

Black Patriots in the Revolutionary War

Prepared by the Maryland State Archives

Overview of Black Military Service

- From the very beginning of the American Revolution, Black and Indigenous people played a role in the fight for independence. Crispus Attucks, who was of Black and Indigenous heritage, was killed at the Boston Massacre (1770) and is often considered the first casualty of the revolution.
- Black men from every state fought during the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). These soldiers included both free people and men who had formerly been enslaved. About 5,000 Black soldiers fought in the American army, as did a smaller number of Indigenous people. On average, Black troops served longer than white soldiers, and a higher percentage of eligible Black men served than white men.
- The Continental Army only tabulated Black soldiers once, in 1778. At that time there were 775 Blacks in the army, about 3 percent of its total strength. This number understates the true extent of Black participation, as some men served before or after that time. Others served in local militia units rather than the regular army.
- In some cases, Blacks were limited to non-combat positions as servants, teamsters, or laborers. For the most part, however, they served and fought alongside white troops in regular infantry units. There was one all-Black unit, the First Rhode Island Regiment, formed in 1778. Otherwise, the Continental Army was fully integrated. The Army was not integrated again until 1948.
- There were no Black officers. The vast majority of Blacks in the army were ordinary privates, while a few were fifers or drummers. A few Black soldiers, including one from Maryland, served as corporals during the war, the lowest non-commissioned officer's rank. While not common, this represented an instance of a Black person holding (a little) authority over whites, a rare occurrence in eighteenth century America.

The Maryland Experience

- More than 100 Black soldiers served in Maryland units. The true number is difficult to determine since, unusually, Black soldiers' race was generally not

noted in enlistment records. State Archives researchers have identified roughly 70 Black soldiers.

- When the Continental Army tabulated the Black soldiers in its ranks in 1778, the Maryland Line included 95 men, about 2.7 percent. There are some hints that the proportion of Black soldiers increased as the war went on and fewer white men enlisted. Black served troops in integrated units with white soldiers. There was a proposal to form an all-Black regiment in Maryland but it never happened.
- Maryland's leaders were initially reluctant to accept Black soldiers, fearing that it would encourage uprisings by enslaved people. It is likely that the first contingent of soldiers raised in 1776 was all white. However, by the summer of 1776 Maryland began enlisting Black men, and every infantry unit was integrated for the rest of the war.
- Maryland was the only southern state that enlisted enslaved people, who could serve as substitutes for white men who were drafted.
- Like their white counterparts, Black soldiers were accompanied by their wives and families. These women cooked for the troops, washed laundry, sold supplies, and provided unofficial logistical support for the army. In addition, Maryland's white officers were probably sometimes accompanied by enslaved servants.

For Further Reading

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