

Black Agency, Participation, and Impact on the American Revolution

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Blacks were present at all the major battles in New Jersey, such as Trenton (1776), Princeton (1777), Fort Mercer (1777), Monmouth (1778), and Springfield (1780), as well as those elsewhere such as Saratoga (1777), Savannah (1779), and Yorktown (1781).

Enslaved men such as **Oliver Cromwell** in Burlington, **Primus Still** in Deptford, **Isaac Murrey** of Mannington, and **Amos Fisher** in Bridgeton were emancipated as a result of service in the Continental Army.

Cyrus Bustill (1732-1806) was born enslaved in Burlington and manumitted in 1769 by his third owner, who taught him to be a baker. Bustill moved to Philadelphia and baked bread for Washington's troops at Valley Forge in 1777. He was the great-great-grandfather of Paul Robeson and later helped found Philadelphia's Free African Society.

Oliver Cromwell, a free black who served with distinction as a private, crossed the Delaware River with Washington and saw action at all the major battles. This twenty-three-year-old served in Col. Israel Strevé's Second New Jersey Regiment. The crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton would be only a small portion of the combat he would see during his nearly seven years of Revolutionary War service.

Another black soldier served in close proximity to George Washington for the entire campaign, so close in fact, that he appears in many of the paintings of the pre-battle preparations and as a rower in the general's boat during the actual crossing of the Delaware. This African American was **Prince Whipple** a man with an unusual story according to [The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution](#) by William C. Nell, published in 1855. Prince accompanied his owner, William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, into the army at the beginning of the Revolution and served as the general's bodyguard and personal servant. Nell further noted that Washington had purchased a young slave in 1768 named **William Lee**. Lee accompanied the general to Massachusetts and served as his personal orderly for the duration of the war. Shortly after the war ended. Lee, still enslaved, asked Washington if he could bring his wife, **Margaret Thomas**, a free woman from Philadelphia, to live with him at Mount Vernon and Washington agreed.

Prime was enslaved by the Loyalist, Absalom Bainbridge of Princeton, and escaped during the War. He fought on the American side and later successfully petitioned the New Jersey legislature for his freedom in 1786. (See: *The Price of Silence* PBS documentary 2022)

In Plainfield, Washington consulted with the Drake family and their three sons served in county militias, while the family's freed slave, **Caesar**, drove a wagon for the Continental forces.

Self-emancipations continued throughout the war. Some of those known by name include **Samuel Smith, James and Catherine Van Sayl, Aaron and Sarah Jones,** and **Oliver Vinson.** Between 1775 and 1782, totals show 106 slaves and 139 indentured New Jersey related runaways...some of these men and women escaped as the British passed through northern New Jersey in the later part of 1776. Over fifty slaves from Bergen, Essex, Somerset, and Middlesex counties fled to the British to gain their freedom. **Colonel Tye,** a Monmouth County-born slave who joined the British forces after Lord Dunmore's Declaration and then led several successful raids against the patriots in Monmouth County. Patriots were also known to enter Tory property to confiscate goods and slaves. In Monmouth County, Tories claimed the loss of twenty-nine slaves during the war.

The British also engaged in slave kidnapping. One estimate reports that 250 slaves were taken along with livestock and a wagon in Monmouth County and slaves taken in a door-to-door search in Paterson.

African Americans of the First and Second Rhode Island Regiments fought the British at the Battle of Red Bank near Gloucester and were also seen with Colonel Elijah Hand's Cumberland militia in the skirmishes at Quinton and Hancock Bridges in Salem County.

Washington led an army of 15,000 against the British at Monmouth Courthouse, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778. Unit reports note that more than 700, or about 5 percent, of the rebel soldiers in the fight were Black. On this date, the Americans and British fought to a stalemate at Monmouth, New Jersey. This battle marked the end of large-scale conflict in the northern states, for neither the British nor the Americans were able to gain any significant advantage.

The Sandy Hook Lighthouse is a National Historic Landmark. The NHL designation indicates a site of exceptional national significance. Lighted for the first time on June 11, 1764, this octagonal tower was the fifth lighthouse in the colonies and remains the oldest operating lighthouse in the United States. It was occupied by both British and Loyalist forces during the Revolution and was surrounded by an encampment of white and African-American Loyalists, who conducted numerous raids. Along the coasts, small British and Loyalist units continued pinpoint attacks. One of the American Revolution's last skirmishes was fought December 27, 1782 at Cedar Bridge, Ocean County. One year later, after a peace treaty was signed in Paris, word reach the Continental Congress, assembled in Princeton, on November 1, 1783.

