


Luther Porter Jackson – Highlighting Black History

Rights And Duties In A Democracy

By LUTHER P. JACKSON

Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen In The American Revolution

NEWS FROM the war front concerning the deeds of heroism of our boys in Sicily and in the Mediterranean reminds us that similar deeds have been performed in all the wars of our history. One of the states of the young republic which had many Negro soldiers and seamen to enlist in the American Revolution and to render a good account of themselves was Virginia.



As soldiers they were members of the continental line and fought all over the country; as seamen they were enrolled in the state navy and fought in Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. As spies in either service and as pilots in the Navy, certain individuals so distinguished themselves that Washington and other commanders praised them highly for their contribution to the cause of independence.

ATTAINED DISTINCTION

Some of the Virginia Negro soldiers participated in many battles and incurred all the hardships of warfare. Shadrack Battle of Albemarle County served three years and fought in the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth and Savannah; Sylvester Beverly of Franklin County served throughout the war and fought in such engagements as Monmouth, Stony Point, Paulus Hook, Guilford Court House, and Yorktown.

Anthony Chavis of Mecklenburg not only served under Washington at Brandywine and Yorktown, but also under LaFayette and General Greene in the Southern theatre. William Flora of Portsmouth likewise fought throughout the war in many battles, and attained particular distinction in the battle of Great Bridge near his home in Norfolk County.

In the state navy Negro seamen fought in fairly large numbers on such vessels as the "Patriot," the "Liberty," the "Tempest," the "Gloucester," the "Hero," the "Dragon," the "Diligence," and the "Northampton." Serving as pilots on one or more of these armed vessels were Minny, Cuffee, "Captain" Starlins, and Caesar Tarrant. Serving as a boatswain's mate on the "Northampton" was James Thomas of Norfolk; and on the "Hero" as a gunner's mate was James Sorrell of Northumberland. On the

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"Diligence" was a Negro drummer. Nimrod Perkins, of Accomac County.

SERVED IN VIRGINIA NAVY

Scattered on several vessels of the Virginia navy were eight members of the present day Nickens family of Lancaster and Northumberland counties in the Northern Neck. Probably because of their previous experience as sailors on the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, a considerable number of Negroes of this section of Virginia fought on the vessels of the fleets of these rivers.

Some of the Negro seamen were killed or wounded in action. Cuffee, the slave pilot, died from injuries received in service; Aaron Weaver of Northumberland received two dangerous wounds in an engagement at the mouth of the York River, and Joseph Ranger of Elizabeth City was with the "Jefferson" when it was blown up by the British on the James River. Ranger was taken prisoner with the rest of his crew shortly before Cornwallis' surrender.

Some of these soldiers and seamen made distinguished records and were rewarded for their acts of bravery. "Captain" Starlins, a slave and a full blooded African, who was trained as a pilot from his youth, led the crew of the "Patriot" in an attack on a British sloop in the James River; and Caesar Tarrant, the pilot and slave of the town of Hampton, "behaved gallantly" in steering his vessels during an engagement with the British south of the Virginia capes.

AIDED LAFAYETTE EXPLOITS

The exploits of LaFayette in Virginia were made easier by the military secrets furnished him by James, a slave of New Kent County; and in like manner Saul Mathews of Norfolk County again and again entered the British lines to get secrets for General Greene, Muhlenburg, and other commanders. The distinguished record of Joseph Ranger of Elizabeth City was one of length of service. He enlisted in 1776 from Northumberland County and continued in service all through the war and afterwards until the State disposed of its last vessel in 1787.

The American Revolution was a struggle to perpetuate democracy, a form of life and government which the British were then seeking to crush. In the American struggle to preserve this principle the Virginia Negro soldiers and seamen, like the same warriors in other states, thus made a valuable contribution. Just as they are helping to preserve it today in Sicily and many other fronts, so have they always been fighters for liberty and democracy.

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