

Chapter 1

The Missing Pages, 1750 to 1815

In 1919 Laura E. Wilkes, a teacher in the public schools of Washington, DC, wrote *Missing Pages in American History: Revealing The Services Of Negroes In The Early Wars In The United States Of America, 1641–1815*.¹ In her foreword, Wilkes states:

A patient research, extending over a period of six years, has given the author the courage to send out this volume. It has also convinced her that the Negroes of America have done their bit in every war and taken no small part in every military movement made for the salvation of this country from the time of the earliest settlement. The facts found herein are taken from colonial records, state papers, assembly journals, histories of slavery, and old time histories of various colonies, and of the republic. The reader can easily verify this statement by using the bibliography at the end of the work.

While it is impossible to gather all of the truths concerning this matter, it is doubtless true, that much more, than is here chronicled, will be available to the student of this particular department of history, if he shall have leisure and funds to dig deeper into half-forgotten traditions of old towns and villages. That these pages may prove a stimulant for further research, by others, their

writer ardently desires and she earnestly hopes the book will eventually be read collaterally, with the histories of the United States, by every one who can be inspired by its information.

What an inspiration Wilkes' book could have been, but sadly for the general public, the work was mainly forgotten, except to inquisitive historians and scholars. Her call for African-American soldiers to be "collaterally" included among the general histories of the United States did not happen, as events after 1919 proved.

In that flow of history before World War I, I have decided to begin *Black Soldiers of New York State* at an arbitrary point, in the mid-eighteenth century with the French and Indian War.² As Wilkes indicated, records reveal that the New York militia was integrated. Upon my foray into the New York Provincial Muster Rolls, the designations "Free Negro," "Negro," or "Mulatto" appears by some names.³ For the years 1758, 1760, 1761, and 1762, the lists show such men on the rolls.⁴ For instance, in 1758 the militia of Queens County, West Chester County, Orange County, and Suffolk County have men labeled as "Free Negro," or "Negro" or "Mulatto" in various companies. As an example, Scudder Samson, "a free Negro," of Suffolk County, was listed on the rolls for 18 April, 1758, while in West Chester County in that year, "Jeffery Garret . . . b Westchester . . . Labourer, Capt. Israel Underhill . . . Negro" was registered.⁵

Although the total of Free Negroes, Negroes, and Mulattos for the entire New York provincial militia was approximately eleven to fourteen men for each year between 1758 and 1762, some individuals' names appeared more than once. For example, a man designated as "Kellis, Molato (sic): Age 18, b Suffolk, Lab.," from a Captain Strong's company of Suffolk County is listed as having passed muster in April 1759 and again in April 1760.⁶ Whether he was a free man is open to debate, but even though the total number of men of African descent is not sizable for the entire militia, New York's provincial force was integrated between 1758 and 1762.



A reconstruction of an African-American militiaman, Colonial New York, circa 1755 to 1760 by Eric Manders. (*Original sketch in the Anthony Gero Collection*)

There are indications that the “New York Battalions” or, as they were sometimes referred to in contemporary eighteenth-century accounts, “Regiments,” which numbered one through three, may have had scattered African-Americans in them. Raised between 1758 and 1762, and uniformed in 1758 in plain green coats, these battalions were a vital part of the colony’s forces.⁷ Other provinces, like South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, used freedmen and slaves in their militia between 1755 and 1762.⁸ Due to manpower needs, even the French and Spanish employed Free Negroes and mulattos in their colonial forces.⁹ As a result, New York, in a hesitant and small way, was following an accepted military practice in North America, but this

does not mean that large-scale integration was generally accepted during these colonial times.

Wilkes states, "Black militiamen were seen also at this period at Fort Williams, a stockade on the road to Oswego, New York. This place was at the southwestern end of Lake George and was built in 1735."¹⁰ Whether these black militiamen were from New York or neighboring colonies is unclear as research continues on them.

African-Americans appear to have served in the British Army in North America, but the question is in what capacity and in what numbers.¹¹ There are hints that Roger's Rangers, a famous colonial unit, may have had an African-American or two in their various companies.¹²

Researchers will undoubtedly over the next decades discover even more information on African-American soldiers. Furthermore, in the colonial and Revolutionary War naval services and merchant marine from 1755 through 1783, black sailors served onboard ships. Since their role is outside the scope of this book, the reader can consult other sources on black sailors.¹³

Documents indicate that, although small in total numbers, colonial New York had elements of an integrated militia system during the French and Indian War. When one considers the global empire building that the European powers were engaged in from 1750 to the end of 1764, the participation of black soldiers in the Americas should be noted not as a matter of political correctness, but as historical fact.

As the rewards of victory can often spell future disaster, British authorities made decisions and policies in the late 1760s and early 1770s, which helped fan the rebellious nature of colonial Americans. By 1775, war with Great Britain had become unavoidable. Sides had been chosen; and, as result of subsequent events in and around Boston, and with the issuance of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the colonies had erupted in armed rebellion. The separation of Britain's thirteen colonies could only be accomplished or resisted, after

that, by force of arms. In those turbulent years, African-Americans began to determine how they felt about colonial independence and personal freedom. Their record of service to the Patriot cause across the thirteen colonies, or among the British forces and its hired auxiliaries sent to America, have been revealed in great detail by eminent historians, such as John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles, and others.¹⁴ Since my book is focused on New York's part in events from 1764 through 1815, what is presented next relates primarily to New York's soldiers of African descent.

Between 1764 and 1775, much is yet to be discovered on the role of black New Yorkers. One could assume that its colonial militia may have contained scattered individuals, but speculative history can be grounds for much misinformation. Other provinces, such as New Hampshire in its 11th Regiment of Provincial Militia in 1774 to 1775, had freed men serving, but did New York do the same in its provincial militia?¹⁵ A hint of what might have happened in New York between 1764 and 1775 is contained in Quarles' work, "In New York the militia act of April 1, 1775, it stipulated that 'all bought servants during their Servitude shall be free from being listed in any Troop or Company within this Colony.'"¹⁶ As this legislative act suggests, from 1764 to 1775, resistance to black involvement as slaves had grown, and the exclusion of all but Free Negroes from the militia was now the standard for New York.

With New York City being the object of British retaliatory plans for the summer of 1776, the necessity of raising large numbers of men for the Continental cause took hold. Congress ordered that, on January 16, 1776, the restriction for Free Negroes reenlisting be lifted.¹⁷ In New York, and all across New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South, provincial legislatures tried to raise men, often despite racial barriers.¹⁸ Wilkes found that in New York: "The name of 'Negro Tom' appears as early as March 18, 1776, on the rolls of the Orangetown, New York, regiment, as a drummer in the company of Capt. Egbert. Philip Field is mentioned as having



A water color drawing of a black soldier in the Rhode Island Light Infantry Company, ca. 1780–1781 by Barry E. Thompson. (*Anthony Gero Collection*)

enlisted April 15, 1777, in the Second New York Regiment. This man was a slave of Dutchess County, New York. He died in Valley Forge, August, 1778.”¹⁹

Historian Benjamin Quarles found evidence that a slave owner named David Belknap, summoned to Fort Montgomery, in New York sent his slave who, after “faithfully performing his duty, died while being held a prisoner by the British.”²⁰ Perhaps Philip Field had also been sent by his owner while the drummer “Negro Tom” might have been brought to this company of the 2nd Militia Regiment as a slave, a practice not uncommon in colonial units. Some

slaves in New York, like Peter Williams Sr., defied their Loyalist masters and decided to support the revolution.²¹

The Provincial Congress, under the direction of its president, John Hancock, called for large-scale military works to be created to defend New York City. These fortifications were, in part, dug by Negroes from the New York City area. These men were drafted from their masters who lived in the city and surrounding areas and were put to work on the defenses. With pick-axe and hoes, these slaves were assigned to build the fortifications to try and hold off the British juggernaut headed for this vital colonial city.²²

By 1779 Wilkes states that General Anthony Wayne used a local man “Pompey Lamb, a Negro on a nearby farm,” as a spy to help scout the British defenses at Stony Point, which Wayne planned to



A water color drawing of a black soldier in Butler's Rangers, a Loyalist unit, ca. 1777 by Barry E. Thompson. (*Anthony Gero Collection*)

attack. The assault, successfully carried out in July of that year, was one of the great American victories of the war. Among the prisoners taken by Wayne's men were several Negroes in British employ.²³

On March 20, 1781, the legislature of New York passed an act that allowed masters to enlist their slaves for the Continental cause. If the slave served for three years, they would be freed, something that was being done in other colonies as well. The act also called for the raising of two regiments of black soldiers for New York's frontier defense.²⁴ Whether these separate black regiments were actually recruited and raised in New York State is still being researched.²⁵

In the January 1783 campaign ordered by General Washington against the British garrison at Oswego, among the forces that Colonel Marinus Willet of New York took was the Rhode Island Regiment. This unit had a long and proud combat history with the Continental Army and was made up of black enlisted men with white officers. An African-American New Yorker named Henry Bakeman, who enlisted at Stone Arabia, Montgomery County in 1781, reportedly accompanied Willet's campaign to Oswego, which resulted in Bakeman's crippling, due to the extreme exposure endured on the march.²⁶

The French and Spanish allied with the Continental cause had black soldiers among the troops they sent to fight. Many sources indicate that units of the British Army, as well among its Loyalist troops, and Germanic units hired to serve in America, had black men as soldiers.²⁷ For example, Butler's Rangers, a Loyalist unit formed by Tories in upstate New York, several black men did their duty as soldiers. The Black Pioneers, raised from men of African descent in the New York City area served, too. Following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, many of these men went to Canada and are listed in the famous source *The Book of Negroes*.²⁸

With the evacuation of New York City on November 25, 1783, the accomplishments of New York's black soldiers in the creation of the American nation was a fact. Some records indicate that in

the land bounty rights given to veterans to settle in the upstate New York from 1781 to 1794, several black New Yorkers were listed. Their names are filed under the heading of "Assignors" and read, "Jack(Negro) . . . Murray Jack(Negro) . . ." ²⁹ Regrettably, no other men in this 1901 source bear this designation, but what this roll shows is that, as veterans, these two men were assigned their land bounty by a grateful New York State government. From 1783 through 1811, what took place in New York's militia with regard to its black men as freemen or slave? In other states of the young republic, the debates on slavery, the status of freedmen, and their role in the militia was wide-ranging. ³⁰ At the national level, there are indications of black sailors serving during the Quasi-War with France, but whether they were in the fledgling American army is being researched. ³¹

In the Empire State the legacy of its black soldiers during the Revolutionary War was allowed to wither on the vine, while their status in the militia, if any, is unclear. ³² Some states, like Georgia, still had slaves enrolled in scattered militia companies, while others, like Virginia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey restricted the enlistment of freedmen to musicians or labor troops. ³³ In the active militia forces of the New York State, the number of free black men, mulattos, or even slaves enrolled for militia duty seems to have been meager, between 1783 and 1811.

From 1803 to 1811, international tensions, precipitated by the Napoleonic Wars, were felt in New York State. Prior to 1812 the Empire State held a key position in the geography of America. With its important harbor at New York City and, in the north and west of the state, along its extensive border with British Canada, New York would be a major theater of military operations if war with Great Britain came. Once war was declared in the spring of 1812, political elements in New York State and among its militia forces supported the conflict.

During these years a question arose: what would be the role of black New Yorkers if war came? In the New York City area

there were enough freemen and slaves in the total population of the city to help support the war, but would black New Yorkers be allowed to serve, and in what numbers, and in what capacity? An interesting item on an attempt to raise units from New York City's African-American population appears in 1812, when Governor Daniel Tompkins replied to a request, sent to his office, proposing to raise "men of color" for the war. The reply from the governor's office states:

.....
Adjutant Generals Office

Albany, 20 July 1812
 To Mr. R. Stevens
 Sir
 If you contemplate raising men of color for the United States army, your application for that purpose must be made to the President; if however, it is your desire to have a corps of them organized for the service of this State, it cannot be done, because the Comm'r in Chief has no authority to do so.
 Your Ob't Servant
 Ulm Paulding, Jun, Adj Genl.³⁴

As commander in chief of the New York Militia, the governor felt he had no authority to raise such a corps in his state. Since no further mention of such a corps is found in Tompkins Papers until October 1814 one can assume no unit was raised in 1812 or 1813. Just who this "Mr. R. Stevens" is remains unclear.

However, from actions of the New York State Legislature in early fall of 1814, the matter had not ended. On October 24 the New York Legislature directed to be raised, "by voluntary enlistment, two regiments of free men of color for the defense of the state for three years, unless sooner discharged. . . ." The strength of these two regiments was to be "one thousand and eight able-

bodied men, . . .” while the commissioned officers “shall be white men.” This order also allowed slaves to be enlisted if their masters granted permission and were appropriately compensated; but were these regiments ever really recruited and put into the field?³⁵

In that regard, the contemporary records are somewhat tantalizing. Based on a reported Congressman Martingale’s account, delivered before the United States Congress in January 1828, he stated: “Slaves or negroes who had been slaves were enlisted as soldiers in the war of the Revolution: and I myself saw a battalion of them,- as fine a martial looking men as I ever saw attached to the Northern army in the last war,- on its march from Plattsburg to Sacket’s(sic) Harbor, where they did service for the country with credit to New York and honor to themselves.”³⁶ If Martingale is to be believed, a battalion of these men was sent up to Sackett’s Harbor, but countering his statement are a series of letters Governor Tompkins sent to the United States Secretary of War, James Monroe, on November 5 and 6, 1814, and on December 12, 1814. In these letters, Tompkins conveys the strong belief that these regiments would receive state bounties and would replace an equal amount of New York State militia, then in service, but he wanted assurances from the national government that these men of color would be clothed and subsisted by the federal government. It also appears, from the phrasing in Tompkins’ letters, that these black men would stay in the New York City defenses, along with the newly authorized Sea Fencibles companies who were recruited among sailors in the city and were raised to help man the fortifications that formed New York City’s defenses.³⁷

With the war ending in January 1815, however, these black New York troops were short-lived, and as a result major histories on the War of 1812 have little on their actual service.³⁸ No data on these black soldiers having been at Sackett’s Harbor in late 1814, other than Congressman Martingale’s account, has yet been found.³⁹ There the matter rested, until a new item on black New

Yorkers in the War of 1812 was published. In the *New York Herald* of August 24, 1814, this local notice appeared:

Patriotism of the Africans. This morning between 800 and 1000 of the hardy and patriotic sons of Africa, accompanied by a delightful band of music and appropriate flags, crossed the ferry at Catharine slip, to work on the fortifications at Brooklyn heights. These men, knowing the value of freedom, are anxious to defend it, and too much praise cannot be bestowed on them for their voluntary exertion.⁴⁰

What this contemporary account shows is the voluntary organization of between eight hundred and a thousand African-Americans, in what I will call a “labor battalion.” Since their formation predates the October 24, 1814, authorization of the New York State Legislature, which directed “two regiments of free men of color” to be raised, could the August activities of New York City’s sons of African descent have prompted the October legislation? I believe it did.

New York City’s black population seems to be volunteering in much the same way as had Philadelphia’s. When asked for aid by the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee in 1814, Absolem Jones, Richard Allen, and James Forten, all leading black citizens of the city, helped secure voluntary service of black Philadelphians in erecting defenses for the city.⁴¹ However, without actual names of any of these black New Yorkers who served, in either August or October, a nagging doubt continues: were some of them sent up to Sackett’s Harbor?⁴² The numbers of New York City’s black residents who wished to serve in 1814 was substantial, as seen by the 1814 newspaper article and probably explains why the New York State Legislature in October 1814 authorized two regiments of black New Yorkers for the northern border’s defense.

What of the United States Army units then on duty in New York State? Did they have freemen, mulattos, or slaves serving here?

If the answer is yes, were any of these men from New York State? Evidence on black soldiers in the 1812–1815 period for the Regular Army, outside New York, is growing. For two examples, in the 7th Regiment, United States Infantry, Jordan B. Noble, “a young mulatto drummer,” served with the regiment at New Orleans from 1813 through 1815, while in the 38th U.S. Infantry, at Fort McHenry in 1814, William Williams, a mulatto, was on the muster rolls.⁴³ As researchers continue to uncover data, more men of color will appear as having served in the United States Army from 1812 through 1815. Did similar enlistments happen in New York State?

In the case of the famous 13th Regiment, United States Infantry, recruited primarily in New York State, and which served gallantly from the Niagara frontier to Sackett’s Harbor, as of yet no evidence has surfaced on Negroes or mulattos in its ranks.⁴⁴ Robert E. Greene’s research on the 25th Regiment of Infantry, which fought on the Niagara frontier and garrisoned Sackett’s Harbor, shows that a soldier named Jacob Dexter, described as a colored man, may have been on its muster lists from 1814 to 1815.⁴⁵

As a last example, the payroll of a company of artificers, under Ira Floyd, assistant superintendent, stationed at Burlington, Vermont, and who may have been at the battle of Plattsburgh in 1814, lists thirteen black men on its payroll.⁴⁶ Whether these African-Americans were from New York State cannot be confirmed from this company’s payroll, but their names and designations are there.

On United States ships of the “fresh water navy,” employed on the Great Lakes or Lake Champlain during the war, there is strong evidence of black sailors.⁴⁷ From the main American naval base at Sackett’s Harbor to the port at Oswego, from the Niagara frontier or along Lake Erie, and finally at the naval engagement at Plattsburg, black sailors fought and died. Just how many of these men were from New York is still being researched. The probability is high for their service since New York City was a major port, with many black sailors ready to serve. For example, in the case of some privateers



A water color of a Freed Black seaman in the United States Navy, ca. 1812–1814 by Barry E. Thompson. (*Anthony Gero Collection*)

like the *Governor Tompkins*, sailing under authorization of New York State, black men were aboard while at the naval engagement on Lake Erie in 1813, Anthony Williams, “a colored man . . . served on the *Somers*, one of Commodore Perry’s vessels . . .”⁴⁸

The British and Canadian forces had black men in the ranks during the war. Some of these black Canadians traced their ancestors to black Loyalists who had settled in Canada, while others were more recent freedom seekers. Whether it was at the famous battle at Queenston Heights in 1812, with Captain Robert Runchey’s company

of black men, or as small part of the Canadian Voltigeurs, black men did their duty. In the British fresh waterfleets on Lake Erie, Ontario, and Champlain, and along the Atlantic coast, the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, had men of color in service.⁴⁹

During the campaign at New Orleans in December 1814 and early January 1815, the American battalion of “Free Men of Color” fought bravely, especially when General Andrew Jackson ordered a night attack on the British camp to try and confound the British as to his strength. When the grand assault of the British finally fell on Jackson’s lines on January 8, 1815, helping to hold a part of the American front stood the 7th United States Infantry, along with its mulatto drummer, Jordan Noble.⁵⁰ As a result of Jackson’s successful defense of this city, the American victory passed into legend and catapulted Jackson to the status of hero, then president. Ironically, among the British troops brought to take this vital port city was one of the West India Regiments, the 5th. These West India Regiments, numbered 1 through 6, were made up of black men whose origins, in part, can be traced to ex-slaves who fled with the British evacuation of the thirteen former colonies in 1783 and who had settled in the West Indies.⁵¹

The evidence is clear that men of African descent served on both sides in the War of 1812, and in some of the most important land battles and naval engagements. The armed forces of the United States and various state militias, including New York State, had black soldiers and sailors in them. Why then, after 1815, was their record largely forgotten, downplayed, or revised?

Conclusion

The facts of history should not be changed, despite revisionist historians’ efforts to do so. Wilkes sought to rectify such omissions in 1919 and *Black Soldiers of New York State* attempts to do so today. After the War of 1812 ended, African-American involvement in

the Empire State's militia faded and from 1816 to 1850; they were largely excluded from her militia. However, when the events of the 1850s and early 1860s became so tragic as to evolve into secession, white and black New Yorkers stood ready to defend the Union and to destroy America's institutionalized slavery.