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The Forgotten Experience

IN APRIL 1787, a month before the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to draw up the culminating document of the revolutionary era, a man, whom nobody commemorated in the Bicentennial year, sent these words to a friend:

If I fall by the hand of such [assassins], I shall fall a victim in the noblest of causes—that of falling in maintaining the just rights of my country. I aspire to the honest ambition of meriting the appellation of preserver of my country, equally with those chiefs among you, whom from acting on such principles, you have exalted to the highest pitch of glory; and if, after every peaceable mode of obtaining a redress of grievances having proved fruitless, the having recourse to arms to obtain it, be marks of the savage, and not of the soldier, what savages must the Americans be...

The author of those words was Hobo-Hili Miko, a leader of the Creek Indians of the lower South and known in white communities of Georgia and South Carolina as Alexander McGillivray (for his father, a Scotch-Irish immigrant who arrived in America about 1738, became an Indian trader in South Carolina, and married a Creek woman).

McGillivray's remark was made at a time when the government of Georgia was intent on killing him because of his fierce resistance to encroaching white frontiersmen, who coveted the rich lands on which the Creek people had dwelt for centuries. His words serve as a reminder that the American Revolution was more than a struggle between highly principled American colonists and a tyrannical, corrupt mother country. It was more, even, than a war of national liberation overlaid by an internal struggle among patriots concerning the kind of society that should emerge if the war was won. Seen most broadly, the Revolution was an era of social upheaval and military conflict in which a bewildering variety of people was swept into a whirlpool of ideas and events, forced to decide what it was they believed in, and obliged—as happens to few of us in the modern age—to risk everything in defense of those beliefs. Some
McGillivray, of the Creeks, was red; and like so many of the heroes commemorated in the Bicentennial year, he decided that what he believed in were the preservation of political liberty for his people, the maintenance of their cultural integrity, and the safeguarding of the land that their ancestors had inhabited from time immemorial. What has been largely lost in our recording of American history is the fact that for many of the people of North America the struggle for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the 1770s and 1780s was carried on by fighting with the British and against those American patriots upon whom our patriotic celebrations have always exclusively focused. The story of these “other” patriots deserves our attention too, if we mean to honor, two hundred years after the fact, all those who struggled for freedom, justice, and opportunity.

An example of the “other” patriots was Thomas Peters. In 1759, the year of Alexander McGillivray’s birth and—annus mirabilis—the year that the British and their colonial partners drove the French from the Plains of Abraham at Quebec and ended French pretensions in North America, Peters had never heard of the thirteen American colonies. He was an Egba of the Yoruba tribe, living in what is now Nigeria and known, of course, by a different name. But a year later he was in the New World, having been kidnapped by slave traders, carried across the Atlantic, and sold at auction in French Louisiana. Peters lost not only his Egba name and his family and friends but also his liberty, his dreams of happiness, and very nearly his life. Shortly thereafter, he started his own revolution in America because, without benefit of a written language or constitutional treatises, he had been deprived of what he considered his natural rights. Three times he tried to escape from the grasp of another human being who called him chattel property. He thus proclaimed, within the context of his own experience, that all men are created equal. Three times he paid the price of unsuccessful black revolutionaries—first whippings, then branding, and finally ankle shackles.

By the early 1770s, Peters had been sold to a plantation owner in Wilmington, North Carolina, perhaps because his former master had wearied of trying to snuff out the yearning for freedom that seemed to beat irrepressibly in his breast. On the eve of the Revolution, then in his thirties and well acculturated to the ways of the New World slave colonies, Peters struck his next blow for freedom. Pamphleteers all over the colonies were crying out against British oppression, British tyranny, and British plans to enslave the Americans. But in November 1775, in Nor-

tion, the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, proclaimed lifelong freedom to any American slave or indentured servant “able and willing to bear arms” who escaped his master and made it to the British lines. Peters broke the law of North Carolina, redefined himself as man instead of chattel property, and made good his escape. For the remainder of the war he fought in the British Regiment of Black Guides and Pioneers, was twice wounded, and was promoted to sergeant. He made a wartime marriage to another black freedom fighter, a slave woman who had escaped her master in Charleston, South Carolina, about the time the colonial delegates to the Second Continental Congress were gathering in Philadelphia to sign the great document by which they collectively emancipated themselves from their masters.

At the end of the war, Peters, his wife, and hundreds of other members of the Black Guides and Pioneers were evacuated from New York City to Nova Scotia by the British. There could be no staying in the land of the victorious American revolutionaries because only Vermont, among the territories of the new republic, had ended slavery. Those who had fought with the British were particularly hated and subject to retaliation; to remain in America meant running the risk of reenslavement. Moreover, the British promised land, tools, and rations for three years to those who had fought alongside them against the rebellious colonists. But in Nova Scotia the dream of life, liberty, and happiness became a nightmare. Some 3,000 ex-slaves found that they were segregated in impoverished villages, given small scraps of often un-tillable land, deprived of rights normally extended to British subjects, and reduced to peonage by a white population whose racism was as concealed as the frozen winter soil of Nova Scotia. White Nova Scotians were no more willing than the Americans to accept blacks as better than slaves, and this was made abundantly clear less than a year after Peters and his people arrived from New York. Hundreds of disbanded British soldiers, who were taking up settlement in Nova Scotia, attacked black villages, burned and looted, and pulled down the houses of free blacks who underbid their labor in the area.

After several years of frustration, Peters determined to journey to England to put the case of the black Nova Scotians before the British government. He sailed in July 1790 and in London met with leaders of the English abolitionist movement—Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilburforce. These men were already working to establish a free black colony on the west coast of Africa, especially for ex-slaves, many of them refugees from America, living in poverty in London. By
1792 the plan was perfected. The colony was to be called Sierra Leone, and its capital city would be Freetown. Peters, accompanied by John Clarkson, the younger brother of Thomas, returned to Nova Scotia and spread the word of a return to the homeland; he also played a galvanizing role in organizing the pilgrimage back to the part of the world from whence many of his compatriots had started half a lifetime before. In January 1792, fifteen ships with some 1,200 black Canadians weighed anchor, set their sails to the east, and followed this black Moses away from the New World. Legend tells that Peters, sick from shipboard fever, led his people ashore in Sierra Leone singing, “The day of jubilee is come, return ye ransomed sinners home.” Four months later he was dead.

Peters deserves a prominent place in any commemoration of the American Revolution that pays heed to the principles upon which the American struggle was based, because he waged an epic half-century struggle for the most basic political rights, for social equity, and for human dignity. For Peters, as for a large number of Afro-Americans in the 1770s, this struggle involved a reckoning of which side of the family quarrel to take in order to pursue their personal freedom as opposed to the nation’s freedom. As Benjamin Quarles has said, the “major loyalty [of black revolutionaries] was not to a place nor a people but to a principle.” If the principle could best be achieved by joining the British, then why should it matter whether the king and Parliament were taxing the Americans without representation or quartering troops in Boston? Such infringements of white rights paled by comparison to the violation of black rights by these same Americans, as even some white revolutionaries admitted. If, on the other hand, the British army was nowhere near, then service on the American side might earn a slave his freedom. So black Americans made their choices according to the circumstances in which they found themselves, and in many of the colonies they were quick to petition the legislatures for their freedom even before the fighting began. They were helped along by scores of white revolutionaries who, like the clergyman Samuel Hopkins of Connecticut, called for “universal liberty to white and black” and pointed out “the shocking, the intolerable, the . . . gross barefaced practiced inconsistency” between the patriots inveighing against the slavery imposed by king and Parliament on the colonies, while at the same time they consigned to “utterable wretchedness” many thousands of poor blacks “who have as good a claim to liberty as themselves.” But black Americans quickly learned in the early years of the war that the chances for a general emancipation were almost nil. Many white patriots, throughout the colonies, believed that slavery was a grotesque contradiction of the revolutionary credo. But they regarded the social and economic costs of emancipation as too high a price to pay. Thus blacks learned not to look to white society for their liberty, but to seize the moment, whenever and wherever it presented itself, to liberate themselves.

It is not surprising, then, that in almost every part of the colonies, black Americans took advantage of wartime disruption to obtain their freedom in any way they could. Sometimes they joined the American army, often serving in place of their masters who gladly gave black men freedom in order not to risk life and limb for the cause. Sometimes they served with their masters on the battlefield as orderlies and hoped for the rewards of freedom at war’s end. Such was the case of William Lee, Washington’s slave, who appears at the General’s side in many paintings of the period but had to wait until Washington’s death in 1799 to collect his reward. Sometimes black Americans served with such heroism that white society gladly gave them freedom for services rendered. Such was the case of James Armistead, who enlisted under General Lafayette in 1781, infiltrated Cornwallis’s camp at Yorktown, providing valuable information for the revolutionary army, and lived, a free man after the war, to greet the French general when he returned to America in 1824 to visit his friend, Thomas Jefferson. Sometimes Afro-Americans tried to burst the shackles of slavery by fleeing all the white combatants and seeking refuge among the trans-Allegheny Indian tribes. But most frequently, freedom was sought by joining the British whenever their regiments were close enough to reach. Acting very little like dependent childlike Sambos that some historians have described, black Americans took up arms, so far as we can tell, in as great a proportion to their numbers as did white Americans. Well they might, for while revolutionaries were fighting to protect liberties long enjoyed, black revolutionaries were fighting to gain liberties long denied. Even in the areas where slavery was practiced in its mildest forms, such as in Quaker Philadelphia, slaves made their bid for freedom. When the British occupied the city in late 1777, slaves fled their masters by the scores. “The defection of the Negroes,” wrote one Philadelphian, “even of the most indulgent masters . . . shows what little dependence ought to be placed on persons deprived of their natural rights.”

We could draw up a roster of black revolutionary heroes as long as the time-honored list of whites: Agrippa Hull, the free black who served two years in the Massachusetts line and four years more as orderly for the Polish patriot general, Tadeusz Kosciusko; John Marrant, the
black evangelist who lived and preached among the Cherokees in the early 1770s, fought with the British during the war, ministered among the relocated blacks of Nova Scotia in the 1780s, and returned to American soil in the 1790s to become the chaplain in Boston of the first American Black Masonic Lodge; David George, founder of the first black Baptist church gathered among slaves at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, in 1773; and Richard Allen, a founder of the Free African Society in Philadelphia in 1787—the first black organization for social and economic cooperation in America—and co-founder of the first free black church in Philadelphia. But while it is important to recall these black leaders, it also needs to be recognized that at a very common level, within the slave quarters of thousands of southern plantations and in the kitchens and backrooms of thousands of northern farms, ordinary black Americans were deciding that the moment had come when they must say, “Give me liberty or give me death.”

Perhaps only 20 percent or less of the American slaves gained their freedom and survived the war—and many of them faced years of travail and even reenslavement thereafter in Nova Scotia, England, the West Indies, and British Florida. But their story is an extraordinarily important part of a tradition of black protest and struggle that did not die with the Peace of Paris in 1783. The American Revolution was the first large-scale rebellion of American slaves, and we must link their quest with the struggles of nineteenth-century black abolitionists and resistant slaves who drew inspiration from their work. It was a rebellion, to be sure, that was carried on individually rather than collectively for the most part, because circumstances favored individualized struggles for freedom. But out of thousands of separate acts grew a legend of black strength, black vision for the future, black resistance to slavery and institutionalized white racism.

Personified in the lifelong struggle of Thomas Peters, this new determination reemerged after the war, surfacing in the first successful efforts to build black institutions in America: the African Baptist and Methodist Episcopal churches founded by sons of the revolution such as David George, Andrew Bryan, Peter Williams, and Absalom Jones; and black schools and fraternal societies in the North. “We are determined to seek out for ourselves,” wrote Richard Allen of Philadelphia, “the Lord being our helper.” In the closing decades of the eighteenth century, among both free and slave Afro-Americans, this spirit could not be stifled. The task of a generation of black leaders, who for the most part had seized the opportunities inherent in wartime disruption to gain their own freedom and carve out their own destinies, was to lay the foundations of modern Afro-American culture. Their task was even more formidable because white society, after the war, abandoned the antislavery impulse of the early revolutionary years and entered an era of intensified prejudice against black Americans. By the early nineteenth century, the movement to hobble all attempts of the growing free black population to obtain political, social, and economic rights accorded to white citizens was fully under way.

For some 200,000 Native Americans living between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River, the American Revolution was also a time to “try men’s souls.” Thayendanegea, known in the English communities as Joseph Brant, stands as an illuminating example. Thayendanegea was a Mohawk, born about the same time as Thomas Peters but in an Iroquois village on the other side of the world. His sister married the prominent William Johnson, who came to the American colonies in the same year as Alexander McGillivray’s father and quickly became a baronial landowner in New York, the king’s superintendent of Indian Affairs for the northern colonies, and an honorary member of the Mohawk tribe. Thayendanegea spoke English fluently, for he had been educated in Eleazar Wheelock’s Indian school in Connecticut, later to become Dartmouth College. He had translated part of the Bible into Mohawk, at age 13 served the Anglo-American cause by fighting with William Johnson against the French at Crown Point in 1755, and four years later aided the colonists again by battling against Pontiac’s Indian insurgents, who were determined in the wake of the defeat of the French during the Seven Years’ War to expel the British soldiers and their encroaching American cousins from the Ohio country. Thayendanegea was a man who lived in two worlds—red and white. Bilingual and bicultural, he gravitated between the two.

As he matured in the 1760s, Thayendanegea grew to understand that despite the trading alliance the Iroquois had maintained with the northern colonies for generations and despite the close ties that the Mohawks (the easternmost of the six Iroquois nations) maintained with William Johnson, his people were now seriously threatened by the rapidly growing white population. Barely 20,000 white colonists inhabited New York in 1700, but by 1740 their number had increased to 65,000 and by 1770 to 160,000. Many times in the twilight of the colonial period, the Mohawks had been swindled out of land by rapacious New York land speculators and frontiersmen. So as the war clouds gathered in 1775,
in 1783, to cope with an aggressive, combat-experienced, and land-hungry American people. Confronting insurmountable odds, the Iroquois signed dictated treaties that dispossessed them of most of their land and consigned them to reservations that within a generation became “slums in the wilderness.” Thayendanega spent the last twenty years of his life trying to lead the Iroquois in adjusting to the harsh new realities by which a proud and independent people found that the pursuit of happiness by white Americans required red Americans to surrender life, liberty, and property.  

The story of Thayendanega and the Iroquois encapsulates important facets of the Indians’ American Revolution. At the heart of this red struggle were the twin goals of political independence and territorial defense. Black Americans, who had neither liberty nor land, fought for the former in order someday to gain the latter. Red Americans, who had both, struggled to preserve both. Like most black Americans, almost all Indian tribes concluded that their revolutionary goals could best be achieved through fighting against the side that proclaimed the equality of all men and with the side that the Americans accused of trampling on their natural, irreducible rights. The logic of nearly two hundred years of abrasive contact with colonizing Europeans compelled the choice, for it was the settler-subjects of the English king who most threatened Indian autonomy, just as it was the royal power that, before the Revolution, had attempted to protect Indian land from white encroachment by means of the Proclamation Line of 1763 and the regulation of trade.  

In pursuing their revolutionary goals, Indian tribes shared with the American enemy the problem of how to overcome a long tradition of local identity and intertribal factionalism—how, in other words, to forge a confederated resistance movement. Just as the white “tribes” of Connecticut and New York had to put aside localist attachments and longstanding disagreements, just as Virginians and North Carolinians had to bury animosities that went back several generations, just as northern and southern colonies had to compose their differences, so the Iroquois, Shawnee, Cherokee, Delaware, Creek, Miami, and other tribes searched for ways to forge a pan-Indian movement out of generations of intertribal conflict. For the white revolutionists, as John Adams said, the issue was to make thirteen clocks strike as one. For the red revolutionists east of the Mississippi, the problem was identical. In both societies new leaders emerged in the process of wrestling with this central question, and usually they were men whose military abilities or political persuasiveness gained them attention, suggesting that the fate of their people

Thayendanega, 33 years old, took ship to London to see what the English king would offer the Iroquois for their support in a war that, while still not formally declared, had been in the shooting stage since early in the year. Like his grandfather, Chief Hendrick, who had been among the Iroquois chiefs who travelled to London to consult with Queen Anne 65 years before, Thayendanega was greeted as royalty in England.  

He was feted by the king, written about in the London Universal Magazine, and had his portrait painted by Romney. But his mission was to determine how life, liberty, and the protection of property might best be preserved by his people. His decision, made before leaving London, augured the reckoning of a vast majority of Indian tribes in the next few years—that only by fighting against the independence-seeking Americans could Indian tribes themselves remain independent. He returned to New York a few weeks after the Declaration of Independence had been signed at Philadelphia, served with the British General, George Howe, at Long Island in the first major defeat of Washington’s army, and then in November 1776 began a long trek through the lands of the Iroquois and their confederates in the Ohio country to spread the message, as he wrote, that “their own Country and Liberty” were “in danger from the Rebels.”  

Thayendanega’s diplomatic mission was crucial in bringing most of the Iroquois into the war on the British side in the summer of 1777.

During the war Thayendanega was everywhere—at Oriskany in August 1777 when the British and their Indian allies, in perhaps the bloodiest battle of the Revolution, defeated the Americans who were trying to reach the besieged Fort Stanwix, which controlled access to the western Mohawk Valley and the Great Lakes; at Cherry Valley in the summer of 1778 when the Iroquois drove thousands of American farmers from their fields in southern New York and northern Pennsylvania; and at a dozen battles in the campaign of 1779 when the American general, John Sullivan, invaded the Iroquois country, burning towns and scouring the earth. For the entire war, Thayendanega played a leading role in virtually eliminating the New York and Pennsylvania back-country (a major grain and cattle-growing area upon which the Continental army had depended for supplies) from contributing much to the war effort. “A thousand Iroquois warriors and five hundred Tory rangers,” writes one historian, “were able to lay in waste nearly 50,000 square miles of colonial territory.”  

Though never militarily defeated during the war, the Iroquois were abandoned by their British allies at the peace talks in Paris and left
lay in their hands. Our history books rarely record the names of Red Jacket or Cornplanter of the Seneca, Attakullakulla and Dragging Canoe of the Cherokees, Red Shoes of the Creek, White Eyes of the Delaware, or Little Turtle of the Miami; but they were as much the dominant new figures of the revolutionary era in Indian society as were Washington, Hamilton, Nathanael Greene, Richard Henry Lee, and John Paul Jones in white society. Moreover, they were well known to the revolutionary leaders, for the Indian tribes of the interior were formidable adversaries who could never be ignored.

In the end, the Indians were disastrously the losers in the war of the American Revolution. Partly this was because they were less successful than the thirteen white tribes in overcoming intertribal factionalism; partly because the supplies of European trade goods upon which they depended—especially guns, powder, and shot—were seriously disrupted during the war; and partly because they were abandoned to the Americans by their British allies at war’s end. Facing a white society in 1783 that was heavily armed and obsessed with the vision of western lands, tribes such as the Iroquois and Cherokee were forced to cede most of their land. The prewar white population buildup, which had caused worsening economic conditions in many older communities along the coastal plain, was relieved as thousands of settlers spilled across the mountains after 1783, frequently in violation of treaties contracted by their own elected governments. Aiding these frontiersmen, many of them war veterans, were state and national governments that understood that the western lands, once the native inhabitants had been driven away, were the new nation’s most valuable resource. The sale of western lands would provide the revenue both to liquidate the huge war debt and to underwrite the expenses of a nation of tax-shy people.29

Such a policy required the newly independent American republic systematically to sacrifice the sanctity of its own laws and treaty obligations and to abandon the revolutionary ideal of just and equitable relations among men. Some white leaders, such as George Morgan, were troubled by this. Morgan, a former Indian trader and agent for the Continental Congress, wrote in 1793:

> At what time do a People violate the Law of Nations, as the United States have done, with regard to the Northwestern Indians? Only when they think they can do it with Impunity. Justice between Nations is founded on reciprocal Fear. Rome whilst weak was equitable; become more powerful are always unjust. To them the Laws of Nations are mere Chimeras.30

But most Americans were no more willing to apply the principles emblazoned on the revolutionary banners to relations with the Indian inhabitants of the trans-Allegheny region than they were to fulfill the revolutionary ideal of abolishing slavery. Indian land, like black slave labor, was one of the new republic’s preeminently important resources. To forego its exploitation was beyond the collective will of a people whose colonial background had inculcated the ideal of individualistic, material aggrandizement alongside the ideals of political freedom and religious liberty.

The pro-British stance of the Native Americans cannot be counted as a failure of judgment on their part. Had they sided with the Americans they would have fared no better, as the dismal postwar experience of several pro-American tribes, such as the Tuscaroras and Oneidas, demonstrates. Moreover, the wartime attempts at intertribal confederation played a large role in mounting the next great Indian resistance movement, from about 1783 to 1815, when white Americans, having won a war of national liberation, now embarked on a war of national expansion.31 Thayendanegea’s wartime exertions and his efforts, after another trip to London in 1785, to foster intertribal cooperation, led to fierce Indian resistance in the Old Northwest. Similarly, in the Old Southwest, Alexander McGillivray was galvanizing Creek resistance to land-hungry South Carolinians and Georgians. “Our lands are our life and breath,” he wrote; “if we part with them, we part with our blood. We must fight for them.”

Thayendanegea and McGillivray were the exemplars of pan-Indian resistance. From the work of a host of such war-tempered Indian leaders arose a new generation of resistance leaders—Black Hawk, Tecumseh, and others. The tribes of the Ohio Valley fought desperately in the postwar era to protect their homelands, only to lose against overwhelming odds when state militias and federal armies, whom they had defeated in the late 1780s and early 1790s, returned with larger and larger forces to invade their land. By this time the humanitarian language of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had been all but forgotten. “The utmost good faith,” promised the Continental Congress in its last significant act, “shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with
them." As the strengthening of state militias and the creation of a national army progressed in the 1790s, Indian societies learned how hollow were the phrases of the Northwest Ordinance. Armed conflict replaced "utmost good faith." The republic's greatest wartime hero, now its first president, captured the national mood when he wrote, "The gradual extension of our settlements will as certainly cause the Savage as the Wolf to retire; both being beasts of prey tho' they differ in shape."34

In studying the Revolution, we need to broaden our perspective so as to recognize that the conflict—fought by white Americans for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—compelled many nonwhite Americans to take the British side in quest of the same goals. The red and black people of this land were animated by the doctrine of natural rights as surely as were the minutemen at Concord Bridge or the signers of the Declaration of Independence; and they were as moved by self-interest as were white revolutionaries. Most of them took the other side to gain or preserve these rights and to pursue their own interests, which had been defined by generations of interaction among red, white, and black people in America. In their struggle against the white revolutionaries, most of them lost, at least in the proximate sense. What they won, however, was a piece of history, for they kept lit the lamp of liberty and passed on their own revolutionary heritage to their children and their children's children. The founding principles of the American Revolution lived on in the nineteenth-century struggles of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Black Hawk, Tecumseh, Sequoyah, and a host of other black and red leaders. They live on yet today, for what we proudly call the Spirit of '76 in our white-oriented history books has been at the ideological core of the Black Protest Movement of the 1960s and the Indian Rights Movement of the 1970s. In this sense, the American Revolution is far from over.

Notes

1McGillivray to James White [Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the United States], April 8, 1787, American State Papers, Indian Affairs (Washington, 1832), VII, 18. Also see McGillivray to Arturo O'Neill, March 4 and April 18, 1787, in John Walton Caughey, McGillivray of the Creeks (Norman, Okla., 1938), pp. 144, 149.


3The remarkable career of McGillivray has gone almost unnoticed in the Bicentennial year. As early as 1851 one of the foremost nineteenth-century historians of the South, Albert J. Pickett, wrote: "We doubt if Alabama has ever produced, or ever will produce, a man of greater ability . . . . We have called him the Talleyrand of Alabama." History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi (2 vols.; Charleston, 1851), quoted in Caughey, McGillivray of the Creeks, p. 34. In addition to the references in notes 1 and 2, useful material on McGillivray can be found in Arthur P. Whittaker, "Alexander McGillivray," North Carolina Historical Review, 5 (1928), 181-203, 289-309; Carolyn T. Foreman, "Alexander McGillivray, Emperor of the Creeks," Chronicles of Oklahoma, 11 (1929), 105-19; and James H. O'Donnell, "Alexander McGillivray: Training for Leadership, 1777-1783," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 49 (1965), 172-86.


5For Dunmore's Proclamation, see Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961), pp. 19-32.

6Ibid., pp. 158-81.

7Vermont had petitioned the Continental Congress for status as the fourteenth state but did not achieve recognition of its separation from New York until 1791. In 1777, delegates from eastern New York were elected to draw up a constitution, which was modeled closely on the radical Pennsylvania constitution of the previous year but included a clause abolishing slavery. See Arthur Zitserstein, The First Emancipation; The Abolition of Slavery in the North (Chicago, 1967), p. 116.

8Hundreds of slaves who ran away during the war were able to elude their masters, migrate to distant places and take up life as free Negroes. Some of those who joined the British army also probably drifted off in this fashion. See Ira Berlin, "The Revolution in Black Life," in Alfred F. Young, ed., The American Revolution; Essays in the History of American Radicalism (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), p. 355.

9Free black Loyalists in Nova Scotia were systematically denied the franchise, jury service, and the right to trial. James W. St. G. Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists; The Slaves' War of Independence," Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques, 2 (1975), 65-70.

The Forgotten Experience


Many of the accounts of blacks who fought with the Americans were set down in the mid-nineteenth century by William C. Nell, _The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution_ (Boston, 1855). The emphasis on the pro-American black experience lasted more than a century; such historical stimulation can be largely accounted for by the long struggle of black and white historians to aid the movement for Negro equality in American society. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Wendell Phillips both wrote introductions to Nell’s mid-nineteenth century book, making no bones about the fact that it was being published as an abolitionist’s book that blacks had always contributed heroically to the building of the American nation.

For a valuable corrective to the tendency of American historians to emphasize the black Americans who fought on the patriot side while ignoring the far larger number of blacks who joined the British, see Walker, “Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves’ War for Independence,” _Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques_, 2 (1975), 51-67.

Quarles, _Negro in the American Revolution_, is the best treatment of the various strategies for black self-emancipation during the war. For the manumission of blacks by whites, see Zilversmit, _The First Emancipation for the North_, and Robert McColley, _Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia_ (Urbana, Ill., 1964) for the South. No systematic attempt has yet been made to estimate the number of slaves who fled during the war. See Walker, “Blacks as American Loyalists,” p. 55n, for a discussion of various estimates. But when the British mounted their southern campaign in 1779 and promised all escaped slaves their freedom (instead of only those capable of bearing arms), tens of thousands of slaves flocked to the British. David Ramsey, the most knowledgeable eighteenth-century historian of South Carolina, thought that at least 25,000 slaves, or about one-third of those in the colony in 1770, were lost during the war. Georgia, according to modern scholars, lost about three-quarters of her 15,000 slaves. In Virginia, by far the largest slave-owning colony, 30,000 slaves ran away in 1778 alone according to Jefferson, and probably twice that many, or about 30 percent of the slave population, during the decade beginning in 1775. See John Hope Franklin, _From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans_ (4th ed., New York, 1974), p. 92.

Pennsylvania Packet, January 1, 1780. The comment was made during the debate of the state legislature on a bill for abolishing slavery.

Kaplan, _Negro Presence in the Era of the American Revolution_ is a fine introduction to the lives of many of these revolutionary black leaders. For the collective black experience, the essay by Berlin, “The Revolution in Black Life,” in Young, _The American Revolution_, pp. 319-48; and Graymont, _Iroquois in the American Revolution_. For the southern tribes, the best of a large but conceptually weak Revolution, is a valuable beginning, although much remains to be done, especially on slave life in the late eighteenth century. Regarding free blacks, much can be learned from Berlin’s _Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South_ (New York, 1974), and Carol V. R. George, _Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840_ (New York, 1973). Some of the rich possibilities for studying slave life in this period are directly or indirectly evident in Herbert G. Gutman, _The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925_ (New York, 1975) and Eugene D. Genovese, _Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made_ (New York, 1974).

Kaplan, _Negro Presence_, p. 85.

Leon F. Litwack, _North to Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860_ (Chicago, 1961) is the best account of the rapid growth of institutionalized racism in the North. Also see Jordan, _White Over Black_, ch. 11-15; and David Brion Davis, _The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1862_ (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), ch. 6-7. For the extraordinary life of one free northern black, whose identification with his African roots became more intense in the early nineteenth century, leading him finally into a close association with the reeducation of black Americans to Sierra Leone, see Sheldon H. Harris, _Paul Cuffe, Black America and the African Renewal_ (New York, 1972).


The much publicized visit of four Iroquois chiefs to London in 1710 is amply described in Richardson P. Bond, _Queen Anne’s American Kings_ (Oxford, 1952).

Graymont, _Iroquois in the American Revolution_, p. 109. Chapters 4 and 5 of this book provide an excellent account of how the powerful Iroquois, whose neutrality was the object of great exertions by the Continental Congress and its agents, threw in their lot with the British in 1776. Two Iroquois tribes, the Tuscaroras and Oneidas, sided with the Americans, thus splitting the Iroquois confederacy, but the main Iroquois strength was ranged against the Americans throughout the war.


_Ibid.,_ ch. 10; Wallace, _Death and Rebirth_, ch. 6-7.

Although the basic problems of all Native Americans were much alike, tribal war experiences varied greatly, depending on proximity to British lines of supply, internal politics and leadership patterns, the ebb and flow of British-American fighting in particular areas, and other factors. The struggles of the northern tribes can be followed in Randolph C. Downes, _Council Fires on the Upper Ohio: A Narrative of Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley until 1795_ (Pittsburgh, 1940). Francis Jennings, “The Indians’ Revolution,” in Young, ed., _The American Revolution_, pp. 319-48; and Graymont, _Iroquois in the American Revolution_. For the southern tribes, the best of a large but conceptually weak
Remembering the Ladies

HISTORIANS AND THE WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Carol Ruth Berkin

literature includes James H. O'Donnell, III, Southern Indians in the American Revolution (Knoxville, Tenn., 1973); Thomas Perkins Abernethy, Western Lands and the American Revolution (New York, 1939); Corkran, Creek Frontier; Randolph C. Downes, "Cherokee-American Relations in the Upper Tennessee Valley, 1776-1791," East Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 8 (1936), 35-53; Arthur P. Whitsaker, "Spain and the Cherokee Indians, 1783-1798," North Carolina Historical Review, 4 (1927), 252-67; A. V. Goodpasture, "Indian Wars and Warriors of the Old Southeast," Tennessee Historical Magazine, 4 (1918), 3-49, 108-45, 161-210, 252-89; Philip M. Hamer, "John Stuart's Indian Policy During the Early Months of the American Revolution," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 17 (1930-31), 351-66; Edgar L. Pennington, "East Florida in the American Revolution, 1775-1783," Florida Historical Quarterly, 9 (1930), 24-46; Arthur P. Whitsaker, The Spanish-American Frontier, 1783-1795; The Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley (Boston, 1927); and David C. Skaggs, ed., The Old Northwest in the American Revolution (Madison, Wis., 1977). The problem with most of these studies, especially those pertaining to the southern tribes, is that they are written as accounts of white-Indian relations during a period of white revolutionary and postrevolutionary stress. Ethnohistorical analyses of most of the major tribes during the second half of the eighteenth century—a period of crucial importance in Indian history east of the Mississippi River—remain to be written.

"For postwar American policies see Abernethy, Western Lands, ch. 22-26; Reginald Horsman, The Frontier in the Formative Years, 1783-1815 (New York, 1970), and Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812 (East Lansing, Mich., 1967); Walter H. Mohr, Federal Indian Relations, 1774-1788 (Philadelphia, 1933); and Downes, Council Fires, ch. 12-13.

"Quoted in Downes, Council Fires, p. 249.

"Writes one recent historian, whose work is helping to reconceptualize the field of Native American history: "... the American revolutionaries fought for empire over the west as well as for their own freedom in the east. While the colony-states fought for independence from the Crown, the tribes had to fight for independence from the states. It makes a huge embarrassment to ideology that the Revolution wore one face looking eastward across the Atlantic and another looking westward into the continent, but Indians have always obstructed awkwardly from the smooth symmetry of historical rationalization." Jennings, "The Indians' Revolution," in Young, ed., American Revolution, p. 322.

"McGillivray to James White, April 8, 1787, quoted in Caughhey, McGillivray, p. 33.


"Washington to James Duane, Sept. 7, 1783, quoted in ibid., p. 38.
Contributors

Carol Ruth Berkin
His Royal Highness Prince Charles
Alistair Cooke
- Linda Grant DePauw
Don Higginbotham
Piers Mackesy
Peter J. Marshall
Elizabeth P. McCaughey
Gary Nash
Stanley K. Schultz
Robert V. Wells
With a foreword by Gordon S. Wood
Headnotes written with the assistance of William Pencak

The American Revolution
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

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