

# THE WallBuilder Report

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY ISSUE 2004



Photo courtesy of [www.blackpatriots.org](http://www.blackpatriots.org)

## *Black Patriots* OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



# Black Patriots of the American Revolution

**A**mericans have lost much of their knowledge of basic historical facts, particularly those relating to the American Revolution. In fact, a recent survey of high-performing college seniors found that more thought that Ulysses S. Grant (a Civil War general in the 1860s) commanded the troops at Yorktown than George Washington (who actually did lead those troops in the 1780s). Since advanced college seniors cannot identify the commander-in-chief of the American Revolution, it is not surprising that today's Americans know even less about the thousands of African Ameri-

cans who fought during the Revolution, or that they participated in every major battle of the War.

Although this part of our history is unfamiliar today, it was known in previous generations because of the writings of black historians such as William Nell, an award winning young scholar in Boston during the 1830s. He studied law and became the first black American to hold a post in the federal government. In 1852, he authored *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812*, and three years later, he penned *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*.

This issue is dedicated to a recovery of the knowledge of our black patriot heroes to whom today's Americans of all colors owe a debt of gratitude.

## **James Armistead (Lafayette)** **(1760-1832)**

James Armistead was one of the most important American spies during the Revolution. As a slave in Virginia, he witnessed much of the War; and following the British siege of Richmond in 1781, he asked his master, William Armistead, for permission to



Valentine Richmond History Center

**James Armistead**

serve in the cause of American independence with General Marquis de Lafayette, a young Frenchman who came to fight with the Americans. His master agreed, and Lafayette accepted his services. Lafayette dispatched Armistead to the camp of the patriot-turned-traitor, Benedict Arnold (then a British general), to pose as an escaped slave looking for work. Arnold accepted Armistead and allowed him to work in the camp, thus placing him around other British generals, including British commander-in-chief Lord Cornwallis. Armistead obtained much vital information about British plans and troop movements, which he daily sent to General Lafayette. Ironically, Lord Cornwallis so trusted Armistead that he even asked him to become a British spy to watch the Americans.



**General Lafayette**

Armistead agreed and thus became a double-spy, feeding accurate information to the Americans and inaccurate information to the British.

Upon learning that the British fleet was moving Cornwallis and his troops to Yorktown, Armistead quickly

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related that information to Lafayette and Washington, who gathered the American forces at Yorktown. After the British troops had landed and the British fleet had unsuspectingly departed from Chesapeake Bay, the Americans engaged the British while the French fleet blockaded the Bay to keep the British navy from returning. The Battle of Yorktown ensued, and the British – without their navy to provide reinforcements or supplies and with no way to retreat off the peninsula on which they were trapped – finally surrendered. Armistead’s crucial information had helped bring a victorious end to the American Revolution.

Following the War, Armistead returned to slavery on his master’s plantation. Three years later, in 1784, General Lafayette returned to America for a visit and met with his friend, Armistead. Lafayette penned a certificate to Virginia leaders praising the work and important contributions of Armistead. Armistead then petitioned the legislature for his freedom, which was granted on New Year’s Day,



*General Lafayette and American spy James Armistead, whose information greatly shortened the American Revolution.*

1787. (In his latter years, Armistead also received a retirement pension from the State for his military services.) Following his emancipation, Armistead adopted the name Lafayette and thereafter called himself James Lafayette. He remained in the State as a farmer.

General Lafayette became an ardent foe of slavery both in America and in Europe, and it is believed that it was his association with James Armistead that helped clarify his views on slavery, leading him to begin his strong

public crusade against that evil.

In 1824, General Lafayette made his final visit to America; his tour across the nation was greeted by crowds of thousands in city after city. When touring Richmond, the General recognized in the crowd his black comrade from four decades earlier (now an old man) and called him out by name and embraced him – the last time the two patriot friends were to meet.

### **Jordan Freeman (? – 1781); Lambo (Lambert) Latham (? – 1781)**

In 1781, both black and white soldiers fought side by side at the Battle of Groton Heights, Connecticut. The American force of only 84 men, led by Lt. Col. William Ledyard, was attempting to defend the town of New London from a large invading force led by American traitor-turned-British General Benedict Arnold.

After suffering heavy casualties against the overwhelming British numbers, Col. Ledyard and his remaining troops retreated to tiny Fort Griswold, equipped with only a few small cannons. The Americans eventually ran out of

ammunition; and when the British charged the fort, the Americans used their rifles as clubs, fighting back the British with only bayonets and pikes. The British began scaling the walls of the fort; upon reaching the top, the British officer leading the attack – Major Montgomery – was speared and killed by black patriot Jordan Freeman. The British rushed over the walls and quickly overran the fort, overpowering the few remaining Americans.

A British officer then asked the American prisoners, “Who commanded the fort?” Colonel Ledyard replied, “I did once. You do now,” and handed his sword



**Benedict Arnold**

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to the British officer, as was customary with a surrender. The British officer then took Ledyard's own sword and thrust it through Ledyard's body all the way to the hilt.

That act was witnessed by all the remaining Americans, including black patriot Lambert Latham. (When the flagpole of the fort had earlier been shot down by the British during the battle, Lambert grabbed the American flag and held it high until he was captured.) Latham had stood silently with the other American prisoners, but upon witnessing the cold-

blooded murder of his commander, Nell records what next occurred: "Lambert . . . retaliated upon the [British] officer by thrusting his bayonet through his body. Lambert, in return, received from the enemy thirty-three bayonet wounds, and thus fell, nobly avenging the death of his commander."

The British – angered by the loss of so many of their soldiers at the hands of so few Americans – promptly slaughtered all the remaining Americans left in the fort, including Jordan Freeman.

Interestingly, Freeman had been a slave of Col. Ledyard, the commander of the fort, but had been freed by him. As a free man, Freeman had remained in the area and married. When the region came under attack from the British, Freeman chose to stay and fight for America side by side with the man who had once been his owner.

Today, at the site of old Fort Griswold is a plaque showing the moment in which Jordan Freeman killed the attacking British officer. There is also a huge monument standing there; the names of Jordan Freeman and Lambert Latham appear on



Courtesy of Robert Baubino

*Memorial plaque at Ft. Griswold honoring Jordan Freeman, who killed the attacking British officer.*

that monument, along with the other American soldiers who gave their lives defending American liberty in that battle.

### **Peter Salem (1750-1816)**

Peter Salem was a member of the famous Massachusetts Minutemen and was involved in a number of important battles, including the battles of Bunker Hill, Concord, and Saratoga (the first American victory of the Revolution). However, it was in the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, that he gained notoriety.

After the battles of Lexington and Concord, American troops from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island assembled at Boston to confront the 5,000 British troops stationed there. The outmanned American forces engaged the British outside the city. The Americans were winning the conflict until they began running out of ammunition. With the Americans near defeat, British commander Major John Pitcairn (who had earlier led the British forces against the Americans at



Courtesy of Robert Barhaus

*Monument at Fort Griswold honoring the American soldiers who valiantly defended the fort.*

Lexington) mounted the hill and shouted, “The day is ours!” whereupon Salem promptly shot him, sending the British troops into confusion and allowing the Americans to escape safely. Peter Salem was honored before General Washington for his soldierly act.

Salem became a member of the Fifth Massachusetts Regiment and served throughout the rest of the Revolution – a total of seven years of military

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*Peter Salem (circled far right) shot British Major John Pitcairn at the Battle of Bunker Hill, allowing the Americans to escape safely.*

service in behalf of his country, a length of time achieved by few other soldiers in the Revolution. Salem had entered the Revolution as a slave but finished it as a free man, marrying in 1783, at the conclusion of the Revolution.

A stone monument was erected to Peter Salem at Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1882; and Salem is pictured in the famous painting of John Trumbull titled, “The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill.”

### **Prince Whipple (c. 1756 – c. 1797)**

Prince Whipple had been part of a wealthy (perhaps even a royal) African family. When he was ten, he was sent by his family to America for an education; but while on the voyage, he was shanghaied by the ship’s treacherous captain and sold into slavery in Baltimore. He was bought by New Hampshire ship captain William Whipple, a famous leader in that State.

William Nell, in his 1852 *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, tells the early story of Prince in America:



As was customary, Prince took the surname of his owner, William Whipple, who would later represent New Hampshire by signing the Declaration of Independence. . . . When William Whipple joined the revolution as a captain, Prince accompanied him and was in attendance to General Washington on Christmas night 1776 for the legendary and arduous crossing of the Delaware. The surprise attack following the crossing was a badly needed victory for America and for Washington's sagging military reputation. In 1777, [William Whipple was] promoted to Brigadier General

and [was] ordered to drive British General Burgoyne out of Vermont.

An 1824 work provides details of what occurred after General Whipple's promotion:

On [his] way to the army, he told his servant [Prince] that if they should be called into action, he expected that he would behave like a man of courage and fight bravely for his country. Prince replied, "Sir, I have no inducement to fight, but if I had my liberty, I would endeavor to defend it to the last drop of my blood." The general manumitted [freed] him on the spot.

Prince Whipple did enter the service of America as a soldier during the Revolution and is often identified in a number of early paintings of the War, including that of General Washington after crossing the Delaware. In fact, many identify Prince Whipple as the man on the oar in the front of the boat in the famous crossing of the Delaware picture painted in 1851. Although Whipple did not actually cross the Delaware with Washington in the manner



**William Whipple**

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Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

*Prince Whipple, pictured in the front of Washington's boat crossing the Delaware.*

depicted, he was representative of the thousands of black patriots who did fight for American independence – and of the many African Americans who did cross the Delaware with Washington.

Prince Whipple fought in the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 and the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778. He directly attended General Washington and the general staff throughout the Revolution, serving as a soldier and aide at the highest levels.

### **Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833)**

Lemuel Haynes was abandoned by his parents when he was five months old. He was taken in and

apprenticed by the David Rose family. According to Haynes: “He [David Rose] was a man of singular piety. I was taught the principles of religion. His wife . . . treated me as though I was her own child.”

Haynes was given the opportunity for education – something rare for African Americans in that day. Haynes explained: “I had the advantage of attending a common school equal with the other children. I was early taught to read.” He also educated himself at night by reading in front of a fireplace. He developed a lifelong love for the Bible and theology, and even as a youth he

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frequently held services and preached sermons at the town parish. He also memorized massive and lengthy portions of the Bible.

In 1774 when he turned 21 and had finished his tradesman apprenticeship, he enlisted as a Minuteman in the local Connecticut militia. While he was not part of the Battle of Lexington, he did write a lengthy ballad-sermon about that famous battle. However, a week follow-

ing that battle, Haynes and the Connecticut troops were part of the siege of Boston. Haynes was also part of the military expedition against Fort Ticonderoga, made legendary by Ethan Allen and the famous Green Mountain Boys. Haynes became an ardent admirer of George Washington and remained so throughout his life. In fact, Haynes regularly preached sermons on Washington's birthday and was an active member of the Washington



*An old tray depicting Lemuel Haynes preaching in a white church.*

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Benevolent Society.

After the Revolution, Haynes continued his studies in Latin, Greek, and theology and became the first African American to be ordained by a mainstream Christian denomination (the Congregationalists, in 1785), to pastor a white congregation (a congregation in Connecticut), and to be awarded an honorary Master's Degree (by Middlebury College in 1804). Over his life, Haynes pastored several churches in Connecticut, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York (often white churches), published a number of sermons, and was a confidant and counselor to the presidents of both Yale and Harvard.

Lemuel Haynes died at the age of eighty, having written the epitaph for his tombstone: "Here lies the dust of a poor hell-deserving sinner, who ventured into eternity trusting wholly on the merits of Christ for salvation. In the full belief of the great doctrines he preached while on earth, he invites his children, and all who read this, to trust their eternal interest on the same foundation."

### **Black Commandos**

In December 1776, the second-in-command of the American Army, General Charles Lee, was taken prisoner by the British. In order for the Americans to effect his release through a prisoner exchange, a British general of the same rank was needed. A bold plan was therefore undertaken by Lt. Col. William Barton. He would slip past British forces at Newport, Rhode Island, enter the heart of the British camp, capture British General Richard Prescott in his quarters, and return him to the American side before the British learned of the raid.



**Col. William Barton**



**Gen. Charles Lee**

Col. Barton hand-selected about forty elite soldiers, both black and white. He gathered the group, explained to them his plan, warned them of the risk, and asked for volunteers. All chose to be part of the daring operation.

Waiting until the middle of the night, the group loaded into small boats, and with muffled oars, rowed silently past General Prescott's warships and guard boats anchored in the harbor. Landing near the general's headquarters, the Americans quickly overpowered the guards and surrounded the house of the sleeping general.

They entered his house and, standing outside his locked door, they had only to break down the door and quickly grab Prescott before he realized what had occurred.

At that moment, one of the black commandos, Prince Sisson – a powerful man – stepped forward and charged the door, using his own head as a battering ram; on the second try, the locked door gave way and Prince entered the quarters and seized the surprised general. They safely returned with Prescott to the American lines where he was subsequently exchanged for the second-in-command of the American Army, General Charles Lee. The daring act of Sisson is still celebrated to this day.

### **Rhode Island Fighters**

The First Rhode Island was a regiment of 125 black patriots – both slave and free – commanded by Colonel Christopher Greene. That regiment, created during the infamous winter at Valley Forge, became noted for its bravery and courage, receiving its first baptism by fire during the Battle of Newport in 1778.

When reinforcements failed to

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arrive during that battle, the Americans were forced to retreat in the face of heavy British attacks, especially from the dreaded Hessian mercenaries. The First Rhode Island thrust themselves between the retreating Americans and the advancing Hessians and repulsed the British forces three separate times, inflicting heavy casualties on the mercenaries. (Following the battle, the Hessian commander asked to be transferred to a different location for fear that his remaining soldiers might shoot him because of the fearful losses which had been inflicted on them, and the deaths of so many of their comrades.)

In 1781 during the Battle of Croton River, Colonel Greene – commander of the regiment – was cut down by the British. William Nell, in his 1855 *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, described what next occurred:

“Colonel Greene, the commander of the regiment, was cut down and mortally wounded: but the sabres of the enemy only reached him through the bodies of his faithful guard of blacks, who hovered over him, and every one of whom was killed.”

While Colonel Greene’s squad was killed, others of the Rhode Island First survived and served the remainder of the War. A battle-hardened and loyal unit, they were with George Washington when he accepted the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown to end the Revolution.

### Conclusion

Numerous other black patriots distinguished themselves during the American Revolution, including James Forten, Peter Poor, Cuff Smith, Cesar and Festus Prince, and thousands of others. It is appropriate that during African American history month, we should remember these great black patriots who contributed so much to the establishment of America as the foremost nation of the world. ■



Photo depicting black soldiers of the American Revolutionary War is used by permission of The Black Patriots Foundation, [www.blackpatriots.org](http://www.blackpatriots.org).