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“How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”

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Anne Midgley

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In favour of this exemption of the Americans from the authority of their lawful sovereign, and the dominion of their mother-country, very loud clamours have been raised, and many wild assertions advanced. . . . These antipatriotick prejudices are the abortions of folly impregnated by faction. . . . We are told, that the subjection of Americans may tend to the diminution of our own liberties; an event, which none but very perspicacious politicians are able to foresee. If slavery be thus fatally contagious, how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?

—Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*  
An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress, 1775.

In his response to colonial American cries for relief from the taxation and legislative control of Great Britain, Samuel Johnson, the great eighteenth century writer, excoriated the American rebels for the obvious hypocrisy of their claims to liberty.<sup>1</sup> During the mid-eighteenth century, anti-slavery opinions arose in Britain, particularly among the educated classes. Johnson’s sentiment in his resolution to the American Congress reflects the growing British sense of moral outrage at slavery, which led to Britain’s abolition of its slave trade in 1787 and outright abolition of slavery in 1834.<sup>2</sup>

Across the Atlantic, in Britain’s thirteen American colonies, however, the slavery of blacks was largely an accepted fact. On the eve of the American Revolution, the colonies contained over four hundred thousand people of African and West Indies descent, representing nearly twenty percent of the population. In the stratified and hierarchical society of colonial America, slaves held the lowest rung on the ladder. Many others—women, children, indentured servants, apprentices, and those without property—had few rights as well, since only adult white male property holders had the right to cast ballots in American politics.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of blacks during the American War for Independence varied significantly. Determinants included their home colony, their occupation, and their status—free or enslaved. The war affected African-Americans in a variety of ways, some of which are relatively unknown to twenty-first century Americans. Blacks fought both for and against the rebellion. In addition, at the close of the war, as many as twenty thousand blacks left America with the British, preferring an unknown future to the certainties of life as a black person in the new

republic.<sup>4</sup>

Not every black person in America was enslaved and the experience of individual blacks during the war was exceptionally diverse. This paper is intended to highlight some instances of African-Americans' participation in the war; it is not intended to be a holistic examination of that very complex topic. If it spurs the reader to further examination and research on the topic, then it has accomplished its purpose.



Figure 1. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, oil on canvas by Emanuel Leutze, c. 1851.

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A close examination of the 1850 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze provides some sense of the diversity of colonial America. Among the oarsmen propelling the boat forward to the fateful Battle of Trenton is a sailor of African descent wearing the “short tarpaulin jacket of a New England seaman.”<sup>5</sup> It is without doubt that the black man represents a member of the New England “Marblehead men.” As the mariners Colonel John Glover recruited for the 14th Massachusetts Continentals hailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts, many in his regiment reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of that New England sea-faring region. Native Americans and African Americans frequently sailed as shipmates in the New England fishing vessels and are known to have served with Glover. General George Washington crossed the Delaware with the men of Glover’s Marblehead unit, who became known as some of the best soldiers in the Continental Army.<sup>6</sup>

William Ranney's famous painting of *The Battle of Cowpens*, which graces the cover of this issue, depicts a sword fight between American Lieutenant Colonel William Washington and British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Outnumbered by the British, Washington's life was in grave danger. The young black bugler, depicted in the painting, who raced to the scene and shot one of Washington's opponents, saved Washington from certain death. The National Park Service documents fifteen black soldiers who fought with the Americans at Cowpens, but cannot confirm the identity of that young man.<sup>7</sup>

A John Trumbull painting of General George Washington reflects Washington accompanied by William Lee, a young black man wearing an exotic



Figure 2. George Washington, oil on canvas by John Trumbull, c. 1780. Trumbull served in the Continental Army as an aide-de-camp to Washington.

turban. According to historian David Hackett Fisher, William “Billy” Lee was Washington’s slave, man-servant, comrade, friend—and a horseman who rode nearly as well as Washington, who was known as one of the best equestrians in the colonies.<sup>8</sup> These paintings depict three black men actively involved in the pursuit of American Independence.

Early in the war, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and the British governor of Virginia offered freedom to slaves who would rally to fight for the British and raised an “‘Ethiopian Regiment’ of three hundred African Americans, their uniforms inscribed with the rallying-cry ‘Liberty to Slaves’.”<sup>9</sup> The rebels quickly defeated Dunmore and he fled to the safety of a British warship. Precedent was set however, and both the British military and the American rebels sought to recruit African Americans to their respective cause. Thousands of black Americans fought with the British as soldiers, and as “scouts, laborers, and servants.”<sup>10</sup> Historian Paul Shirley noted that the British formed several black regiments, including the Black Dragoons, a cavalry regiment formed entirely of former slaves and led by black officers.<sup>11</sup>

Historian Gary Nash, among others, estimates that ten to twenty times as many blacks fought for the British than for the rebels, in large part due to the hope that fighting for the British would earn the soldier his long-sought freedom.<sup>12</sup> After the close of the war, tens of thousands of African Americans sailed with the British to gain a better life. Their diaspora brought these people—including women and children—to far-flung corners of the globe. They settled in regions as diverse as the colony of Sierra Leone in Africa, British Canada, East Florida, Jamaica, and the Bahamas in the Americas, and London and other major European cities. In “Harry Washington’s Atlantic Crossing: The Migrations of Black Loyalists,” found in *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America*, Douglas R. Egerton outlines the challenges facing both the free blacks and former slaves who fled the American colonies. Ironically, those who migrated from the former American colonies felt that their own opportunity for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was far from its shores.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Samuel Johnson, “Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress,” from *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, published by Pafraets & Company, Troy, New York, 1913; volume 14, pages 93-144, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://www.samueljohnson.com/tnt.html>.

2. Editha Jacobs, “The Role of Women in the British Anti-Slavery Campaigns,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 40.2 (2006): 293-IX, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/211103463/317FD8B1472943CCPQ/9?accountid=8289>.

3. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32, 42.
4. "African Americans in the Revolutionary Period," *The American Revolution: Lighting Freedom's Flame*, National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, accessed October 17, 2016, [https://www.nps.gov/revwar/about\\_the\\_revolution/african\\_americans.html](https://www.nps.gov/revwar/about_the_revolution/african_americans.html).
5. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 22, 219.
7. "Patriot Minorities at the Battle of Cowpens," *Cowpens National Battlefield*, National Park Service, accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/cowp/learn/historyculture/patriot-minorities-at-the-battle-of-cowpens.htm>.
8. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 18.
9. Paul Shirley, "Tek Force Wid Force," *History Today* 54, 4 (Apr 2004): 30-35, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/202817406/208CE5D73AB944C0PQ/3?accountid=8289>.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*; Timothy C. Hemmis, "Cavalry of the American Revolution," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 114, 3 (Jul 2013): 262-264, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/1492539172/41E29B4205734E67PQ/1?accountid=8289>.
12. Gary B. Nash, "African Americans in the early republic," *Magazine of History* 14, 2 (Winter 2000): 12, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/213730210/71FB2191A68F497DPQ/3?accountid=8289>.
13. Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196-197.

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