogan "Liberty." A rash of slave revolts and conspiracies spread through the Caribbean and the southern colonies in the 1770s. In 1775 authorities uncovered two slave conspiracies led by black water pilots in the Carolinas. The leaders were whipped and their ears cropped; a free black pilot by the name of Thomas Jeremiah, who was probably innocent, was executed.[29]

With the outbreak of the War of Independence, African Americans waged their own battle for emancipation. Despite the voluminous rhetoric on liberty produced by the patriots, the British were the first to recruit slaves as a matter of military policy. Historically, most slave societies have been reluctant to arm slaves, but European powers, especially the Spanish, recruited free blacks, even slaves during moments of crisis, whether they were fighting each other or Native American nations or both. Slaves were an essential source of manpower in colonial America, and even slaveholders could not afford to ignore that fact during times of war. But military service did not automatically translate into freedom or even into more privileges for slave soldiers, though the Spanish did grant rights to their free black militias. The American Revolution changed that, thanks to the British governor of Virginia, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore. His Proclamation of November 7, 1775, offered freedom to slaves and any others who would fight for the British, raising the stakes considerably for blacks who wished to remain loyal. The idea originated with runaway slaves who offered their services to Dunmore. In Massachusetts a handful of black men had done the same to the British governor, Thomas Gage. After Lord Dunmore's Proclamation was issued, over a thousand slaves as well as some white servants and convicts escaped to the British in Virginia. Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment fought in the tattered clothing of slaves but no doubt subscribed to the sentiment of the legendary white sashes proclaiming "Liberty to Slaves" that they supposedly donned. Many succumbed to smallpox, and only around three hundred, including women and children, left Virginia with Dunmore in 1776.[30]

African Americans fought on both sides to gain their freedom. Abolitionists, arguing for black military service and citizenship during the Civil War, recovered the history of black patriots who had helped secure the liberties of the white Republic. A handful of black men, including Haynes and one Prince Esterbrook, a slave belonging to a local farmer, fought with the ragtag colonial militia in the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. At a decisive moment in the Battle of Bunker Hill a black soldier, either Peter Salem, a slave promised his freedom by his patriot master, or Salem Poor, a particularly honorable black soldier, purportedly distinguished himself by killing the officer leading the British charge, Maj. John Pitcairn. One hundred and fifty African Ameri-

cans fought at Bunker Hill. When Washington took charge of the Continental Army, he and the Continental Congress, in October 1775, banned African Americans from serving on the American side. In the aftermath of Dunmore's Proclamation, Washington allowed free blacks, but not slaves, to enlist in the army, a decision supported by Congress.[31]

Some states allowed masters to use their slaves as substitutes and received compensation for them. Patriot forces used slaves confiscated from Tories for military labor and in some southern states offered slaves themselves as bounties for military service. Desperation at Valley Forge forced Washington to lift his ban, as he and the Continental Congress accepted a proposal to allow Rhode Island to recruit slaves. A 1778 law in Rhode Island enlisted and freed slaves, though it was later rescinded. The 1st Rhode Island Regiment, which initially contained all-black companies, was chosen by Washington as part of a combined Rhode Island Regiment to lead the Continental Army in the final Battle of Yorktown. Two other all-black companies fought on the patriot side, the Massachusetts Bucks of America, led by an African American, Col. George Middleton, and the 6th Company from a Connecticut battalion. A French contingent of five hundred Haitians probably included André Rigaud and Henri Christophe, leaders of the Haitian Revolution.[32]

All the northern states followed Rhode Island in allowing slaves to enlist and granting them freedom for their military service. Virginia and Maryland allowed only free blacks to serve, though many slaves in the Chesapeake, pretending to be free or in lieu of their masters, joined the Continental Army. While some masters freed slaves they owned for their wartime service, others remanded them back to slavery. Virginia freed slaves who had served in the patriot forces, but the government there also sold state-owned slaves who had served in the navy. The Continental Congress, responding to British general Henry Clinton's Phillipsburg proclamation of 1779, which offered freedom and even gave confiscated patriot land to slaves who declared loyalty to the Crown, and to British military success in the lower south, approved of slave enlistment in Georgia and South Carolina. This plan was the brainchild of John Laurens, Washington's aide-de-camp, whose distaste for slavery matched his patriotic zeal. Educated in Geneva and influenced by the egalitarian ideas of the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Laurens recommended recruiting slaves and freeing them after their military service. Washington's other aide-de-camp, Hamilton, who proposed a similar plan to Governor Jay in New York, supported him, and Laurens procured a commission to lead such a regiment. Long derided for his alleged rashness, Laurens has only recently been recognized for his abolitionist beliefs. Despite his efforts, both states refused the proposition.

Instead, patriot militias in these states hunted down slaves fleeing to the British. Laurens, the lone voice of antislavery to emerge from the lower south political establishment, tragically died in a skirmish during the war.[33]

At least five thousand, if not more, African Americans fought in the Continental Army and Navy, most of them in integrated units. In the latest edition of their *Forgotten Patriots* project, the Daughters of the American Revolution have raised that count to sixty-six hundred black and Native American patriots. Black Revolutionary War veterans included Haynes, Prince and Primus Hall, rumored to have shared a blanket with Washington, and Peter Williams Sr. in New York. James Forten of Pennsylvania enlisted as a powder boy in a ship in Stephen Decatur's fleet and was held prisoner in a British man-of-war for refusing to renounce the American cause. Prince Whipple, who served with his master, William Whipple, signed the New Hampshire freedom petition of 1779.[34] All of these men became pioneering black abolitionists.

Black Loyalists, including thousands of escaped slaves, far outnumbered blacks who fought with the patriots. Responding first to Dunmore and later to Clinton's Phillipsburg proclamation, slaves defected to British lines in all thirteen colonies, some belonging to revolutionary luminaries such as Washington, Jefferson, Henry, and Madison. During the British occupation of Charleston in 1781–82, seven hundred slaves were recruited into the Black Dragoons, armed and used as patrols around the city. In New Jersey a slave named Titus fled his Quaker master and, as Colonel Tye, led the Black Pioneers formed by Clinton against the patriots until his death in 1780. Black Loyalist guerillas accumulated supplies for the British, and the British army used African Americans as military laborers, foragers, spies, and soldiers, but they did not make the revolution into a war about black liberation.

Unlike the American Civil War, the Revolutionary War was not fought by either side in the cause of slavery or its abolition. A desperate Lord Cornwallis, in a display of imperial indifference, abandoned many slaves to disease, starvation, and the tender mercies of their former masters at Yorktown. Once of the largest slave-trading and slave-owning powers in the world, the British did not fight an abolition war. They were solicitous of Loyalist masters' right of slave ownership, and some slaves of Loyalists found themselves transported from American to West Indian slavery. An exception was George Liele, whose Loyalist master freed him but who was wrongfully imprisoned until a British officer came to his rescue and helped him purchase his family's freedom. He founded the first black Baptist churches in Savannah, Georgia, and Kingston, Jamaica. Andrew Bryan, who bought his freedom after the death of his evangelical master Jonathan Bryan, took over the Savannah church. The latter was the

brother of none other than Hugh Bryan, who had written against slavery earlier in the century. Both Liele and Andrew Bryan were persecuted by slaveholding authorities in Jamaica and Georgia for their preaching: Liele was imprisoned and Bryan whipped.[35]

It was the slaves who attempted to make the Revolutionary War into an abolition war, especially in the southern colonies. Most, including entire families and communities, women, children, and the elderly, used the disruption of wartime to simply flee. David George, after seeing his family cruelly abused and himself being "whipped many a time on my naked skin," explained that his "master's rough and cruel usage" was the reason for him to abscond. Boston King ran away to escape his master's cruelty and found the "happiness of liberty" as well as smallpox in British lines. Runaways like Prince Whitten fled from the lower south states to Spanish Florida, as they had done during the colonial era. The numbers are staggering: around thirty thousand in Virginia, twenty to twenty-five thousand in South Carolina, and ten to fifteen thousand in Georgia. A recent estimate has scaled down these figures, originally proposed by Jefferson, showing that at most twenty thousand slaves ran away to the British, twelve thousand from the South. Even so, Gary Nash has called this the largest unknown slave rebellion in American history. The anti–slave trade movement would fail in the short run because of the determination of some lower south slaveholders to make good their revolutionary losses, which were also caused by the suspension of the African slave trade during the war. Slaveholders and the new American Republic made compensation for lost slave property a sticking point in their negotiations with the British in the aftermath of the war. Despite the massive scale of slave defection, there were more slaves in the infant Republic at the end of the revolutionary era than at its beginning owing to the natural increase in the slave population.[36]