

25 Black Soldiers



A sketch of a black soldier by Baron von Cloesen, a German nobleman who fought in the American army against the British.

On November 17, 1775, Virginia's imperious royal governor, Lord Dunmore, proclaims "all indentured servants, Negroes, and others...free if they are able and willing to bear arms and join his Majesty's troops for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their Duty to his Majesty's Crown and Dignity."

White citizens are stunned. Dunmore has not only offered freedom to their slaves, he has said that anyone who doesn't rally to the king's banner is a traitor. His proclamation forces Virginians to choose sides: Rebel or king. In Norfolk, many choose the king.

It is not an easy decision for blacks or whites. The Rebels are fighting for the words of the Declaration of Independence. Do they really mean it? Is Dunmore's offer just a cynical way to get soldiers? No one—black or white—knows where this rebellion

will finally lead. But Lord Dunmore's words are enough for some 300 black men, who assemble in a force the British call the Royal Ethiopian Regiment. They wear white sashes emblazoned with the slogan LIBERTY TO SLAVES, and they are trained by redcoat officers. Other blacks choose to fight with the Rebels.

Lord Dunmore, who has not freed his own 57 slaves, gathers a fleet on the Elizabeth River and takes his family aboard ship. He has seized 70 cannons and the printing press of Rebel publisher John Holt (why a printing press?).

Cynical means heartless, calculating, and with an eye only for results.

A HISTORY OF US

Agitation is action, ferment, and sometimes rebellion.

In this 19th-century painting, Peter Salem, one of the black minutemen who fought at Bunker Hill, is shown at the lower right loading his gun. Salem is said to be the marksman who killed Britain's Major Pitcairn. Shortly after the battle, he was almost pushed out of the Continental Army when Congress decided to limit it to free men. Salem's owners gave him his freedom.



This commemorative plate shows soldiers of the black regiment who fought at the battle of Rhode Island in 1778.



Williamsburg is the center of Rebel agitation. Troops gathered there head east, toward Norfolk, under the command of Colonel William Woodford, a veteran of the French and Indian War. Patrick Henry is the supposed commander of Virginia's Rebel forces, but he is a better speaker than soldier, and, to his dismay but others' relief, is left behind to guard Williamsburg.

On December 9, Woodford's troops fight the first land battle in the South, at Great Bridge (a swampy spot south of Norfolk). The battle lasts 30 minutes, but it proves that barely trained colonial citizen-soldiers can beat the proud, scarlet-jacketed British regulars. It also proves that black soldiers—the Royal Ethiopians fighting for the British and some free blacks siding with the Rebels—can fight as well as anyone. They "fought, bled and died like Englishmen," writes Virginia's Captain Richard Kidder Meade with admiration.

Mostly the British are outsmarted; they are deceived by the black servant of Thomas Marshall (father of future Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall), who, pretending to be a deserter, slips into the British lines and announces that the colonists have a force of only 300 men. Actually, Woodford commands at least three times that number.

The British attack at Great Bridge is suicidal. Straight into the Rebel fire. "Reserve fire until they are within 50 yards," the Virginia commander tells his men. At 50 yards, the sharpshooting Virginia riflemen are deadly accurate: Seventeen redcoats are killed, 49 wounded. Woodford reports to Williamsburg, "This was a second Bunker Hill affair, in miniature, with this difference, that we kept our post and had only one man wounded in the hand."

But Norfolk is now in trouble with both sides in this fray. Its loyalists have angered the Rebels and the defeat at Great Bridge has enraged Lord Dunmore. On New Year's Day, four British warships bombard the city, setting it on fire. Rebel "shirtmen" (landed gentry who wear long hunting shirts as uniforms) torch other buildings. In two days, most of the city's buildings and houses are in ashes.

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Total Surprise

General Howe, who commanded the redcoats on Long Island, was sarcastic about the Continentals' inexperienced tactics in preparing for battle:

Their [the Americans'] want of judgment had shone equally conspicuous during the whole of this affair. They had imagined... that we should land directly in front of their works, march up and attack them without further precaution in their strongest points. They had accordingly fortified those points with their utmost strength, and totally neglected the left flank....It was by marching round to this quarter that we had so totally surprised them on the 27th, so that the possibility of our taking that route seems never to have entered their imaginations.

The Americans on Long Island were trapped by British troops drawn up between them and their retreat across the East River. They had to fight their way back through the enemy. One rebel said later, "When we began the attack, General Washington...cried out, 'Good God, what brave fellows I must this day lose!'"

The British troops marched from Long Island into New York City and occupied it for the rest of the war.

uniforms. And those salaries hardly ever got paid. Congress seemed to spend its time talking and not doing much else. It just didn't have any money. Talk about frustration!

Most of the soldiers would have run off—deserted—if it hadn't been for their respect for General Washington. As it was, some did desert, and many others signed up for only three months. These were citizen-soldiers, not professionals like the Europeans. As soon as Washington got them trained, it was time for them to go home.

For all his cool under fire, Washington was said to have had a fierce temper. He must have had a hard time keeping it under control those first months after he took charge. Everything seemed to go wrong.

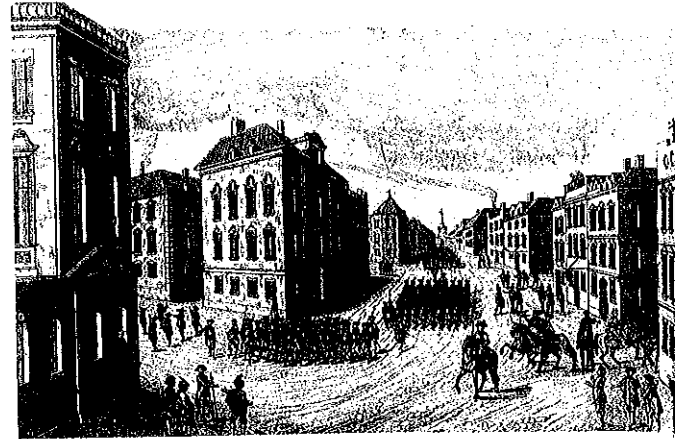
The British didn't just sit around and let the colonies rebel. They sent an army to put down the Revolution. One day in the summer of 1776, a New Yorker named Daniel McCurtin looked out his window and saw the wooden masts of hundreds of British ships. He described what he saw:

I espied as I peeped out something resembling a wood of pine trees...the whole bay was full of shipping...I thought all London was afloat.

Those ships were full of soldiers; the British were landing an army in New York.

General Washington had his army in New York, too. But his men were inexperienced, and the British were not. On Long Island (a part of New York), the Americans marched into a trap: they were outnumbered, they panicked, they did many things wrong. The war might have been over right then, soon after it began, but Washington knew when to retreat and save his men. And he had some luck.

The luck came in the form of fog, thick fog. The cool general decided to move his troops from Long Island, across the East River to Manhattan Island. He had more luck: Massachusetts fishermen were manning his boats. Their eyes were used to fog. Before the British



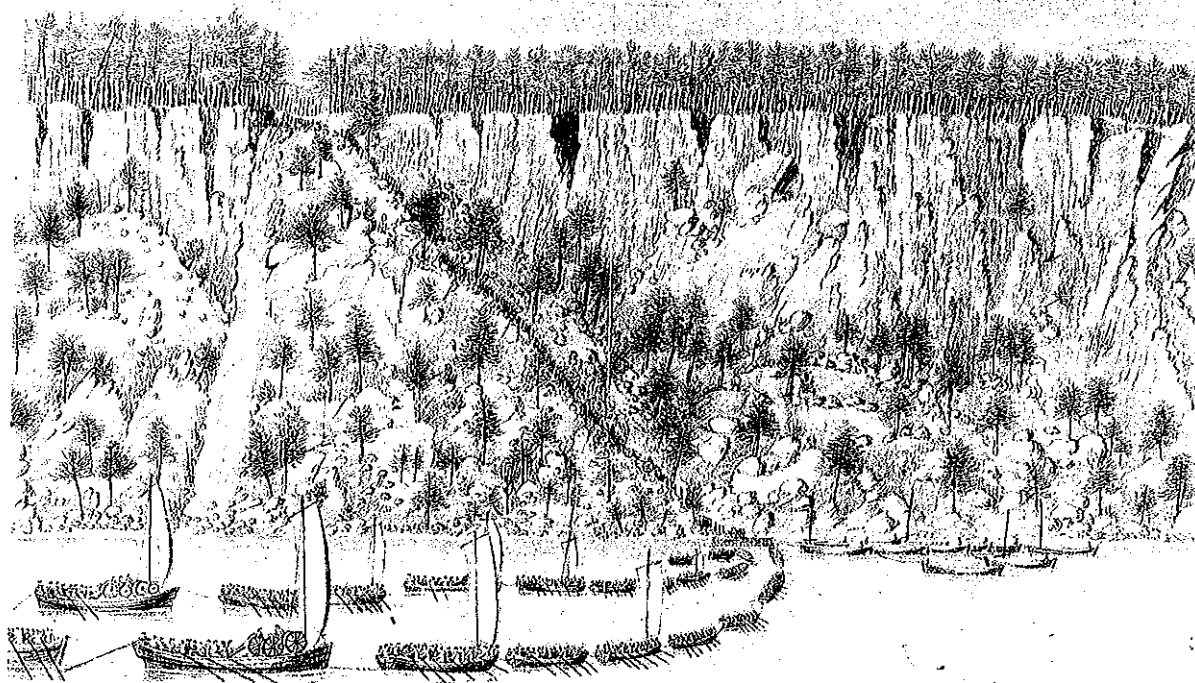
knew what had happened the Americans were across the river and saved to fight again.

Most of the soldiers the Americans fought were not even British. They were German—called “Hessians”—because many of them came from Hesse in Germany. Remember, Europe had been fighting wars for centuries. Large numbers of men in Europe spent their whole lives fighting. That was the only profession they knew, and they didn’t much care who they were fighting for. Many didn’t have a choice; they were forced to fight by their rulers. Some German princes made money by supplying soldiers to anyone who wanted to pay for them. The soldiers were called “mercenaries.”

Thirty thousand German troops fought in America. Almost half never returned to Germany: some of them died, some chose to stay in the new country.

The Americans were furious that the British hired foreign soldiers. After all, most still thought of England as their mother country. Many Americans who were undecided about supporting the Revolution became Patriots when they saw the mercenaries.

As the British scaled the cliffs on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River, “the rebels fled like scared rabbits,” one Englishman said. They left “their artillery, stores, baggage and everything else behind them; their very pots boiling on the fire.”



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