

Black Heritage Month:
New Jersey African American Soldiers
During the American Revolution

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Beginning in the late 17th century and in the decades prior to the American Revolution, the colony of New Jersey, split by the east and west division line, was home to a large African American community. The population of East Jersey was upwards of 15 percent of African descent, with many towns and villages within the counties of Monmouth and Somerset, containing a much higher black population due to the influence of early Dutch and English settlers.

Just over the line in West Jersey, estimates are that less than 5 percent of the population contained individuals of color. This was primarily due to a large Quaker population in Burlington and Gloucester counties. Quakers abhorred slavery. A greater proportion of free individuals of color were found in the western regions of the colony because of the area's resistance to slavery.

Prior to and throughout the war, New Jersey's Loyalist community supported continued governance under King George, III, with their Patriot counterparts adhering to the cause of independence and self-rule. The escalating conflict which began in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775, compelled both sides to accept racially diverse militia units. The militia were irregular military units trained to protect the colony and State during armed conflict, and during the Revolution supplemented regular British and Continental Army commands.

Early successes utilizing members of New Jersey's African community, led to the creation of guerrilla bands that raided both New Jersey and New York. These newly forged relationships forced the State's often ill-trained Patriot militia forces to contend with an additional threat beyond that of the British Army.

Encouraging Loyalist black residents to wage war on their Patriot neighbors, heightened the sense of fear felt by the inhabitants of New Jersey towns. A thorough understanding of

African American military service in the British and Continental Armies can be found in many contemporary primary source documents. These records offer a clear understanding of the overall racial composition of the State. Existing military service and pension records provide an vivid historical pathway in exploring how New Jerseyans of African descent felt about the war.

The Continental Congress, Provincial Congresses, Committees of Safety, and the commander of the Continental Army, General George Washington, while initially accepting of the Native peoples as members of the Continental forces, were more reluctant to recruit and arm African American troops even though African Americans were already members of local militias in the colonies.

Muster rolls compiled during the French and Indian War show that African Americans served in the pre-Revolutionary War colonial militias alongside white and Native American troops. Individual service records and unit muster lists found within the military records section of the New Jersey State Archives indicate that after hostilities broke out, many men of color served as teamsters at in the supply departments of both armies. They are specifically mentioned as being present at Trenton with the Continental Army, while providing valuable service after their white counterparts chose not to leave their farms to support the war effort.

As the war progressed, both free and enslaved African Americans saw opportunities to improve their standing in colonial society through service in the British or American armies. One example of this is African American militiaman, Peter Williams of Middlesex County. Williams was the slave of a Loyalist from Woodbridge. Though the British promised Africans freedom if they fought for Loyalist cause, Williams escaped to the American lines. He faithfully served in the militia and the Continental Army's New Jersey Brigade. For his efforts, he was granted manumission at the end of the war. William's situation would set a precedent for granting freedom to men of color who served loyally in the Continental Army.

Men of color also served in the Loyalist militia. Cornelius Otis, a well-known Loyalist partisan of African descent, operated within Monmouth County. Otis, who was born a slave in New Jersey and was bound to John Corlis of Shrewsbury. In 1775 he left the farm and enlisted for a time in Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Loyalist Regiment in Virginia. He later made his way back to New Jersey where he and other Loyalist men of color cooperated with Colonel John Simcoe's Queens Rangers.

Throughout 1778 and into 1780, Otis, or Colonel Tye, as he would come to be known, formed a band of partisan militia that raided hamlets throughout New Jersey and New York. Colonel Tye was an excellent example of how men of African descent were utilized as guerilla forces in support of regular British forces. Though officer commissions were not handed down to men of color, “Colonel” was an honorary title extended to Otis for his exceptional support of the Crown forces.

African Americans also appeared on the muster rolls of irregular Loyalist frontier units, which included those raised by the British Department of Indian Affairs. Many of these men would serve in specialized units supporting the British Army, which included laborers and engineers who would build and maintain fortifications erected across New York and New Jersey. Along with their white counterparts, many men of color would serve as guides and intelligence gatherers because their social status allowed them to navigate through colonial society.

Loyalist records describing men of African descent in the service of the Crown forces can be found within the muster rolls of a Black Pioneer company (engineers) commanded by Captain George Martin, stationed in New York in late 1776, under the overall command of General Sir William Howe.

It is unfortunate that many records have been lost to history regarding the service of New Jersey’s men of African descent during the war. While there never will be a full accounting of African American Patriots and Loyalists, the preceding examples of these two men of color, allows us to understand of how the African American community figured prominently in the formation of our State both during and after the American Revolution.

We must make special note that until the Korean War, the Continental Army is most often cited by the historical community as the most integrated military force fielded by the United States during armed conflict.