

African American Involvement in the American Revolution

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Hist. 420 - Senior Seminar: John Hope Franklin

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In *The Moral Legacy of the Founding Fathers*, John Hope Franklin discusses the problems that he saw with America before, during, and after the American Revolution. It was a war for freedom but not all those who participated were given it. African American's fought in the war, yet following its conclusion, most of them were forced to return to the position they held before the war: that of slaves. After reading his essay, one wonders how important the roles were that the African American soldiers played.

This paper argues that African American troops were an important asset to both American and British forces during the American Revolution. When men were needed to fight, African Americans answered the call no matter what side asked for it. General Washington and Lafayette both entrusted their servants with key military information and even had them perform tasks that reward the American forces with vital information on the enemies forces. Throughout the war, one can see multiple examples of heroism by African American soldiers. In addition, this paper will provide a brief background on John Hope Franklin and how he is relevant to the topic.

John Hope Franklin was a scholar that made history because of his success in creating the field of African American history and his involvement in gaining equality for African Americans. Throughout his life he experienced many hardships because of the simple fact that he was an African American and managed to overcome every obstacle that was placed in front of him. One such hardship that helped to make Franklin the man he was took place when he was only a child. His family was thrown off a train because they were sitting in a white only coach. As they walked back to town, Franklin began to cry but his "mother promptly reminded [him] that while the law required [them] to be kept separate from whites usually placed in inferior accommodations, there was not a

white person on that train or anywhere else who was any better than [he] was. She admonished [him] not to waste [his] energy by fretting but to save it in order to prove that [he] was as good as any of them.”¹ Looking back on Franklin’s life one can see that his mothers words stuck with him and that he proved he was just as good.

Franklin was a graduate of Fisk University and continued his college career at Harvard University where he obtained a MA and Ph.D. in history. Following his first year at Harvard, Franklin took some time to teach at Fisk in order to repay his loan; however he did not let the opportunity distract him from completing his education. This truly shows what type of person Franklin was: someone that was willing to accomplish any goal that he set before himself no matter how hard he had to work for it.

Franklin taught at multiple universities and colleges during his life, but once again he showed his mettle when he was given the opportunity to teach at Howard University. At the time it was thought to be one of the highest positions an African American educator could obtain; however Franklin was reluctant to accept the invitation because he dreamed of reaching a position above the glass ceiling set for his race. In the end he took the position, but it was not the end for him. Some years later Franklin, not only climbed above the ceiling, but smashed the glass by becoming the head of the history department at Brooklyn College, an all white school. Even after reaching this unforeseen height, Franklin strove forward and became “the James B. Duke Professor Emeritus of History, and for seven years was Professor of Legal History in the Law School at Duke University.”²

¹ John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 20.

² “Biography of John Hope Franklin,” John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/franklin/bio.html>.

Franklin was more than just a college professor; he is credited with helping to create the field of African-American history and wrote multiple books on the subject. “Professor Franklin's numerous publications include *The Emancipation Proclamation*, *The Militant South*, *The Free Negro in North Carolina*, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, and *A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Ante-bellum North*. Perhaps his best known book is *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans*, now in its seventh edition.”³ When he started his writing career other authors had already published books about African-Americans; however, most of them were little more than opinions that degraded them. Franklin’s research contributed hard evidence about the tough times that his race endured as well as challenged the policies that were made regarding African-Americans. His writing’s were those of an intellectual that was not afraid to point out the flaws in an individual no matter who they were including the founding fathers’.

In addition, John Hope Franklin continued to advance himself in history in 1965 when he participated, along with many other activists, in the Civil Rights march to Montgomery, Alabama. This was the second march from Selma to Alabama’s capital because the first attempt at the march ended with participants experiencing police brutality when they were “viciously attacked by mounted state troopers armed with clubs and tear gas, all of which was aired on television.”⁴ This goes to show that Franklin was not only willing to write about what he believed in, but he was willing to contribute in other ways to the advancement of African-Americans.

³ “Biography of John Hope Franklin,” John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries, <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/franklin/bio.html>.

⁴ Franklin, *Mirror to America*, 237.



April 1965, John Hope Franklin walks in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama⁵

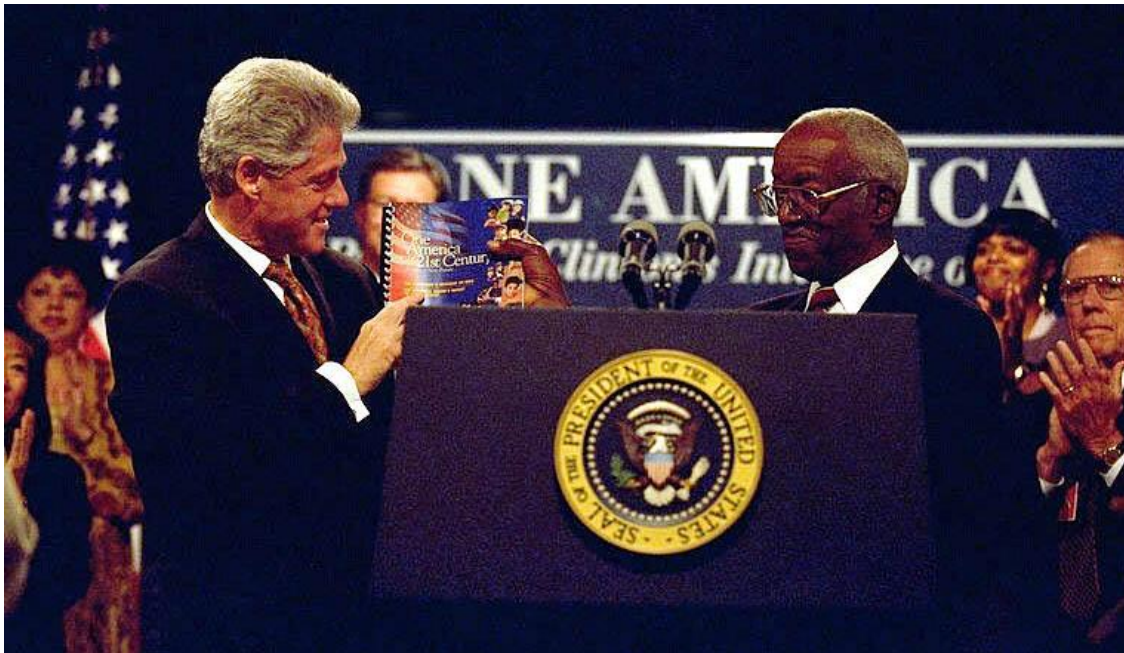
In the image above, one can see that African-Americans were not the only ones enraged by the acts of the Alabama state troopers for beating the participants in the original march to Montgomery. Franklin received an invitation by the “former chairman of [his] department at [the University of] Chicago, Walter Johnson, [because he believed] that historians should participate.”⁶ He is seen in the center of the picture, wearing a black suit, holding the hand of the women next to him. In the images original caption, Franklin writes, “none of us were certain how the locals would respond to our being there, and I took the hand of the women beside me for support and solidarity.”⁷

⁵ Franklin, *Mirror to America*

⁶ *Ibid*, 237-238.

⁷ *Ibid*.

Throughout Franklin's adult life, he traveled across the world teaching those of other nations, mainly about African-American history in the United States, and attending international functions on behalf of the United States. During his travel abroad he experienced some more racism, as well as, what it was like to live with the separate but equal laws in America. On some occasions he was merely a representative for the United States because of his skin color; however these experiences, coupled with his vast array of knowledge, allowed him the opportunity to be selected by multiple Presidents of the United States of America to hold advisory positions and attend major international conferences.



John Hope Franklin presenting President Clinton with the report from the Advisory Board for the President's Initiative on Race.⁸

⁸ One America, Dr. John Hope Franklin, Chair of the Advisory Board..., <http://clinton2.nara.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/cevent.html>.

Looking at the picture above, one can see that John Hope Franklin was indeed an influential person because as the chairman to President Clinton's Advisory Board for the President's Initiative on Race it was his right to give the boards report to the President of the United States. As one observes the image, notice how everyone else present at this event is applauding the passing of the report to the President. In addition, one should realize that this was such an important occasion that the President decided to make an event out of it and not just have it left on his desk.

As a result of Franklin's lifelong contributions to history and the United States, he has received numerous awards, medals, and honorary degrees. As a matter of fact, his work was thought to be so instrumental that he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This is the highest award that any civilian can receive. Further, he has received multiple forms of recognition for his publications, most of which had to do with African-American history, including the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award and the American Historians Award for Outstanding Achievement.

After reading *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938 – 1988*, a book by Franklin, one can understand why he became an important figure in history. He says what he believes with authority and does not shrink away from it because it is an uncommon idea. For instance, in one of the essays featured in the book Franklin writes, "one of the problems that we encounter as we look at our past as well as our present is that we tend to shy away from making judgments or even criticisms of those who occupy the seats of the mighty."⁹ In this essay, he also brings to mind the factor that African

⁹ John Hope Franklin, "The Moral Legacy of the Founding Fathers," University of Chicago Magazine, Vol XLVII, No. 4 (Spring, 1975)

Americans fought alongside the Colonists as well as the British. They simply decided to join whatever side seemed more likely to grant them their freedom.

From the beginning of the war to its end African American's played key roles. The "shot heard round the world," which was fired in Concord, MA in 1775, is perhaps one of the best known events in American history. It was so important that students learn about this event in elementary school, so they grow up knowing about it. When the militia lined up to block the British from advancing "Prince Esterbrooks... [and] nine other Blacks were among the Americans."¹⁰ During the event Esterbrooks was wounded and his name was documented as a result. These brave men put their lives at risk and it was not until recently that they were credited for their actions. It was not common fact that African Americans fought during the war never mind that they were present when the first shots were fired.

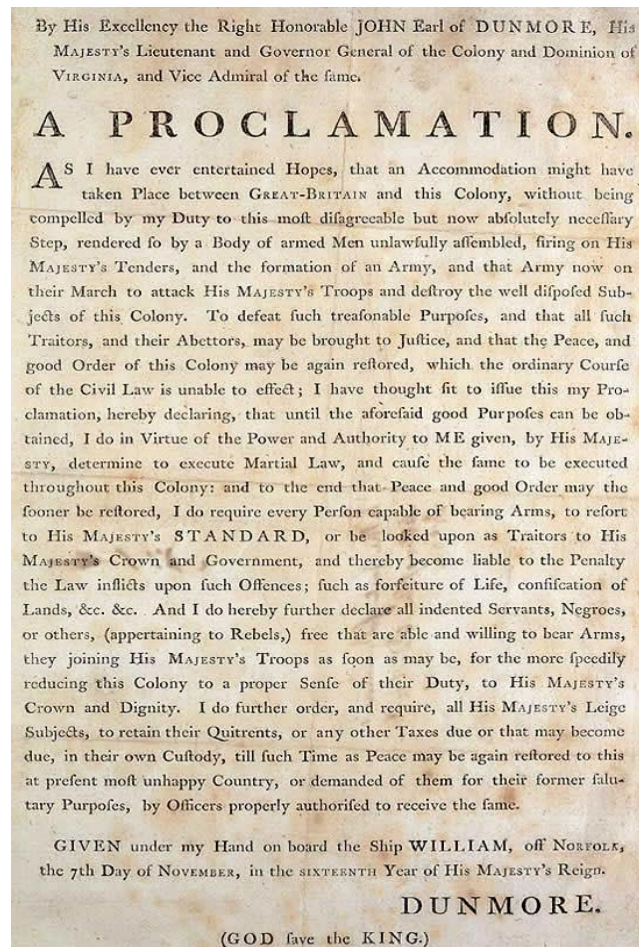
Further, in November of 1775, Lord Dunmore, the British governor of Virginia, decided to raise a force of African American soldiers. King George had massed his forces in the North and left "less than 300 British troops in Virginia when the fighting started."¹¹ Dunmore needed soldiers so he called upon those most likely to answer the call: American slaves. In return for their service, he promised them their freedom and was almost immediately rewarded with what came to be known as "Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment." This strategy was a brilliant idea because "rebellious planters who contemplated a resort to arms would be deprived of their workers and would be compelled to return to their families and their property."¹² Not only did it undermine

¹⁰ Lisa W. Strick, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800*, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹² Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 21.

Colonial recruiting, but it also played against their economy because the slaves were needed in order to run the Southern plantations and played against Southerners biggest fear. They dreaded the thought of a slave revolt because they were greatly outnumbered by the African Americans and the British were providing them with the arms needed for such an event.



Lord Dunmore's proclamation that claimed he would set free any slave that joined England's cause against the rebel forces.¹³

¹³ State of New Jersey Traveling Exhibit, *Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. November 1777*, http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/historic/oh_freedom/battlefront_loyalist.htm

On the other hand, the colonists had originally decided not to allow slaves to join the Continental Army; however, circumstances forced them to modify their decision. In a similar predicament as the British, the rebels needed manpower. During this time, it was possible for a man to avoid fighting if he could find another to take his place. As a result, African Americans were usually the replacement found. In many cases, a slave owner would send one of his servants. In addition, “General Washington himself had opened the door for African-Americans in his general orders... ‘enlist none but Freemen,’ the implication being that the recruit could be black just as long as he was free;”¹⁴ but, it was unlikely that recruiters would turn any runaway slave claiming to be a freeman. This meant that many runaway slaves were able to join with the hope of freedom waiting for them at the conclusion of the war.

Even though there was an obvious need for more soldiers, Southerners were not keen on the idea of slaves carrying arms. The result was that most of the African Americans that fought were from the North. As it turns out, a general’s aide wrote, “Three quarters of the Rhode Island regiment consists of Negroes...and that regiment is the most neatly dressed, the best under arms and the most precise in its maneuvers.”¹⁵ During the Battle of Rhode Island, this regiment, led by Colonel Greene, fought against “an army of professional German soldiers...the resistance they put up was so fierce that the Hessian commander refused to make his men face the Blacks again the next day.”¹⁶ So not only did the African Americans answer the call to arms but they played significant roles in some of the battles.

¹⁴ Robert A. Selig Ph.D., *The Revolution’s Black Soldiers*, <http://americanrevolution.org/blk.html>

¹⁵ Lisa W. Strick, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-180*, 29-30.

¹⁶ Ibid

African Americans played other significant roles then just supplying the Continental Army with able bodies. Some of them were privy to confidential military information and performed tasks that their commanding officers gave them special recognition for because the information that they provided played a part in the success of the revolution. “Three of the most important generals the Americans had during the Revolution-- George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Tadeusz Kosciuszko— had black orderlies to whom they entrusted the most important and confidential military information.”¹⁷ One of Washington’s slaves, William Lee, served him throughout the entire war and was rewarded with his freedom. He can be seen in multiple paintings of Washington.



George Washington and William Lee¹⁸

¹⁷ Lisa W. Strick, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-180*, 25

¹⁸ John Trumbell, *George Washington*, Teachers Paradise,
http://www.teachersparadise.com/ency/en/wikipedia/g/ge/george_washington.html.

In the above portrait, notice how it is obviously a painting of Washington, yet one can clearly see that William Lee, Washington's servant, is included in it. Washington catches the viewer's attention and as one focuses in on it more, they can make out the figure of Lee. It was common during this time period for a slave to be painted into the portrait along with his or her master; however, Lee is in multiple painting with Washington. It had to do with the fact that he was with Washington most of the time, like he was throughout the American Revolution. As a result, Lee became one of the most popular African Americans of his time period.

Continuing on, for the first two years after Agrippa Hull enlisted, he was General Paterson orderly, but it was his serves with Kosciuszko, a Polish General for the Colonists, that Hull is remembered. They traveled all over the colonies together throughout the span of the war. Accounts mention how Hull and Kosciuszko notice the difficulties that Southern slave owners had with keeping their servants because of the promises for freedom that the British offered in return for their service. For a time "Hull was assigned to a unit of military surgeons, and he remembered for the rest of his long life the bloody operations in which wounded soldiers' arms and legs were removed."¹⁹ Like William Lee, Agrippa Hull's services during the American Revolution made him one of the best known African Americans from his time period.

Whereas Hull and Lee gained their fame from their traveling and personal services that they provided for General Washington and Kosciuszko, James Armistead earned his in a different way. When the Marquis de Lafayette arrived in Virginia, he set up a spy network to oversee British activity originating out of their Virginian base in Portsmouth. With his master's permission, Armistead took service with Lafayette and

¹⁹ Lisa W. Strick, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-180*, 28

became the middle man between the General and his spies. He was given the position because of his knowledge of the area and turned out to be a major asset for Lafayette. Armistead transported the messages between the spies and “then hovered around the British camp”²⁰ in order to gather as much detail as he could about the enemy base and troop movement. As it turns out, he was such a good spy that when Cornwallis visited Lafayette, following his defeat, he was shocked to see Armistead at the American headquarters. In return for the extraordinary service that he provided, Lafayette wrote out his praise for Armistead and “prompted the Virginia assembly to give James his freedom; a law passed in October 1786 ordered the state treasurer to pay James’s master the equivalent of the price the slave would have commanded on the auction block... another legislature voted the former spy a \$40.00 a year pension.”²¹ After he was granted his freedom, he changed his name to James Armistead Lafayette.

Not all of the African American heroes during the American Revolution had a relationship with a high ranking officer. Crispus Attucks is credited with being the individual that struck a British soldier, sparking the Boston Massacre. He was shot and killed during the event, but there is a monument for him on the Boston Common. The accepted story for the event is that Attucks “struck one of the [soldiers] over the head...[then he] held the bayonet with his left hand, and twitched it and cried, kill the dogs, knock them over. This was the general cry, the people then crowded in.”²²

²⁰ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 94

²¹ *Ibid*, 95

²² *Ibid*, 6



The Boston Massacre²³

The Boston Massacre was one of the most appalling events around the time of the American Revolution. As the viewer can see, armed soldiers used muskets against a crowd armed with pitchforks and clubs. One can see the soldier that Attucks struck lying at his feet while he is being shot by the rest of the Red Coats. The British could have used other means to put down the unhappy Bostonians. Instead they responded with force that could not have been matched by any present. Now a day it would be manslaughter because of that factor.

²³ Africans in America, Portrait of Crispus Attucks in Boston Massacre, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h3147b.html>

During the Battle of Bunker Hill, another African American was recognized for his heroism: Salem Poor. During this famous battle, the American force was ordered not to fire until they could see the whites of their enemies eye because they were low on ammunition. During this event the British charged the colonist's position time and time again. The English lost a large number of soldiers but were able to force the Americans out of their position at the top of the hill. It was in the middle of one of these charges that Salem Poor killed an important British officer. Following the event fourteen officers signed a petition to recognize the bravery that Poor displayed. In addition, he also served at Valley Forge and the White Plains. Also at this battle was Peter Salem who was previously present at Lexington and Concord.

In conclusion, both the British and colonists were rewarded for their decision to incorporate African Americans into their forces. They supplied the man power needed by both sides to sustain the war effort. The English were the first to offer slaves freedom in return for service forcing the Americans to do likewise. Some African Americans provided the Continental Army with more than brute force, but with intelligence as well. Some of these individuals received the greatest reward imaginable, their freedom. William Lee, Agrippa Hull, and James Armistead Lafayette are just a couple of those that were rewarded for their remarkable service. The feats that the African Americans accomplished during the American Revolution are best remembered because of the creation of African American history by John Hope Franklin. He dedicated most of his life to education and managed to become one of President Clinton's advisors on race.

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