

Researching Black Patriots and Loyalists During the Revolutionary Era

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Introduction

For most American colonists, the Revolutionary War was a fight for economic and political independence from the superpower of Great Britain. For Black people living in the colonies, however, the war represented a more personal fight: freedom from enslavement. As such, many fought for the side they believed would aid them in their fight for racial justice. Thousands of Black soldiers fought for the patriot cause and even more (tens of thousands) enslaved people fled to the British forces. This handout covers some key record sets and reference materials to help as you research Black Patriots and Loyalists.

Common Names of Enslaved People

As you research soldiers of African descent, you will notice a variation in the origins of their names. Although many Black soldiers had common Anglicized names, such as Charles, James, and Peter, several who were enslaved (or formerly enslaved) were given more unique names. These more unique names may serve as an indication of their race in cases where it is not explicitly described. Some examples of different names you may come across include:

- Traditional West African names: Cuffee/Cuff, Quame, Juba
- Names derived from classical literature: Cato, Hannibal, Caesar, Pomp/Pompey, Primus, Neptune, Scipio
- Geographic names: Boston, London, Cambridge, Jamaica
- Surnames referencing emancipation: Freeman, Liberty

Tip: It is important to locate other sources to confirm a soldier's race. The name alone cannot be the determining factor! Look into other military records (such as pension files), as well as vital, church, and town records, for confirmation.

Black Patriots

History of Black Soldiers in the Continental Army

Prior to the war, colonies relied on local militia units as their main defense system. Each colony created its own guidelines that regulated who was eligible for service. After war broke out in spring 1775, colonists quickly assembled a New England army comprised of various militia units from different states. Due to the varying enlistment rules, men of color—including those of African and Native descent—were eligible to serve during this time.

In June 1775, Congress formally established the Continental Army, which grew from the initial New England army. Army leaders soon made efforts to standardize enlistment requirements. In November 1775, General George Washington prohibited the enlistment of men of color in the Continental Army, including free and enslaved Black men. Due to low reenlistment numbers, Congress amended this policy in January 1776 and allowed free men of color to reenlist if they served the previous year. Manpower continued to be an issue throughout the war. In 1777, Washington ordered that any free man could enlist in the Army, regardless of race. Some enslaved men escaped and lied about their freedom status to join. In 1778, individual states began to actively recruit both free and enslaved men, again due to a shortage of troops.

Black soldiers chose to serve for a variety of reasons, including:

- Consistent pay and promise of bounty land.
- Better social standing as a member of the military community.
- Promises of freedom in exchange for service, However, some enslaved individuals were forced to serve in place of their enslavers.
- Hopes of racial equality after the war.

Published Studies

Several scholars have aimed to collect the names of the many soldiers of color who served during the Revolutionary War. Though they may not be entirely complete, these studies serve as good starting points for research. The following publications provide information on soldiers from every state:

- Eric G. Grundset, editor, *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War* (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, 2008).

Now a searchable database as a collaboration between the 10 Million Names Project and the Daughter of the American Revolution:

<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/3843/daughters-of-the-american-revolution-patriots-of-color-1712-1888>



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- William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution: With Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons* (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855).

Some historians have focused their work on soldiers from a single state or involved in a specific event. Below are a few examples:

- Luther Porter Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the Revolutionary War* (Norfolk, V.A.: Guide Quality Press, 1944).
- Glenn A. Knoblock, *“Strong and Brave Fellows”: New Hampshire’s Black Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution, 1775-1784* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2003).
- George Quintal, Jr., *Patriots of Color: “A Peculiar Beauty and Merit”: African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill* (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, Boston National Historical Park, 2004).
- Richard S. Walling, *Men of Color at the Battle of Monmouth, June 28, 1778: The Role of African Americans and Native Americans at Monmouth, containing a brief history of these Men of Color and a presentation of nearly Two Hundred names and identifications* (Hightstown, N.J.: Longstreet House, 1994).

Muster Rolls

Muster rolls provide basic information on when and where a soldier served, as well as their rank, who they served under, and place of enlistment. Some Black soldiers can be easily identified by racial descriptors (i.e., Black, colored, negro). In some cases, they may only be listed by their first names.

General links of muster rolls for the Continental Army:

- Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783 (NARA microfilm group M246):
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2068326>
- U. S. Rosters of Revolutionary War Soldiers and Sailors, 1775-1783:
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2546162>

State-specific resources:

State	Muster Rolls Resources
Connecticut	<p>Connecticut Adjutant General, <i>Record of Service of Connecticut Men in the I. War of the Revolution, II. War of 1812, III. Mexican War</i>, (Hartford, C. T.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1889). https://archive.org/details/waroftherevolution00recorich/page/n11/mode/2up</p> <p>Connecticut Revolutionary War Military Lists, 1775-1783: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3779/</p>
Delaware	<p>Delaware Public Archives Guide to Revolutionary War Records: https://archives.delaware.gov/guide-revolutionary-war-records/</p>
Georgia	<p>Mrs. Howard H. McCall, <i>Roster of Revolutionary Soldiers in Georgia, Volume 1</i> (Atlanta: Georgia Society of the American Revolution, 1941) https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49320/</p>
Maryland	<p>Maryland Historical Society, <i>Muster rolls and other records of service of Maryland troops in the American Revolution, 1775-1783</i> (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1900). https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2062053</p>
Massachusetts	<p>Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, <i>Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War Vol. 1-17</i>, (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing, 1896-1908). https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7726/</p> <p>Massachusetts, Revolutionary War, Index Cards to Muster Rolls, 1775-1783: https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2548057</p> <p>Muster/payrolls, and various papers (1763-1808) of the Revolutionary War [Massachusetts and Rhode Island]: https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/729681</p>
New Hampshire	<p>New Hampshire Revolutionary War Records, 1675-1835: https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1880940</p> <p>Isaac W. Hammond, editor, <i>The State of New Hampshire, rolls of the soldiers in the Revolutionary War, 1775 to May 1777</i> (Concord, N. H.: New Hampshire State Legislature, 1885-1889). https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2060117</p>
New Jersey	<p>New Jersey Adjutant General's Office, <i>Official Register of the Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Revolutionary War</i> (Trenton, N. J.: W. T. Nicholson & Co., 1872) https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/4128824</p>
New York	<p>Muster and Pay Rolls of the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/48595/</p>

State	Muster Rolls Resources
North Carolina	Daughters of the American Revolution (North Carolina), <i>Roster of the soldiers from North Carolina in the American Revolution: with an appendix containing a collection of miscellaneous records</i> (North Carolina Daughters of the American Revolution, 1932). https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/105980 North Carolina Revolutionary Pay Vouchers, 1779-1782: https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1498361
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania, U.S., Revolutionary War Battalions and Militia Index, 1775-1783: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2591/ William Henry Egle, <i>Muster rolls of the Navy and Line, Militia and Rangers, 1775-1783, with list of pensioners, 1818-1832</i> (Harrisburg, P. A.: Wm. Stanley Ray, 1898). https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/493074
Rhode Island	Muster/payrolls, and various papers (1763-1808) of the Revolutionary War [Massachusetts and Rhode Island]: https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/729681 Rhode Island Historical Society Revolutionary War Military Records: https://www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss673sg2.htm
South Carolina	Roster of South Carolina Patriots in the American Revolution: https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49323/
Virginia	H. J. Eckenrode, <i>List of the revolutionary soldiers of Virginia: Special report of the Department of Archives and History for 1912</i> (Richmond, VA: Davis Bottom, 1913). https://archive.org/details/listofrevolution00virg/mode/1up

Pension Records

Pension records can provide an enormous amount of information for a Revolutionary War veteran, including basic vital information, details on their regiment and fellow soldiers, names of family and friends, and more. Pension records have been digitized through the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) and are available on Fold3:

<https://www.fold3.com/publication/467/revolutionary-war-pensions>.

Understanding the timeline of the various pension acts can help determine when a soldier might have applied for a pension. Many veterans applied after the 1818 Pension Act passed.

- 1776: Half pay for officers and men disabled during service and incapable of earning a living
- 1780: Half pay for seven years to widows and orphans of officers
- 1806: Pensions approved for veterans of state troops and militia
- 1818: Pensions approved for veterans who served at least nine months and in financial need
- 1820: Certified inventories of pensioner's estate and income were required



- 1832: Requirement rescinded for service of less than six months and financial need
- 1838: Widows authorized to receive pensions for five years if married to the veteran before 1794
- 1848: Widows authorized to receive pensions for life if they married the veteran before 1800
- 1853: Removed restrictions on the date of marriage for widows
- 1878: Widows authorized to receive pensions for life if the veteran served at least 2 weeks

Example of a pension record coversheet

Key elements of the coversheet (above):

- The state on the lefthand side represents where the soldier served.
- The soldier's name will be listed along with his widow's if she also received a pension. Name variations will also be written here.
- A racial description may be included (i.e., colored), but not in all cases.
- Each application is assigned a number that begins with a letter:
 - S – Survivor, meaning the veteran himself
 - W – Widow's pensions
 - B. L. Wt – Bounty land warrants; these files are cards that include the name of the veteran, rank, unit, number of acres granted, and the date assigned
 - R – Rejected applications

Additional resources for pension records:

- Index of Revolutionary War Pensioners, 1800-1900:
<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/392/index-of-revolutionary-war-pensioners-1800-1900>

- Virgil D. White, *Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files* (Waynesboro, TN: The National Historical Publishing Company, 1990).
 - Vol. 1 (A-E): <https://archive.org/details/genealogicalabst0001unse/mode/2up>
 - Vol. 2 (F-M): <https://archive.org/details/genealogicalabst0000whit/mode/2up>
 - Vol. 3 (N-Z): <https://archive.org/details/genealogicalabst0003whit/mode/2up>
- United States Census Office, *A Census of Pensioners for Revolutionary or Military Services* (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1841).
<https://archive.org/details/acensuspensione00socigoog/mode/2up>
- U. S. Revolutionary War pension payment ledgers, 1818-1872:
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2069831>
- Massachusetts Revolutionary War Pensioners' Receipts, 1799-1807:
<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserearch/185/massachusetts-revolutionary-war-pensioners-receipts-1799-1807>
- Massachusetts Revolutionary War Pensioners' Receipts, 1827-1836:
<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserearch/2710/massachusetts-revolutionary-war-pensioners-receipts-1827-1836>

Tip: Use the FAN method (Friends/Associates/Neighbors) when researching your soldier. This can include friends and fellow soldiers mentioned in the pension record, as well as other soldiers listed on muster rolls.

Bounty Land

The Continental Congress promised land to officers and soldiers who served a minimum of three years of service. After the war, land in the Northwest Territory (present day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and parts of Minnesota) was issued by the federal government and participating states. Some resources for bounty land applications include:

- Lloyd Dewitt Bockstruck, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants: Awarded by State Governments* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1996):
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49315/>
- U.S., War Bounty Land Warrants, 1789-1858: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1165/>
- Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, ca. 1800-ca. 1900: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/567388>

Black Loyalists

History of Black Loyalists' Service

In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, promised freedom to any enslaved person who joined the British in the fight against the American rebels. This strategy aided the British in two ways: 1) They would provide much needed manpower to help the British forces, and 2) The loss would hurt the American economy, which relied heavily on the labor of enslaved people. Tens of thousands of enslaved people escaped to join the British forces throughout the duration of the war and are now known as the Black Loyalists. However, not all Black Loyalists were enslaved people. Some free men of color chose to side with the British due to the Continental Army's initial enlistment bans.

Similar to Black Patriots, Black Loyalists served in a variety of capacities, although not all engaged in direct combat. Some responsibilities included: scouts or guides, military engineers (building fortifications and digging trenches), blacksmiths, carpenters, and wagon drivers. Black women also joined the military effort in support of the British Army working as nurses, cooks, and seamstresses.

Military Records

Records that list the names of Black Loyalist soldiers are scarce. Unlike American muster rolls, the British records may not use racial descriptions. Therefore, you will need to locate other records to confirm a soldier's race. Some of the few surviving records can be found in the following collections:

- Black Pioneers can be found in the Ward Chipman Papers: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-ward-chipman/>
- Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment, 1776: <https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/united-states-lord-dunmores-ethiopian-regiment-1776>
- Carleton Papers, Loyalists and British Soldiers, 1772-1784: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/introduction.aspx>

Relocation

At the end of the war, General George Washington demanded that the British return all American property, including the enslaved people who fled to the British. Sir Guy Carleton, commander of the British forces in North America, chose to honor the promise of freedom made at the beginning of the war for those who were with the British by the time a Provisional Peace Agreement was signed on November 30, 1782. Thousands of Black Loyalists were evacuated to various British territories, including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, England, Jamaica, and St. Augustine. Unfortunately, there are some instances in which formerly enslaved people were either given back or resold to their former enslavers.

Those that sailed to Nova Scotia are documented in Carleton's Book of Negroes. 3,000 Black men, women, and children sailed from New York to different ports in Nova Scotia between April and November 1783. The book details the following information (provided from interviews with Brigadier General Samuel Birch) for each passenger:

- First/given name
- Surname
- Age
- Gender
- Race
- Military service
- Place of origin
- Former legal status (free or enslaved)
- Current legal status
- How freedom was obtained
- When freedom was obtained
- Whether they received a certificate of freedom
- Name of the issuer of certificate
- Name of former owner
- Destination port in Nova Scotia
- Name of the ship
- Name of the shipmaster

(156)		
Negroes Names	Age	Description
Worcey	34	Ordinary Fellow
George Kennedy	29	d. - - - - - Wench
Sam. Herborn	1	
Peter Harding	20	Street Fellow
John Harding	40	Ord. Wench
Eben. Harding	2 1/2	
John Jackson	30	Street Fellow
Hannah Jackson	30	d. - - - - - Wench
Pompey Golt.	27	Ordinary Fellow
Toby Castington	33	Street Fellow
Chloe Mann	34	Ord. Wench
Bethsey Mann	5	

Example of a list of names in the Book of Negroes

There are many versions of the Book of Negroes. They were created at the same time, but vary in format.

- The physical British version is preserved in the National Archives in the United Kingdom. Digital versions are available in Canadian archives.
 - An indexed version can be found through the Library and Archives of Canada website: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/book-of-negroes/>
 - A searchable database on the Nova Scotia Archives website also includes images of the original book: <https://archives.novascotia.ca/africans/book-of-negroes/>
- The American version is held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and forms the basis of Graham Russell Hodges' *Black Loyalist Directory*. A database of the publication is available on AmericanAncestors.org as part of the 10 Million Names Project: <https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasearch/2823/black-loyalist-directory-1783-1788>

Resources for Nova Scotia Research

Those that evacuated to Nova Scotia settled in the following towns: Birchtown, Tracadie, Digby, among others. Below are resources on Black Loyalists who settled in Nova Scotia:

- Black Loyalist Refugees, 1782-1807 – Port Roseway Associates: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalist-port-roseway/Pages/port-roseway-associates-loyalists.aspx>
- Nova Scotia Land Papers, 1765-1800: <https://archives.novascotia.ca/land-papers/>
- Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *The Shelburne Black Loyalists: A Short Biography of all Blacks Emigrating to Shelburne County, Nova Scotia after the American Revolution 1783* (Nova Scotia: Crown Copyright, 2000) <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/NSM/article/view/3899>

Black Loyalists in New Brunswick

New Brunswick was formed as a separate colony from Nova Scotia in 1784. Below are resources for land papers in New Brunswick:

- Index to New Brunswick Land Petitions, 1783-1918: <https://archives2.gnb.ca/Search/RS108/default.aspx?culture=en-CA&letter=A>
- Index to New Brunswick Land Grants, 1784-2007: <https://archives.gnb.ca/en-ca/land-grants>

Freetown Colony in Sierra Leone

Resettling came with several complications for Black Loyalists, including difficulty receiving land, poor farming conditions, and racial tensions. In 1791, former soldier and Black Loyalist Thomas Peters formed a petition detailing the grievances of the Black community in Nova Scotia and presented it to the British government. He successfully negotiated passage for about 1,200 Black Nova Scotians to resettle in Sierra Leone, where they established Freetown. The University of Illinois Chicago has a collection of documents from the colony of Sierra Leone from 1792-1825:

https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/uic_sierra

Additional Resources

Books:

Mary Louise Clifford, *From Slavery to Freetown: Black Loyalists After the American Revolution* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company, 2006).

Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).



Robert Ewell Greene, *Black Courage, 1775-1783: Documentation of Black Participation in the American Revolution* (Washington, D. C.: National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1984).

Marion Gilroy, editor, *Loyalists and Land Settlement in Nova Scotia* (Board of Trustees of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1937).

Graham Russell Hodges, editor, *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile After the American Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996).

Bobby B. Moss and Michael Scoggins, *African-American Patriots in the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution* (Blacksburg, S. C.: Scotia-Hibernia Press, 2004).

Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1961).

James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman, O. K.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists: Southern Settler of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nimbus Publishing, 2013).

Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976).

Online Resources:

Black Loyalists Digital Collections: <https://blackloyalist.com/cdc/index.htm>

Black Loyalists in New Brunswick: <http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/acva/blackloyalists/en/>

Black Loyalist Records, Nova Scotia Archives:

<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africans/results/?Search=&SearchList1=2>

The Loyalist Collection, University of New Brunswick: <https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/>

The Online Institute for Advanced Loyalist Studies:

<http://www.royalprovincial.com/military/black/black.htm>

Patriots of Color Archive, Museum of the American Revolution:

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/patriots-of-color-archive-black-and-indigenous-soldiers-in-the-revolutionary-war>

Patriots of Color, Boston National Historical Park:

<https://www.nps.gov/bost/learn/historyculture/patriotsofcolor.htm>

Revolutionary Roots, American Ancestors: <https://revolutionaryroots.americanancestors.org/>

General Websites:

American Ancestors: <https://www.americanancestors.org/>

Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com/>

ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

FamilySearch: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>

FamilySearch Wiki: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page

Fold3: <https://www.fold3.com/>

Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/>