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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 74-750612

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BLACKS  
IN THE  
AMERICAN  
REVOLUTIONARY  
WAR

conceived, narrated and recorded by

JEAN BRANNON

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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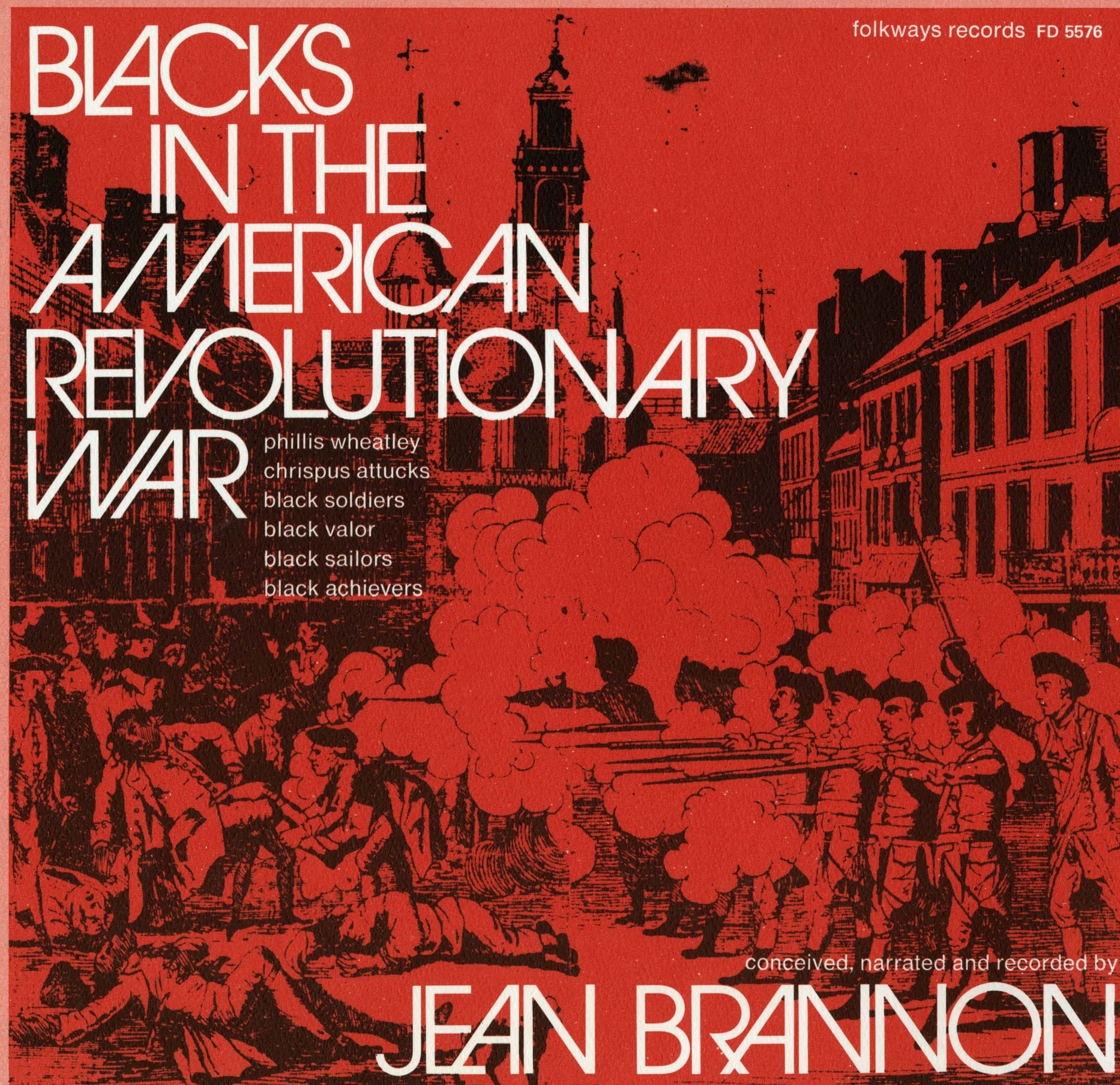
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"bloody massacre", boston's king street, 1770



## BLACKS IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR

### Blacks and the Revolutionary War Years:

A recorded history of some of the contributions and courageous deeds performed by freed, fugitive and enslaved Black Americans during the years when the United States was struggling to become an independent nation.

INTRODUCTION: Side I - Band I - Phillis Wheatley

Revolution: The decision to break away from the rule of Great Britain was a difficult one for the settlers of the thirteen English colonies. The colonists had solved the problems of providing adequate shelter and food, had managed to adjust to the elements and environmental conditions, had survived several colonial and Indian wars, had obtained the beginnings of the religious freedom which some had so fervently sought, and were successfully attaining ways of earning their livelihoods when the gnawing and disquieting issue of revolt began to be contemplated and discussed. The determined and combined efforts of those pioneering spirits had resulted in the thriving fishing and ship building industries of the New England coastal waters and forests and had cultivated the agricultural wealth of the Middle and Southern regions. It had not been easy, but the colonies were prospering.

Revolution: The word had a harsh ring, and the resulting necessary moves seemed to be exceedingly rash ones. But surely the sacrifices and endurance that had been exerted in overcoming the sometimes seemingly impossible odds warranted the colonists certain basic rights. How could a king some three thousand miles across the sea be expected to understand and sympathize with the problems of a people who, though unlike in many ways, all held the one common goal of surviving and succeeding in the newly settled continent? How could that king, George III, understand the revolutionary concepts of human existence and government that promised liberty to all of its citizens? After all, it had been the intolerance and intolerable practices and conditions of this and other kingdoms that had caused a great number of the colonists to abandon their former lands. They had braved the hardships and uncertainties in order to find freedom of expression and life in a new setting. It was probably inevitable that the bold, unique spirit that had created such an enterprising group of settlements would result in the emergence of a government and nation which was to be the first of its kind in ideal and endeavors. The mood of the colonists became more rebellious and resolved as the English throne sought to squelch all wayward attempts toward independence and representation. Firm control of colonial navigation and trade revenue was enabling the British Empire to finance various wars and to add to colonial expansion. The constant and obnoxious presence of British soldiers made it quite clear that the king intended to enforce, with violence if necessary,

all of the unfair policies. Gifted and dedicated leaders such as Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin emerged and became increasingly vocal. Anti-Loyalists political parties were formed to protest the enactment of the Stamp Act and other taxation practices that provided revenue to the English but denied any type of voice from the settlers. Strong sentiments expressing the equality of all men and the rights of liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all were sounded as resistance among the Thirteen Colonies grew.

But what of the Blacks who were residing within the boundaries of the Thirteen States? Did the political spokesmen recognize the contradiction of the slaves' and freed Blacks' positions? When speaking so eloquently of the Godgiven, inalienable rights intended for each, did the colonial leaders ever include the darker brothers in their considerations? Thomas Paine wrote in Common Sense:

O ye that love mankind: Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth: Every spot of the old world is over-run with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. . . O: receive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams and mother of John Quincy Adams, said, "It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have." 2

And what of the Blacks? Did they yearn for freedom of body, expression and representation? Amid the white clamor and cries for freedom, Black Gustavus Vassa expressed in The Interesting Narrative, "... O, ye nominal Christians: might not an African ask you, Learned you from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? ..." 3

From the writings of Phillis Wheatley, the sensitive and talented Black poetess, came a gentle but intense expression:

No more America, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,  
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.  
Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatched for Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
...



Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

Side I - Band II - Chrispus Attucks

Colonial Blacks certainly had contributed much to the growing wealth of the American colonies on farms and plantations, in forests, in shipyards, on building and road construction sites, Black labor had freed white men and enabled them to get on with the business of directing the building of a prosperous economy. The hundreds of tasks performed by slaves supplied the time needed by white scholars to formulate a philosophy which questioned the right of any man to restrict the rights of another.

As the colonists continued to engage in stubborn acts of resistance against the tyrannical rule of the English, individual Blacks participated along with whites in several Stamp Act riots. In Boston, large crowds would often gather to exchange bantering insults with the stationed British soldiers. The seething and tumultuous atmosphere finally erupted into an open break on a troubled, March night in 1770. A group of Bostonians led by a tall, massive, escaped slave, Chrispus Attucks, confronted a group of musket-bearing redcoats in front of the military barracks on King Street. A watchful mob quickly gathered.

"They dare not fire," the taunts were directed at the guarding soldiers. "They are afraid. Why don't we kill them?" the curses and insults continued as the crowd, with Attucks in the fore-front, pressed forward. Someone threw a missile. Chrispus Attucks, who was fearlessly urging the crowd to push back the sentinels, was the first to fall as the British opened fire. Attucks had escaped from his Massachusetts owner twenty years before and had become an occasional seaman. A well-known figure on the Boston docks because of his commanding appearance and direct manner of speaking, he became a hero of the times. The Boston Massacre, five Americans had died that night, settled any doubts concerning the necessity for a definite move on the part of the colonists. A letter written by John Adams in 1773 to the Tory governor of Massachusetts which concerned the persecution of the Americans bore the name of Chrispus Attucks:

. . . You shall hear from us with astonishment. You ought to hear from us with horror. You are charged before God and man with our blood. The soldiers were but passionate instruments, mere machines, neither moral nor voluntary instruments, in our destruction, more than the leaden bullets with which we were wounded. You were a free agent. You acted coolly, deliberately, with all that premeditated malice nor against us in particular but against the people in general, which in the sight of the law is an ingredient in the composition of murder. You will hear from us hereafter.

5

Chrispus Attucks

George Washington, in remembrance of the fateful, historic night, reminded his troops in 1776, "Remember it is the fifth of March...avenge the death of your brethen."

6

Side I - Band III - Black Soldiers

In the ensuing bloody struggle, Black soldiers, seamen and ship pilots were highly visible and active in the battlefields and in naval combat. Their numbers in espionage roles and as minutemen, musicians, medical aides, messengers, commissary workers, servants and laborers were significant and attention worthy. The early battles of Lexington and Concord as well as Bunker Hill included Peter Salem, Salem Poor, Barzillai Lew, Prince Hall, Cuff Hayes, Lemuel Haynes, Pomp Blackman, Primas Black, Ephram Blackman, Cliff Whittemore, Caesar Weatherbee - a partial list of the Black fighters who defended the colonies in one or all of the first desperate military engagements. Minuteman Peter Salem was one of the Blacks cited for heroism at the Battle of Bunker Hill because of his wounding the British major who was attempting to lead his troops to victory.

Salem Poor was commended during the war by fourteen of his army officers, "...in the person of this Negro centres a brave and gallant soldier."

7

Lemuel Haynes, a farmer who after serving as a minuteman in the battles of Lexington and Ticonderoga became an ordained minister of a white, Connecticut congregation.

Prince Hall, a west Indian Black who fought on the side of the Americans, was the founder of the first Negro Masonic Lodge and became a valued spokesman of his day:



Patience, I say; for were we not possessed of a great measure of it, we could not bear up under the daily insults we meet with in the streets of Boston, much more on public days of recreation. How, at such times, are we shamefully abused, and that to such a degree, that we may truly be said to carry our lives in our hands, and the arrows of death are flying about heads. 8

Patience was indeed needed for in spite of the bravery displayed on the part of Black soldiers, all Black enlistment was stopped. When George Washington was named commander-in-chief of the American troops, a growing fear of slave insurrections brought about the Black exclusion from the colonial forces. The decision, however, was quickly reversed when an ousted English governor, Lord Dunmore, made an appeal for Black army volunteers along with the promise of freedom. A Black response to several English leaders' pleas resulted in active colored battalions who fought against the Americans in Long Island and North Carolina.

After the bloody Battle of Valley Forge, (Barzillai Lew, a former copper, was with Washington there.) Blacks were once more able to enter the Continental Army and many of the state regiments. The Revolutionary forces were for the most part integrated though there were several all Black companies. The First Rhode Island Regiment and the Massachusetts Bucks were two Black groups who saw action in a number of confrontations with the English - Red Bank, Point Bridge and Yorktown included. There was a Black commander, Colonel Middleton, who headed a Massachusetts volunteer unit. The promise of land grants and, in some instances, freedom made the military life an attraction for the Blacks who joined the American forces. A large number of slaves were sent in combat in place of masters, and many of them, not all, returned to bondage after the war ended.

A letter written by a Hessian officer, fighting on the side of the British, in 1777 stated, "No regiment (among the Americans) is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance and among them are able-bodied, strong and brave fellows." 9

Approximately one hundred Haitian Blacks, the Fontages Legion or the Black Brigade of Saint Domingue, fought against the British at the siege of Savannah. The leader, Henri Christophe, was later to become the king of Haiti.

The tales of individual and united Black valor performed during the fight for colonial freedom are quite numerous. The governor of Rhode Island spoke of the accomplishments of the Rhode Island regiment which could typify Black patriotism during the Revolutionary Period:

...these slaves who were to win their own freedom in fighting for American Independence took the field in force. Before the end of the year, these men were tried and not found wanting. In the battle of Rhode Island...said by Lafayette to have been the best fought action of the whole war...this newly raised Black regiment, under Colonel Greene, distinguished itself by deeds of desperate valor, repelling three times the fierce assaults of an overwhelming force of Hessian troops ...they continued to discharge their duty with zeal and fidelity - never losing any of their first laurels so gallantly won. 10

Often Blacks carried messengers in the role of laborers and sometimes detained enemy advancement by destroying bridges as they traveled. One such example was James, the slave of a Virginian named Armistead, who was assigned to marquis deLafayette in the fighting against Benedict Arnold. Lafayette, in discussing the spying activities of the slave, said, "... properly acquainted himself with some important communication I gave him...his intelligence from the enemy's camp was industriously collected and more faithfully delivered. 11

James was given freedom and a pension and became known as James Armistead Lafayette.

Alexander Hamilton suggested freeing all of the slave soldiers as a means of instilling an even increased amount of loyalty and courage in the Black patriots. In a letter written to John Jay, President of Congress, in 1779:

It appears to me, that...in the present state of... affairs, is the most rational that be adapted, and promises very important advantages...the enemy's operations...are growing infinitely serious and formidable. I have not the least doubts that the negroes ...make excellent soldiers...(for their natural faculties are as good as ours) joined to that habit of subordination of servitude, will enable them sooner to become soldiers than our white inhabitants. I forsee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest. The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the Blacks, makes us fancy many things that are found neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the im-



practicability...of a scheme which requires such sacrifices...An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their swords. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and, I believe, will have a good influence... opening a door to their emancipation... 12

Side II - Band II Black Sailors

Free Blacks and slaves played a conspicuous role in the colonial navy as pilots, gunners, captain's boys, powder carriers, rope makers, ship carpenters and cooks. Many Blacks sailed on individually-owned and manned state ships that acted as agents for Congress and also provided a mecca for runaway slaves.

A free Negro, James Forten, who was to become a leading abolitionist, invented a mechanism for the improvement of handling sails while a member of a galley crew.

Paul Cuffe was another free Black who sailed the revolutionary waters. After being taken prisoner by the British, he returned to his Massachusetts' village and became a ship captain and shipyard owner. A petition submitted by Captain Cuffe and several other free Blacks questioned the government's right to tax Blacks who were denied voting privileges while being taxed for property owned.

...we are not allowed the Privilege of freemen of the state having no vote or influence in the Election of those that Tax us...we are not allowed in voting in the town meeting...nor to choose an officer...yet many of our Colour (as is well known) have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defense of the common cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar exertion of power (in regard to) taxation too well known to need recital in this place. 13

Other Blacks who were in evidence in colonial naval operations were Peter Brittain and Daniel Peterson who served aboard the galley, Trumbull. Jo Blackley and his son, Samuel, were assigned to a Massachusetts' sloop, Morning Star. Scipio Africanus sailed with John Paul Jones.

Side II - Band III - Black Achievers

Four other prominent Blacks of the period were Richard Allen, Absolom Jones, Dr. James Derham and Benjamin Banneker.

Alland and Jones, both born slaves, were the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Free African Society in Philadelphia. In stating the aims of the latter organization, the two ministers voiced the need for Black economic unity:

...Absolom Jones and Richard Allen...these persons, from a love to the people of their complexion whom they beheld with sorrow...often communed together...in order to form some kind of religious society....it was proposed...that a society...be formed, without religious tenets,... in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children. 14

James Derham, a Philadelphia slave whose two masters had been physicians - one a surgeon with the British Sixteenth Regiment, observed, assisted and was instructed in the practice of medicine by Dr. Benjamin Rush. The eminent Philadelphia practitioner, said upon meeting the freed and mature Dr. Derham, "I have conversed with him upon...the current and epidemic diseases of the country - I find him perfectly well acquainted with all of them." 15

A feeling of unrest and incompleteness prevailed throughout the new nation when Benjamin Banneker, astronomer, mathematician, almanac compiler and surveyor, wrote to Thomas Jefferson who was then Secretary of State:

I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom, which I take with you on the present occasion; a liberty which seemed to me scarcely allowable, when I reflected on the distinguished and dignified position in which you stand, and that almost general prejudice and prepossession which is so prevalent in the world against those of my complexion...we are a race of Beings who have laboured under the abuse and censure of the world... I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions which so generally prevail with respect to us,...Sir, Suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the Arms and Tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort, in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude; ...You cannot but acknowledge, that the



present freedom...which you enjoy you have mercifully received...how pitiable...that altho you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father or mankind...that you should at the same time counter-act His mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression that you should... be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves....

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An article printed after the end of the war highlighted one of the inconsistencies that existed in the young nation:

...an old colored man...few are aware that he is among the survivors of the gallant army who fought for the liberties of our country 'in the days which tried men's souls'...His name is Oliver Cromwell... He enlisted in a company...attached to the Second New Jersey Regiment...He was in the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Monmouth and Yorktown, at which last place...he saw the last man killed... He was with the army at the retreat of the Delaware on the memorable crossing of the twenty-fifth of December, 1776 and relates the story of the battles of the succeeding days with enthusiasm. He gives the details of the march from Trenton to Princeton, and told...with much humor, they 'knocked the British about lively'... He was for six years and nine months under the immediate command of Washington, whom he loved affectionately. His discharge...at the close of the war was in Washington's own handwriting, of which he (Cromwell) was very proud...Had he been of lighter complexion...every newspaper in the land would have been eloquent in praise of him many virtues.

17

The revolution had ended but as one Black Revolutionary war veteran declared, "I served in the Revolution with General George Washington's army, three years under one enlistment. I have stood in battle where balls, like hail, were flying all around me. The man standing next to me was shot by my side - his blood spouted upon my clothes...My only brother was shot dead instantly in the Revolution. Liberty is dear to my heart, I cannot endure the thought that my countrymen should be slaves."

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# Footnotes

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7. Bennett, Lerone. Before the Mayflower. Johnson Publishing Co., Chicago, 1962.
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