

George Washington and Black Patriots

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Thank you President Ferguson. It is a profound honor to stand in this chamber with you and to address the Maryland Senate in honor of George Washington's birthday in the 250th year since America's declaration of independence. 250 years ago today, in February 1776, General Washington was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, meeting with his Council of War and contemplating an attack on Boston—and being advised that in no way did they have the number of soldiers to make a serious ground invasion. The report from the meeting that day states:

*That the Regiments of the United Colonies at these Incampments... amounted to 8,797 men fit for duty, besides Officers and 1450 men on Command...our Stock of powder was so small, as to Afford but little aid from Cannon & mortars, and therefore that Small Arms must be our principal reliance in any event, till a Supply cou'd be Obtained.*¹

Ultimately—aided by the arrival of the famed 'guns of Ticonderoga' that were then traveling over water, land, and mountains from New York—Washington was able to fortify Dorchester Heights and force the British evacuation of the city. But that early victory would be followed by many defeats, including a near total annihilation in Brooklyn that August. If not for the Maryland troops, the renowned 'Maryland 400' that took the brunt of British fire while enabling Washington and nearly 9,000 other soldiers to escape to Manhattan, the War might have ended right there. But that is a story for another day—specifically August 22 when I hope some of you will join the MD250 Commission in Brooklyn at the Old Stone House as we commemorate 250 years since Maryland's Old Line achieved their immortality at the Battle of Brooklyn.

As that battle proved, every man counted, and in 1776, when enlistments in the Continental Army lasted only one year, General Washington faced a profound challenge in maintaining adequate levels of troops—let alone well trained troops—to continue waging war against the elite forces of Great Britain. Convincing men to stay in the army, with poor rations, inadequate clothing and shelter, and no guarantee of solid pay, was not easy. Even those who joined with a fervor for liberty could be discouraged by the uncertainty of the situation, and Washington often found himself appealing for loyalty to the cause to men eager to return home and take up their previous lives. Recruitment of new troops was critical to any chance of success.

¹ "Council of War, 16 February 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-03-02-0229>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 3, 1 January 1776–31 March 1776, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988, pp. 320–324.]

Washington was particularly panicked by the methods of the British army, who, waging war thousands of miles from home and on unfamiliar terrain, also needed reinforcements. In November 1775, Virginia's royal governor, John Murray, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation that offered freedom to indentured servants and Black people enslaved by "rebels" if they fought for the British.

Washington learned of this at his headquarters in Cambridge on December 2 and was greatly agitated, as indicated in his letter to Joseph Reed on December 15 where he refers to Lord Dunmore as 'that arch Traitor to the Rights of Humanity.' He uses an analogy he'd use often in letters describing Dunmore's plan, saying his army 'will increase as a snow ball by rolling, and faster, if some expedient cannot be hit upon to convince the Slaves and Servants of the Impotency of His designs.'²

It's no stretch of our modern imaginations, given all the scholarship on Washington's enslavement of hundreds of humans throughout his life, that the Virginian must have been shocked by the idea of Black troops serving alongside white men. Even more outrageous must have been the idea of arming a Black man—either free or enslaved—with a weapon. Prior to the issuance of Dunmore's Proclamation, it was clear that Washington was not considering Black men as a way to grow his ranks. He issued instructions from Cambridge that the army "was not to enlist any deserter from the British army, nor any stroller, negro, or vagabond....neither Negroes, boys unable to bear arms, nor old men unfit to endure the fatigues of the campaign..."³ Individual states, in raising regiments, also adopted policies prohibiting 'Negroes' from enlisting, particularly noting the prohibition of the enslaved. Existing records do indicate that free Blacks served in regiments throughout the colonies—although in small numbers that are difficult to define—and were relegated to noncombat roles such as wagon drivers or manual laborers.

But Dunmore's initiative and the prospect of armed enslaved men fighting for the British so alarmed Washington that he reversed course, and on December 30, issued general orders stating that "as the General is informed, that numbers of Free Negroes are desirous of enlisting, he gives leave to the recruiting Officers to entertain them, and promises to lay the matter before Congress, who he doubts will not approve of it."⁴ Congress did quickly approve, and the active recruitment of African Americans—both free Black and enslaved—began in earnest. The author Benjamin Quarles, in his ground-breaking book of 1961—the first to comprehensively document Black Patriots—wrote, "when manpower needs became acute, whether in the volunteer forces,

² "George Washington to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Reed, 15 December 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0508>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, 16 September 1775–31 December 1775, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987, pp. 551–554.]

³ "General Orders, 12 November 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0326>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, 16 September 1775–31 December 1775, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987, pp. 353–355.]

⁴ *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Abbot and Twohig, 2:620, as quoted in Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal*, p.146.

the militia, or the Continental troops, hesitations and fears were put into the background and the Negro was mustered in.”⁵

Rhode Island was the only state to raise an all-Black regiment, albeit with white officers in command. Across all the states, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut are known to have enlisted the highest numbers of Black soldiers, and overall, it is believed that at least 5,000 Black soldiers served throughout the War. They were fighting for the liberty of a country in which, even though some of them were free, as Black people they were denied the same rights as colonists, nor were they guaranteed the benefits that might come with independence from Britain.

Where does Maryland fit into this history? The exact number of Maryland’s Black soldiers is unknown—due to a variety of factors including the nature of information collected on muster rolls, and the paucity of evidence found in pension records submitted decades after the War. Confirmed numbers across all available muster rolls indicate about 150 Black soldiers served from Maryland.

We might have known the names of many more had a 1781 legislative effort to raise an all-Black regiment not failed in the House of Delegates.

A proposal to raise a regiment of 750 enslaved soldiers in Maryland began to circulate in the Maryland General Assembly in the spring of 1781, as the state struggled to rebuild the army after significant troop losses the previous summer at the Battle of Camden. One supporter of the plan, Maj. Edward Giles wrote to his friend, Col. Otho Holland Williams, on June 1:

*There is some talk of raising a black regiment ... I wish the regiment could be raised ... I am of the opinion that the blacks will make excellent soldiers--indeed experience proves it. As to the danger of training them to arms, tis the child of a distempered imagination. There are some people who are forever frightening themselves with the bugbears of their own creation.*⁶

The text of the proposed law has not survived, but it was described by Charles Carroll of Carrollton to his father, Charles Carroll of Annapolis, on June 4, 1781. Clearly believing it would imminently pass, he wrote:

*We shall pass a law tomorrow for raising a negro regiment. Every person having 6 negroes between 14 & 45 years of age may have a negro taken from him, if the negro should be willing to enlist for [duration of] the war; the owner is to receive a certificate for 100 pounds specie ... This law appears to be unequal & consequently oppressive to a particular set of men.*⁷

⁵ *The Negro in the American Revolution*, Benjamin Quarles. University of North Carolina Press, 1996. As quoted in Hirschfeld, p. 147.

⁶ Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Charles Carroll of Annapolis, 4 June 1781, in *Dear Papa, Dear Charley*, 3:1443-1444. Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

⁷ *Ibid*, 3:1443.

I'll refrain from further quoting from this letter, which uses pejoratives of the period—but I will summarize that the 'particular set of men' that Carroll referred to as being oppressed by this law, were Maryland slaveholders, who would not be compensated enough, in Carroll's view, by the potential loss of their property when an enslaved man was conscripted into this regiment.

Although not recorded, the bill appears to have passed the Senate and was introduced in the House on June 5, where support quickly collapsed. Although no record of debate survives, the concerns Carroll raised about his own property, and the large number of members of the House who were also enslavers, likely influenced the vote. It was rejected 27-19.⁸ By July, the proposal was dead.

So what we know of the service of Maryland's Black Patriots comes from the scant historical records that exist. One of those records, a pension application from 1818, documents the service of a free Black man from Caroline County—Thomas Carney—who served in the Continental Army from 1777 until 1783. He was promoted to the rank of corporal—the lowest ranking non-commissioned officer—in the 7th Maryland. One of the witnesses to his service documented in his pension application is Major General Perry Benson, who was carried to safety by Carney after being wounded in South Carolina in 1781. It was Carney's life story that compelled Steven Xavier Lee, an author, artist and independent historian, to bring a proposal to the State House Trust to erect a monument honoring Black Patriots at the State House. The Trust unanimously approved the proposal in 2023 and, for the past two years, planning has been underway for the *Maryland Monument to Honor Black Patriots who Served in the American Revolutionary War*. It will be unveiled on August 29, 2026 and will perhaps be Maryland's most prominent and enduring contribution to America's 250th anniversary commemoration.

I'd like to take a moment to publicly acknowledge President Ferguson and the State House Trust (including Speaker Emerita Adrienne Jones) for the commitment to this monument and also recognize Senator Malcolm Augustine for his service on the Black Patriot Monument Advisory Committee. The advisory committee selected the artist, Branly Cadet, as well as Mr. Cadet's concept for the monument, and continues to be engaged with him, as well as with the Department of General Services, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the Archives' Commission on Artistic Property, who are managing the project.

On May 15, 1783—seven months before General George Washington walked into this room and resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, the *Maryland Gazette* published an anonymous essay pointing out the hypocrisy of a revolution based on the principles of liberty and all men being equal, when so many people in the country remained enslaved. It reads in part:

Freedom is the object of our humble address...In the language of your humble addresses to the inexorable throne of Britain, permit us humbly to address you.

⁸ House Journal, May 1781, pp. 138, 141

Liberty is our claim. Reverence for our Great Creator, principles of humanity, and the dictates of common sense, all convince us that we have an indubitable right to liberty. Has not the wisdom of America solemnly declared it? Attend to your own declarations—'These truths are self-evident—all men are created equal; they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'
*Though our bodies differ in colour from yours; yet our souls are similar in a desire for freedom.*⁹

The essay was signed, “Vox Africanorum,” Latin for “Voice of the Africans.”

Can there be a greater expression of the paradox that is the American Revolution? Can there be a more eloquent justification—should anyone demand one—for the inclusion of honoring Black Patriots alongside George Washington, the Signers, and all of those generals whose portraits hang in the room next door when we remember Maryland’s role in the Revolutionary War?

In her brilliant book, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution*, author Judith VanBuskirk asserts that those free Black and formerly enslaved people who stepped up to fight for American liberty are the founders of the modern Civil Rights movement. That it was their grandchildren who fought for abolition in the 19th century, and their grandchildren’s grandchildren, who fought the battles against Jim Crow in the 20th century; and their distant descendants who today fight to maintain equality for all Americans.

A monument doesn’t solve any of the problems our society collectively faces in maintaining the promises of America’s founding. But I would offer that it does provide an opportunity to more broadly consider what “reparations” can look like. Not the monetary reparations that draw so much attention and controversy—but the idea of reparative history. Are we taking anything away from our reverence for George Washington by placing a statue of a Black soldier—representing a person that he might not have fully supported or at least never fully recognized in his lifetime—within view of this very room? Does our knowledge of Washington’s own history as a slaveholder mean we shouldn’t honor him as the leader of the Continental Army, without whom it’s very likely the War might not have ended in our favor? Of course not, and by broadening the scope through which we view American history and the people whose lives are contained within it, we provide representation for people today to see themselves in that historical arc. And that matters—it’s why one of President Ferguson’s first acts was to install the portrait of Verda Welcome in the Senate Chamber. It’s why we have statues of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass across the hall in the Old House of Delegates Chamber, and why the memorial to Thurgood Marshall was sited in relation to the statue of Roger Brooke Taney—a statue removed in 2017 by the State House Trust, which remains in the care and custody of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property.

⁹ “Vox Africanorum,” *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, MD), May 15, 1783.

History will judge us for that action, as we have judged those who came before us who created their own monuments for reasons we may not fully understand. More poetically, in the words of the musical *Hamilton*, “History has its eyes on you.” Let us endeavor to be seen by those who come after us to have strived to remember and honor the truth of all of our history. Let the ‘eyes of history’ see that we did all within our power to fulfill the promise of the American Revolution.

Thank you.

In addition to crediting the authors of published works cited in the footnotes, I want to acknowledge the assistance of staff at the Maryland State Archives in preparing these remarks, most notably Mimi Calver, Owen Lourie and William Kelly.