

African Americans and the Revolutionary War

At the start of the war General George Washington did not want African Americans to fight in the military.

In November of 1775 Lord Dunmore, the Governor of Virginia, promised freedom to any slave, owned by a rebelling colonist, that fought for the British. This caused many slaves to escape to the side of the British. The Americans still did not let slaves fight with them. As time passed and the Americans lost many soldiers, some of the colonies began to let slaves enlist in 1778. Virginia did not let slaves join but they did let some free blacks volunteer. Some slave owners in Virginia went against this rule and sent slaves to fight in their place.

There were over 5,000 African Americans in the army. Salem Poor, Prince Estabrook, Cato Woods, and Lemuel Hayes fought at Lexington and Concord. Salem Poor fought at Bunker Hill and is given credit for shooting British Major Pitcairn. Over 2,000 African Americans like James Forten fought with the Navy. Some, like James Armistead Lafayette, were spies. African Americans fought bravely in many of the major battles. Yet, they were not treated the same as the white soldiers. African American soldiers often got less pay and poor quality guns and clothes. African Americans did more than fight. They dug trenches, built forts, and roads and did whatever was necessary to further the cause.

Freedom was very important to the African Americans who fought on both sides in the war. Some of those who fought with the colonists gained their freedom after the war and some did not. Many of those that fought with the British left with the British when the war was over. They went to Britain, Canada, the Bahamas, or Jamaica. Almost 20,000 African Americans left the United States after the war.

1. Why do you think the colonists did not want African Americans to fight in the war?