

2000

Black Pilots, Patriots, and Pirates: African-American Participation in the Virginia State and British Navies during the Revolutionary War in Virginia

Kolby Bilal

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [African History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bilal, Kolby, "Black Pilots, Patriots, and Pirates: African-American Participation in the Virginia State and British Navies during the Revolutionary War in Virginia" (2000). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1539626268.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-4hv4-ds79>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

BLACK PILOTS, PATRIOTS, AND PIRATES

African-American Participation in the Virginia State and British Navies During the
Revolutionary War in Virginia

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by


Kolby Bilal

2000

APPROVAL SHEET

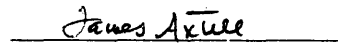
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

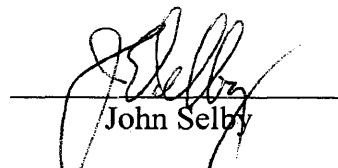


Kolby Bilal

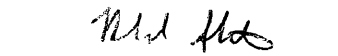
Approved, April 2000



James Axtell



John Selby



Ronald Schecter

*For Michael and all of the other African American navy veterans who preceded him in
honor, courage, and dignity*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER I	11
CHAPTER II	29
CONCLUSION	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	43
VITA	47

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to Professor James Axtell, under whose guidance this thesis was prepared, for his attempts to make me a better writer. In addition, I am quite grateful for Professor John Selby's suggestion that I look at African-American participation in the Virginia State Navy and the Royal Navy instead of at black soldiers and sailors in the Virginia forces, as I had initially planned. I would also like to thank Ronald Schecter for his fresh perspective as well as for the enthusiasm that he exhibited toward this project.

Sincere thanks to Michael Bilal, Tawana Jackson, Claytee White, and my mother, Kathleen Wragg for their patience, constant encouragement, and frequent admonitions to "just do it."

ABSTRACT

Many slaves who served in the Virginia State Navy during the Revolutionary War were pilots before the Revolution and subsequently enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than the average field slave, which made the black pilots more prone to lend their skills to the Virginia patriot cause. Even if these black pilots were not freed by their masters at the end of hostilities, they would still be granted a respite from hard labor in the tobacco fields and possess a greater degree of mobility than allowed most other slave laborers. In addition, some free blacks probably served the American cause in order to prove their loyalty and hence win fuller citizenship rights and land.

On the other hand, slaves who joined the British naval forces were less likely to have piloting or seafaring skills that were dear to the fledgling Virginia Navy. Although freedom came more swiftly with the British, it arrived at greater peril as those blacks who flocked to British ships were considered runaways, and subject to corporal or capital punishment if recaptured by their owners. Free blacks who joined the Royal Navy were probably motivated by a desire to leave the country, as it quickly became apparent that they would only occupy a quasi-free status in the new nation.

BLACK PILOTS, PATRIOTS AND PIRATES
AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE VIRGINIA STATE AND BRITISH
NAVIES DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR IN VIRGINIA

INTRODUCTION

To date, scholarship on black participation in the American revolutionary war has focused primarily upon their service in the army, for two reasons. First, black soldiers overwhelmingly outnumbered black seamen in the war.¹ Consequently, interpretations of agency, motives, and participation are more numerous and more easily constructed for the former group and scholars have chosen to take advantage of this available information. Data on black seamen in the Revolution are even slimmer. Second, the majority of engagements were fought on land and not at sea. Thus there is a general trend in the scholarship of the Revolution to focus on soldiers rather than sailors, and if seamen are studied, they are likely to be officers and white men. Thus, the story of the black seamen in the revolutionary war has been virtually untold.

Although the scope of study on black sailors in the revolutionary war has been limited, certain coastal areas such as Tidewater Virginia offer broader resources on this neglected subject. Information gleaned from a regional analysis yields a wealth of data that can contribute to the understanding of African American agency, motives, and participation in the war. The distinct regional maritime culture shaped African American revolutionary participation in Virginia, with its eighteenth-century Tidewater hub, in an interesting fashion. Although many slaves defected to the British when Lord Dunmore offered freedom to all slaves who would bear arms for the royal cause, African American participation on the side of the rebellious Virginians was still significant, particularly in the State Navy. This was because many slaves who served in the State Navy during the

¹ Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America 1775-1973: A Reference and Pictorial History* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1974), pp. 6-23.

Revolution were pilots before hostilities erupted and subsequently enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than the average field slave, which made the black pilots more prone to lend their skills to the Virginia patriot cause. Even if these black pilots were not freed by their masters at the close of the conflict, they were still granted a respite from hard labor in the tobacco fields and possessed a greater degree of mobility than allowed most slave laborers. In addition, some free blacks probably served the American cause in order to prove their loyalty and hence to win fuller citizenship rights and land. This is not to say that skilled slave pilots did not join the Britons, but it is more likely that blacks without seafaring skills would become absorbed into the sweeping British forces, primarily Dunmore's roaming royal fleet.

In order to appreciate African Americans' motivation, participation, and agency as pilots and seamen for both the Americans and the British, it is important to first understand the origins and nature of slavery in pre-Revolutionary Virginia. It was a well-established axiom that the first Africans arrived in Olde Pointe Comfort and later Jamestown aboard a Dutch vessel that had stopped there for sundries in August 1619. It was thought that the Dutch sailors traded approximately twenty Africans for more crucial cargo. However, more recent studies suggest that the 1619 arrivals were taken from the Portuguese ship *San Juan Bautista*, which had sailed from Luanda, Angola, on the southwest coast of Africa and was headed for the port of Vera Cruz in Mexico. More than likely, these Africans were war captives, victims of the conflict between the Kingdom of Ndongo and rival groups with whom the Portuguese sided. Most blacks arriving in Virginia from 1619 to circa 1660 were probably from the Angola region. They probably knew how to farm, and were possibly already familiar with Europeans and

Christianity. These Africans were originally deemed indentured servants by the colonists and worked similar terms of service as whites occupying the same status, about a period of four to seven years. About one-third of the early African arrivals were able to secure their freedom and acquire their own farms.²

However, shortly after the first Africans arrived in Virginia, the colony began to write legislation concerning black labor.³ For example, in the records of the judicial proceedings of the governor and council of Virginia on September 17, 1630, the first vestiges of colony-sanctioned racial separation between blacks and whites appears:

Hugh Davis to be soundly whipped, before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians by defiling his body in lying with a negro, which fault he is to acknowledge next Sabbath day.⁴

According to the wording of this announcement, Davis, whom we can assume to be white, was punished not for having sexual relations with a woman, but for having sexual relations with a *black* woman.

However, the sexual separation of the races, and the colonists' growing belief in blacks' inferiority was only the beginning. By 1639, the Virginia colonial administration added a provision that "All persons except negroes to be provided with arms and ammunition or be fined at pleasure of the Governor and Council."⁵ That whites would be punished if they did *not* own firearms and that blacks would presumably be fined or punished if they *did* illustrates the power and importance weapons wielded in colonial Virginia, and more importantly, expresses the marginalization of blacks. Even more

² "The Angola to Virginia Connection: 1619-1999," pamphlet, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia. See also, John Thornton, "The African Experience of the '20 and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619," *The William and Mary Quarterly* LV, no. 3 (July, 1998): 421-434.

³ Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14.

⁴ William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia*, 13 vols. (Richmond: J. G. Cochran, 1819-1823), 1: 146.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:226.

specifically, before the American Revolution, free blacks were not allowed to bear or bring arms to colonial militia musters, as mandated by law:

all...free mulattoes, negroes, and Indians as are or shall be inlisted, as foresaid, shall appear without arms, and may be employed as drummers, trumpeters, or pioneers, or in such other servile labor as they shall be directed to perform.⁶

Thus, from the beginning of Virginia's history, the colonial administrators prescribed menial roles for people of color in the militia, and apparently afraid of an insurrection by these disfranchised groups, denied them the protection of firearms. Even pre-Revolutionary South Carolina, where a slave majority existed, allowed slaves to be armed during an emergency. However, in Virginia, the ban on slave enlistment in the militia continued, and in 1723, 1738, and 1756 free blacks were again barred from bearing arms, even in the case of invasion.⁷

Twenty years after the law excluding blacks from gun ownership was passed, they were recorded in the books as "slaves," indicating that by 1660 blacks were no longer treated as indentured servants with specified terms of service, but were increasingly being permanently enslaved.⁸ Thus, notions of racial difference, exclusion based on race, and the codification of the nascent institution of slavery all conspired to create a tense situation for Virginia blacks, both slave and free, by the time of the American Revolution. Despite their enslavement, Africans and African Americans almost always harbored the desire to be free. But since the successful flight of slaves ended their bondage and created the possibility for future aggressiveness, colonial assemblies developed elaborate punishments, including branding, maiming, and outright killing of

⁶ Ibid., 7:95.

⁷ This information was gleaned from the calendar of documents in Morris J MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, 13 vols. to date (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1977), vol. 1, *A Time of Slavery*, 3, 8, 31, 33, 40.

⁸ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 7:540.

runaways.⁹ Thus, when the Revolutionary War broke out, Africans and African Americans, particularly those with skills such as boat or ship pilots, saw serving in the war on either side as an opportunity to considerably improve their mostly miserable lots.

From the beginning of hostilities, blacks were present, starting with the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. Crispus Attucks's involvement in this event has been so frequently described and at such length that a detailed account here is unnecessary.¹⁰ In addition, much hyperbole has surrounded Attucks's activities both before and during the Boston Massacre. However, it is significant that we know that Attucks was a runaway slave and seaman. Although Attucks probably used his seafaring skills to escape slavery, he still rallied with the Americans against the British and their occupation of Boston, possibly because his status as a mariner put him on a more equal footing with the white colonists. The Boston Massacre did not technically start the war but some historians consider this event the first conflict of the American Revolution.¹¹ Thus, history has generally granted Attucks the distinction of being the first man to die in the American Revolution.

Although a black man was at the forefront in the Boston Massacre and blacks were present at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, fought valiantly at the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, and served with Connecticut units during the Boston campaign, Adjutant General Horatio Gates was soon given orders to issue a statement that directed all colonial officers to refuse to enlist vagrants, vagabonds, and blacks. Gates's orders came from General George Washington, a Virginia slaveholder, and reflected southern

⁹ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 15.

¹⁰ See for example, Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), pp. 4-7. See also Greene, *Black Defenders of America*, pp. 3-5, and Otto Lindermeier, *Black and Brave: The Black Soldier in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. 11-14.

whites' fears of providing slaves and free blacks with arms that could be turned against their masters and oppressors. Moreover, the fragile relationships between the thirteen disunited colonies was such that the northern colonies, where slavery was not deeply entrenched, were forced to comply with the exclusion of blacks because they were reluctant to offend southern slaveholding interests whose support was needed to wage the war. There was also premature colonial optimism that the war could be won without employing black manpower. The effectiveness of black fighting men is suggested by the resolution to dismiss blacks from the Continental Army that was defeated by Congress on 26 September 1775.¹² While the blacks currently in the army were allowed to remain, no new slave or free black recruitment was allowed at this time. Consequently, black fighting men, all in the North, were dealt a severe blow since Gates's directive "served notice that the battle being fought to win independence from England was to have few, if any, far-reaching consequences for the slave population of the colonies."¹³

The vacillating policies concerning blacks serving in the Revolution changed once again on November 7, 1775 when Virginia's last royal governor, John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore, proclaimed that "all indented servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels), that are able and willing to bear Arms" would be freed after service with the British.¹⁴ Dunmore had threatened to implement this plan as early as April 1775, slightly before gunfire was exchanged at Lexington and Concord. In May, Dunmore spoke more explicitly of his intention to "proclaim...all the Negroes free, who

¹¹ Lindermeier, *Black and Brave*, p. 12.

¹² "Note of Debate of the Continental Congress," September 26, 1775, in MacGregor and Nalty eds., *Blacks in the US Armed Forces*, 62.

¹³ Quoted in Lindermeier, *Black and Brave*, p. 17; David O. White, *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783* (Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, 1973), 17.

¹⁴ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 63.

should join him.”¹⁵ Until he finally played this race card in November, Dunmore dangled the prospect of using the Virginians’ slaves against them over their heads. Shortly after discovering that the rebels were no longer accepting black enlistees and following a few skirmishes with minutemen, the deposed Dunmore declared martial law in Virginia from aboard the *William*, which he confiscated from local merchants and armed for war, and issued his infamous proclamation.¹⁶ From this precarious position, Dunmore and His Majesty’s Navy sailed the coastline, encouraging slaves to join British ships. However, the blacks needed no such encouragement, and soon Dunmore “had more than 300 persons enrolled in his ‘Ethiopian Regiment,’ with the words ‘Liberty to Slaves’ emblazoned across their uniforms.” Events continued to conspire in Dunmore’s favor for awhile, with “blacks making desperate efforts to elude their owners and come under the protective wing of the Royal Navy.”¹⁷ In all, several hundred blacks eventually joined his standard and were placed under the command of William Byrd III’s son, Thomas, a British army officer, including some free blacks, who later claimed compensation for land confiscated under antiloyalist laws.¹⁸

Dunmore’s plot, which made possible most slaves’ dreams of freedom by allowing them to run away and join the royal cause, was not a humanitarian act but a strategic one. In actuality Dunmore owned a lion’s share of human chattel and carefully limited his proclamation to slaves of his opponents and then only to able-bodied males.¹⁹ Southern

¹⁵ Peter H. Wood, *Strange New Land: African Americans 1617-1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 116. Although this book is geared toward young adults and is not footnoted, its author is one of the foremost historians of African Americans in the colonial period and therefore a trustworthy source of black participation in Dunmore’s Virginia campaign.

¹⁶ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 55,63.

¹⁷ Wood, *Strange New Land*, 116-117.

¹⁸ John E. Selby, *Dunmore* (Williamsburg, VA: Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, 1977), 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

planter-lawmakers saw his declaration as anathema. The Continental Congress thought Dunmore's activities in Virginia were "tearing up the foundation of civil authority and government" in Virginia, and the Virginia Committee of Safety president Edmund Pendleton noted soon after Dunmore's proclamation that "Letters mention that slaves flock to [Dunmore] in abundance, but I hope it is magnified."²⁰ Pendleton's statement of the present reality of affairs illustrates the psychological need of Virginia's executive body to impugn the possibility of total slave defection to Dunmore. This wishful thinking was further expressed in a letter Pendleton penned to Thomas Jefferson: "[Dunmore's] slave scheme is...at an end, since it is now Public that he has sent off a sloop load [of slaves] to the West Indies, which has made others use every endeavor to escape from him, and will stop his further increase of that Crew."²¹ By mid-December, it was clear to Pendleton and the Committee of Safety that the number of slaves flocking to British lines was not exaggerated. Virtually every slaveowning family lost bondspople. Consequently, on December 14, 1775 the Virginia Committee of Safety issued the following declaration:

Whereas lord Dunmore, by his proclamation, dated on board the ship William, off Norfolk, the 7th day of November 1775, hath offered freedom to such able-bodied slaves as are willing to join him, and take up arms, against the good people of the colony, giving thereby encouragement to a general insurrection, which may induce a necessity of inflicting the severest punishments upon those unhappy people, already deluded by his base and insidious arts, and whereas, by an act of the General Assembly now in force in this colony, it is enacted, that all negro or other slaves, conspiring to rebel or make insurrection, shall suffer death, and be excluded all benefit of clergy: We think it proper to declare that all slaves who have been, or shall be seduced, by his lordship's proclamation, or other arts, to desert their masters' service, and take arms against the inhabitants of this colony shall be liable to such punishment as shall hereafter be directed by the General convention...²²

This declaration illustrates the ill effect Dunmore's proclamation had on Virginia's

²⁰ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 63; To R. H. Lee, November 27, 1775, David J. Mays, ed., *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, 2 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1967), 1: 133.

²¹ To Thomas Jefferson, November 16, 1775, in Mays, ed., *Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, 1: 131.

²² "A Declaration By the Representatives of the People of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, assembled in General Convention," December 14, 1775, in Mays, ed., *Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, 1:138.

planter-lawmakers and was probably responsible for George Washington's subsequent policy reversal the following year that permitted militias to again accept new free black recruits. In fact, in late December 1775, Washington expressed his concern over the success of Dunmore's proclamation. He wrote fearfully that if "that man is not crushed by spring, he will become the most formidable enemy America has; his strength will increase as a snow ball by rolling; and faster, if some expedient cannot be hit upon to convince the slaves and servants the impotency of his designs."²³

Washington did not officially approve slave enlistment, but an imminent manpower shortage forced colonial authorities to offer land bounties to slaveholders for any slaves they would supply for military duty. In addition, many slaveholders themselves who were drafted sent their slaves in their place.²⁴ Moreover, slaves and free blacks were probably allowed to fight for the cause of American independence to keep them from joining the British. Modifying the traditional opposition to slaves participating in warfare made Americans appear more egalitarian without making any specific promises. In the midst of this barrage of controversy, slaves and free blacks in Tidewater Virginia awaited their opportunity to use their skills as pilots and seamen in order to attain their freedom, some land, and coveted citizenship.

Most of these men had been bred for a life at sea.

²³Quoted in Wood, *Strange New Land*, 118.

²⁴Lindermeyer, *Black and Brave*, 18.

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE VIRGINIA STATE NAVY, 1775-
1783

Many African Americans' seafaring talents were showcased in the Virginia State Navy, which was established in late 1775 as Virginia's leaders early saw the need to protect the Tidewater region from the British threat. Thus, the construction of two row galleys, initially propelled by oars, commenced for harbor defense. Throughout the course of the war additional galleys, fitted with masts and sails, were crafted. Other sailing vessels such as sloops, brigs, brigantines, cutters, and flat boats were also acquired or built by the state. During its brief period of existence, from 1775 to 1787, the Virginia Navy consisted of seventy-seven commissioned vessels and at least one hundred privateers. Although "the state navy's war record was not as eventful as that of the embryonic United States Navy," many of her vessels saw military action, even if it was only in the capacity of mundane patrol duty at the mouths of Virginia's plethora of rivers and waterways.²⁵ Since the naval vessels of Virginia primarily operated in bay and river waters, they were mostly small craft that had "often been constructed by Negroes and piloted by them" even before the Revolution. In fact, many blacks who grew up in the counties lying on the bay or its tributaries had become skillful in the navigation of these waters.²⁶

A few African Americans from the Tidewater area who served in the Virginia State Navy were skilled slave pilots. "Many slaves in Virginia were already experienced

²⁵ E. M. Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution, 1774-1787* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1978), 149.

boatmen and pilots long before the war with Great Britain had begun. A number of them were used to fill out the crews of Virginia naval vessels and in one case to command a vessel.”²⁷ One such slave named Cuffee was among this group of talented pilots. As is the case with many slave participants in the Revolution, the records do not leave much information about Cuffee except that he was owned by Mary C. and William Graves. William Graves, a Norfolk resident and lieutenant in the State Navy, most likely taught Cuffee how to navigate boats, perhaps ferries, in Norfolk’s bustling harbor. Cuffee was a pilot on the *Row Galley*, which was commanded by Captain James Barron, and was killed in the line of duty in 1781. Even less is known about another slave pilot named Minny. Probably lost forever are the name of Minny’s master and his county of residence.²⁸ However, we do know that Minny “volunteered as a pilot in the spring of 1776 when an enemy supply ship ravaged the Rappahannock.” Minny did not survive the ensuing engagement but was commended for his bravery. For Minny’s laudable service, as well as the loss of his labor, Minny’s master was awarded \$100 by the state legislature.²⁹

A little more is known about self-styled “Captain” Mark Starlins. Starlins was a native African from an unknown county, presumably in the Tidewater region. He was trained as a pilot from his youth and showed particular bravery on the *Patriot* when he led the crew in an attack on a British sloop in the James River. In the midst of this fight Starlins thought he had captured the British vessel, but it was his schooner that was

²⁶ Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 87.

²⁷ Thad Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965), 120.

²⁸ Robert A. Stewart, *History of Virginia’s Navy of the Revolution* (Richmond: Mitchel & Hutchkiss, 1933), 176; Luther P. Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors in the Revolutionary War* (Norfolk: Guide Quality Press, 1944), 33-34.

²⁹ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 88.

captured because of the sudden appearance of fifty British sailors.³⁰ Before this unfortunate incident, Starlins “showed initiative and unusual bravery in one or more skirmishes with British ships in the James River and in Hampton Roads.”³¹ He was also said to have engaged in daring night raids on British vessels in Hampton Roads during the spring and summer of 1781 when a large fleet of British ships outfitted for war assembled in the Roads with the intention of protecting and transporting General Cornwallis’s army from Portsmouth to Yorktown. After the war Starlins was reclaimed by his master and died shortly thereafter, still in slavery.³² All the Virginia naval officers held Starlins in high esteem, especially Commodore James Barron who said this of the “noble African”:

He lived and died soon after the peace, and just before a law was passed that gave freedom to all those devoted men of colour who had so zealously volunteered their services in the patriotic cause. It is, however, an agreeable part of my duty, as the historian of this little affair, to assure my readers, that the captain never felt any degree of restraint that could serve to remind him that he was not absolutely a free man; for his master was as proud of his character and deeds, as he himself was of the estimation in which he knew that he was held by all worthy citizens, and more particularly, by all the navy officers of the State.³³

Although Barron’s comments concerning the degree of freedom Starlins felt are intrinsically biased considering white racial attitudes of the eighteenth century, there may be a kernel of truth in his opinion that Starlins did not feel a great deal of restraint and possibly thought of himself as a free man due to the relative freedom that piloting ships allowed him. Barron also described Starlins as “a devoted patriot.”³⁴

Probably due to his longer lifespan, even more is known about Starlins’s shipmate and fellow black patriot pilot, Caesar Tarrant. Born in Hampton, Caesar was trained by his

³⁰ James Barron, “The Schooner *Patriot*,” *The Virginia Historical Register, and Literary Advertiser*, Vol. I, No. 3 (July 1848), 129-130.

³¹ Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 43.

³² Lerone Bennett, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 6th ed. (Chicago: Penguin, 1987), 68.

³³ Barron, “The *Patriot*,” 131.

master Carter Tarrant as a ship's pilot, a trade many slaveowners taught their slaves in the Tidewater. Finding his services in demand at the beginning of the Revolution, Tarrant entered the State Navy and served on the schooner *Patriot* under Commodore Taylor. Like Starlins, Tarrant engaged on daring raids of British vessels in Hampton Roads as well as south off the Virginia Capes. He was at the wheel when his ship engaged and captured the British brig *Fanny* south of the Cape of Virginia; a strategic victory for the Americans since the brig was loaded with stores and supplies for British forces in Boston.³⁵

Besides pilots, other slave seamen and sailors served in the Virginia Navy as well. Numerous blacks with different skills and capacities performed a wide range of functions in the Virginia Navy, such as dock laborers, stevedores, seamen, ordinary seamen, able seamen, and sailors.³⁶ Virginia seamen were in great demand because Virginia floated the largest of the state navies.³⁷ A constant shortage of men forced naval officers to enlist slaves as well as free blacks. In addition, to prevent the enlistment of runaways, the Virginia legislature passed the following statute in May 1777:

whereas several negro slaves have deserted from their masters; and under the pretense of being free men have enlisted as soldiers: For prevention whereof, *Be it enacted*, that it shall not be lawful for any recruiting officer within this commonwealth to enlist any negro or mulatto into the service of his or either of the United States, until such negro or mulatto shall produce a certificate from some justice of the peace for the county wherein he resides that he is a free man.³⁸

As a result, there were rarely more than five to six slaves on any Virginia Navy ship at any one time, with most of the state's seventy vessels averaging two black sailors apiece. In total, at least 140 black men served in the Virginia Navy.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., 129.

³⁵ Eugene Winslow, *Afro-Americans '76: Black Americans in the Founding of Our Nation* (Chicago: Afro-Am Publishing, 1975), 47; Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 20-23.

³⁶ Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 88-89.

³⁷ Charles O. Paullin, *The Navy of the American Revolution* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), 144.

³⁸ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 9: 280.

For the most part, slaves in the Virginia Navy such as Cuffy (to be distinguished from Cuffee) had to be enlisted by their masters. Cuffy was the slave of Elenor Boury and was engaged in service on the *Norfolk Revenge* under Captain Calvert, starting in September 1777. Cuffy was a slave in Norfolk and listed as “an able seaman.” Like Cuffee, he probably learned his trade by working on ships in Norfolk Harbor. Lewis Hinton, born August 20, 1760, enlisted on the *Dragon* for three years as a replacement for his owner Thomas Hinton, who retired from the service due to failing health. Pluto, the slave of Robert Brough of Norfolk, participated in many battles and in 1796 petitioned the General Assembly for his freedom and won his liberation. However, as of 1835, Pluto had not received his entitled land bounty. Nor had probable slaves Peter and Will, both listed as able seamen or Abram, Daniel, and Tom, all ordinary seamen.⁴⁰

These men listed in the records by first name only and indicated as being “negroe,” most likely were slaves and may not have been released from bondage after the war. This would explain why five people listed without a surname all appear on the list produced in Richmond of “non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Virginia state line, and seamen and mariners of the state navy, whose names are on the army register, and who have not received bounty land for Revolutionary Services.”⁴¹ It is probable that these men served as substitutes for whites, and by an act of the Virginia State Legislature begun on October 20, 1783, *all* slaves who served in the American forces as substitutes

³⁹ Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 89.

⁴⁰ Stewart, *Virginia's Navy of the Revolution*, 140-170; Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 29-46; Gaius Marcus Brumbaugh, *Revolutionary War Records: Virginia Army and Navy Forces with Bounty Land Warrants for Virginia Military District of Ohio, and Virginia Military Scrip; from Federal and State Archives*, Vol. I, Virginia (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), 197, 214-215, 217-218.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

were to be emancipated.⁴² While it is possible that these men were indeed freed, it is likely that their luck (or rights) did not extend far enough for them to receive the bounty land promised revolutionary war veterans.

Davis or David Baker was a slave who entered the Virginia Navy as a substitute for his master Lawrence Baker of the Isle of Wight. Baker did what the General Assembly feared most: he purported to be a free man. However, reclaimed by his master after the war, Baker also petitioned the legislature for his freedom. Other known slaves in the Virginia Navy were William Bousch (or Bush), Jack Knight, Jack, Bachus, and Boston.⁴³ Bousch and Knight are special cases because both men were allowed by the state legislature to remain in service aboard the *Cormorant* after Congress permitted Virginia to keep two of its naval vessels in 1783. At this time as well as during the war, Bousch and Knight were owned by the state, but after the war most of the other “public Negroes” were sold or resold to private owners. That the state retained the two sailors in service attests to their probable skills as mariners. When the Virginia Navy disbanded in 1789, Bousch and Knight were finally freed by the state legislature.⁴⁴

Due to restrictions on slave enrollees, many more free blacks served in the State Navy, probably in an effort to show their worth as Virginians and to gain fuller citizenship and land. One such hopeful was Joseph Ranger, born in Elizabeth City County. Possibly moving around in search of opportunities, he entered the service from Northumberland County in 1776. Enlisted at the rank of “private,” Ranger gave the most years of service to the Virginia Navy than any other black seaman during the period—he also served on

⁴²“An Act directing the emancipation of certain slaves who have served as soldiers in this State, and for the emancipation of slave Aberdeen,” in MacGregor and Nalty eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces*, 118-119.

⁴³ Stewart, *Virginia's Navy of the Revolution*, 140-170.

the most ships, including the *Hero*, *Dragon*, *Jefferson*, and *Patriot*. First, he served the *Hero* about three months, and was afterwards transferred to the *Dragon*, where he saw action for a period of four years. After this vessel was converted to a fire ship, Ranger was transferred to the *Jefferson* for a year, where he saw intense naval combat until it was blown from under him by the British on the James River. The last ship he served on during the war was the *Patriot*, on which he performed duty for about six months until a British ship captured the crew shortly before Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in 1781. Thus, Ranger served aboard the *Patriot* with slave pilots Mark Starlins and Caesar Tarrant for a time. He continued to serve on the *Liberty* and *Patriot* six years after the war and only retired from the State Navy when Virginia disposed of its last ship in 1787.⁴⁵ Ranger's participation on the *Patriot* afforded him the opportunity to make two shillings a day; he was probably paid a comparable sum on the other ships on which he served. Ranger's probable goal of attaining land through participation in the war was also realized. Shortly before the conflict was officially resolved in September 1783, he received a land grant of 100 acres from the Commonwealth of Virginia in the military district of Ohio. In addition, although late in life, when he was seventy-three, Ranger finally received a pension from the United States government, amounting to \$96 annually. In order to receive his pension, Ranger had to make a sworn statement before the Elizabeth City County Court in Hampton on October 25, 1832 where he told his story

⁴⁴ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 89-90.

⁴⁵ Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 13-14; Winslow, *Afro-Americans '76*, 48.

of service on four vessels and the captains, lieutenants, pilots, and boatswains on each vessel in order to prove the legitimacy of his claim.⁴⁶

Free black families also served in the Revolution, most likely in a concerted effort to gain access to land that could be assembled into one large estate. There were several free black revolutionary sailor families, including the Nickens, Sorrels, Weavers, Woods, Stephens, and Haws. The Nickens had the most participants in a single family in the Virginia State Navy, their seamen numbering eight: Amos, James, Edward, Hezekiah, John, Nathaniel, Richard, and William. In 1777, while serving on the *Gloucester*, Edward, James, and Hezekiah benefited from being in the service by each receiving two pairs of trousers, two jackets, two shirts, one pair of drawers, two pairs of stockings, one pair of shoes, one hat, and a blanket. While serving on the *Tempest*, Nathaniel, Richard, and Hezekiah were each given a sixty-day supply of rum. Thus, free blacks could count on ample supplies and amenities. A few years after the war, Richard, Edward, Hezekiah and Nathaniel Nickens received one hundred acres each. James, originally a sailor, switched to militia service and subsequently received 200 acres.⁴⁷ Essentially, the Nickens's combined service, which later transferred into shared landholdings, may have satisfied their thirst for land.

For the most part, the Nickens sailors received their land grants several years apart. Edward received his land immediately after the war in 1783 as did Richard, while Nathaniel was given his land three years later. But Hezekiah was not granted his plot until 1835, when he was long in the grave. The land was warranted to "James Nickens

⁴⁶Lloyd DeWitt Bockstruck, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants Awarded by State Governments* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1996), 436. Ranger received his land grant on 4 June 1783. Brumbaugh, *Revolutionary War Records*, 8, 369; Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 13-14.

⁴⁷ Bockstruck, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants*, 393.

and others.” Whether “James Nickens and others” refers to Hezekiah’s heirs or to his brothers remains unclear. Difficulty in proving eligibility may account for the differences in timeframe of land dispersal. The lands deeded to the Nickens family were all located in the military district of Ohio. Interestingly, Nathaniel’s land was held in trust by a William Reynolds, apparently an attorney-at-law, as he is listed as the assignee for several other veterans.⁴⁸

For all the blacks’ hard work, most white officers and colonial officials rewarded black seamen with praise. For instance, eyewitness Dr. David Brown, who was probably the *Patriot’s* resident doctor, lauded Caesar Tarrant for bravery. In order for Tarrant to receive his land bounty, Brown later testified that “During the action between Commodore Taylor (of the *Patriot*) and a British privateer at the South of the Capes of Virginia he steered the *Patriot* during the whole action and behaved gallantly.”⁴⁹ Thomas Pierce and Thomas Smith of the Isle of Wight advised Edmund Pendleton on December 12, 1775 to drag his heels on discharging “a Negro fello named Caesar,” who, being a slave, the Virginia authorities sought to exclude from service particularly at this early stage in the conflict. However, Pierce and Smith insisted that Caesar was “a very good Scoundrel” and “a fello’ they can’t do well without being an Excellent pilot.”⁵⁰ Thus, the accolades given to Caesar Tarrant allowed him to remain in service at the beginning of the war when slave participation was questionable, and because he was able to remain in service, he was able to gain his freedom and receive land after the hostilities ceased.

Edward Nickens, Lewis Hinton, and James Causey were also described with favorable comments. In the listing of bounty land warrants, Edward Nickens stands out by being

⁴⁸ Brumbaugh, *Revolutionary War Records*, 360-61, 371.

⁴⁹ Stewart, *Virginia’s Navy of the Revolution*, 256.

recorded as an “able seamen” as opposed to the common generic descriptor of simply “seaman.”⁵¹ Testimony recorded in the eligibility hearing for a United States pension that was being granted to revolutionary war veterans years after the war reported that Hinton, a former slave, was “an orderly colored man and respectable.”⁵² For this service, Hinton was granted one hundred acres in March 1835.⁵³ James Causey was discharged from service on the *Dragon* “having well and truly served three years...the term of enlistment.”⁵⁴ For his achievement, Causey was swiftly allotted one hundred acres in September 1783 as the ink was drying on the finally ratified peace treaty between the new United States and Great Britain.⁵⁵

Although most remarks about black seamen showered these sailors with praise, underneath it all the shadow of racism still lurked. This was just a sign of the times. The racist and sexist spirit of the age is probably best exemplified by a derogatory statement recorded in Virginia planter-politician Landon Carter’s diary in 1777: “A negroe and a passionate woman are equal as to truth or falsehood: for neither thinks of what they say.”⁵⁶ This comment expressed the widespread notion among white men, particularly the elite, that blacks were childlike, overly emotional subhumans. The assessments of blacks in this light was clearly expressed in an account Commodore James Barron related after the war concerning Mark Starlins:

Capt. Starlins, (for so our African called himself) allowed his patriotism to get the better of his judgment, and

⁵⁰ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 29.

⁵¹ Brumbaugh, *Revolutionary War Records*, 217.

⁵² Stewart, *Virginia’s Navy of the Revolution*, 202.

⁵³ Bockstruck, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants*, 249.

⁵⁴ “Land Bounty Warrants,” James Causey, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

⁵⁵ Bockstruck, *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants*, 94; John Selby, *The Road to Yorktown* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), 198.

⁵⁶ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 367.

gave free utterance to the most extravagant expressions of joy—at the same time hopping about with uplifted and clapping hands, --in the hope, which indeed we indulged, that we should soon see both vessels changing their course, and going up the river, instead of down to the Roads.

When the British ships did not retreat and instead “up jumped fifty Marines with their officers,” Barron described Starlins’s disappointment at the *Patriot’s* capture and defeat in vivid detail:

Poor Captain Starlins was stuck dumb and motionless, and the questions which my brother and I put to him as to the first movements of the vessels after they came in collision with each other, were only answered by heavy groans, and a rapid motion along the edge of the bank downwards, as if he was determined to keep pace with the departing favorite, or at least to see the last of her, under the control of her new masters. My brother had more command over his feelings. He was indeed exceedingly grieved, but although young, being only fifteen years of age, he was already remarkable for that dignity of character which afterwards became so conspicuous in him, and restrained himself; while I gave way, like the poor captain, whose downward course, however, I now endeavored to arrest, by laying hold of his clothes, and exclaiming, “Why, uncle Mark, where are you going? That is not the way home.” This I said with sobs and cries too loud not to be heard by him, and coming to himself, as it were, out of a deep revery, which had hitherto absorbed all his faculties, he burst out into a strain of incoherent exclamation, and floods of tears, which so far relieved him that he could now attend to our situation and giving a last look to the now lessening object of our sorrow, we all turned our melancholy steps towards our temporary home.⁵⁷

Barron’s account paints Starlins as a pathetic wretch with no control over his emotions while Barron’s brother, a mere boy, displayed “dignity of character...and restrained himself.” According to Barron, Starlins, a grown man, did not exhibit self-control, which is a childlike trait. Although he acknowledged his own distress, Barron downplayed the intensity of his emotions by only mentioning them briefly and magnified Starlins’s response to the point of theatrics. Thus Barron’s version of the events surrounding the capture of the *Patriot* and Starlins’s reaction to the incident signified the paternalistic nature of white male-dominated society in eighteenth-century Virginia.

Although blacks behaved gallantly for the most part, albeit in a few cases viscerally, some, like many white seamen, “jumped ship.” One deserter named Francis Arbado, a West Indian from the French Sugar Islands described as “a black Frenchman,” abandoned

⁵⁷ Barron, “The *Patriot*,” 128.

ship from the *Manley Galley* along with two anonymous slaves belonging to a Mr. Peters.⁵⁸ Two mulattos, Abel Spiggs and Thomas Wood, deserted the *Dragon* along with ten white seamen. Captain James Markham offered “60 dollars for each person that will secure them in any jail, or deliver them on board of any vessel belonging to the navy in this state, and all reasonable expenses allowed.”⁵⁹ Since there are no written accounts from the black seamen as to why they deserted, it is impossible to know their reasons for doing so. Perhaps the three black men who deserted the *Manley Galley* together received ill treatment at the hands of their white officers and crewmembers. On the other hand, the two mulattos who deserted from the *Dragon* appear to have been part of an organized plot in which they worked in collusion with white crewmembers to collectively abandon ship. These two conjectures as to why the black deserters listed in the *Virginia Gazette* abandoned ship, if they are correct, suggest the likelihood that the racial climate and cooperation among the races had a different dynamic on each vessel.

For their service to the cause of American liberty, black seamen were often liberally rewarded-- since some slaves even won their freedom. Caesar Tarrant is the apotheosis of a black seaman who benefited from the rewards he received for his service in Virginia’s navy. Tarrant had remained in the navy for over four years until the British captured the *Patriot* on the eve of the Battle of Yorktown. A few years after the war, on November 14, 1789, the Virginia legislature passed this resolution for his emancipation:

Whereas it is represented to this Assembly, that Mary Tarrant of the county of Elizabeth City, hath her life in a negro named Caesar, who entered very early into the service of his country, and continued to pilot the armed vessels of this state during the late war; in consideration of which meritorious services it is judged expedient to purchase the freedom of the said Caesar; *Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly*, that the executive shall appoint a proper person to contract with the said Mary Tarrant for the purchase of the said Caesar, and if they should agree, the person so appointed by the executive shall deliver to the said Mary Tarrant a certificate expressing such purchase and sum, and upon producing such certificate to the

⁵⁸ *The Virginia Gazette*, May 16, 1777.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1779.

auditor of accounts, he shall issue a warrant for the same to the treasurer, to be paid out of the lighthouse fund. *And be it further enacted*, that from and after the execution of a certificate aforesaid, the said Caesar shall be manumitted and set free to all intents and purposes.⁶⁰

Thus, the Commonwealth of Virginia purchased Caesar's freedom from his master for services performed during the revolutionary war.

After his liberation, Tarrant probably earned his living as a skilled artisan, was a respected man of his community, and bought two or more pieces of property in Hampton. In his will, Tarrant left his wife houses and a lot, household furniture, and all money due him from debtors. In what would be a complex arrangement between his two daughters, one a slave, the other free, Tarrant provided that after the death of his wife the property should be sold to Nancy, his free daughter, who should use half the proceeds to buy her sister Liddy's freedom and keep the other half for her herself. If Liddy's freedom could not be bought with half the proceeds from Caesar's real estate, his daughter Nancy and her heirs were to keep the unsold property. If Nancy died and had no heirs to inherit the property, the land was to be sold with proceeds going once again to the attainment of Liddy's freedom. If there was a balance left over from this transaction, then it was to be split equally between Liddy and Caesar's son Sampson.⁶¹ This complicated arrangement indicates the level of sophistication achieved by a former slave whose participation in the Virginia State Navy provided him with his own freedom as well as his family members', and later, property that he was able to will to his progeny.

It seems strange that Tarrant did not seem to actively seek Liddy's freedom while he was still alive, considering his apparent success. Stranger still is the fact that one of Tarrant's daughters and not his son was to inherit the bulk of the estate. In fact, it appears that Sampson would not get anything at all unless Nancy died without any heirs.

⁶⁰ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 13: 102.

Like her father, Nancy, apparently his favorite or perhaps oldest child, was shrewd and sagacious. She took advantage of Virginia's and the United States' offer of land provisions for veterans of the Revolution and their heirs. On March 4, 1833, Nancy received a warrant for a tract of land in Ohio, where the Virginia legislature was then setting aside territory and was granting heirs of revolutionary war veterans property comprised between 100 and 2666 2/3 acres. The reward Nancy claimed for her father's service was the highest, the grant of a subaltern, or a commissioned officer below the rank of captain. This was the maximum amount of land granted to black Virginia veterans. Although it was a considerable amount of land, Nancy probably never relocated to Ohio in order to stake her claim because she bought land in Hampton only four years later. More than likely, she exchanged her land in Ohio for cash and used part of the proceeds to purchase more land in Hampton to increase the landholdings of her family in an effort to continue the tradition of acquiring properties established by her father, who bears the distinction of being the first property-owning black citizen in Hampton.⁶²

Although manumission and land bounties were the most significant rewards blacks received for service in the Virginia Navy, monetary payments were also an important opportunity for black seamen. As an inducement to enlist, and later as a reward for service, black seamen received money and pensions granted first by the state of Virginia and later by Congress. Money was important because it could be used to purchase land, the ultimate symbol of wealth and freedom in the eighteenth century. For instance, in 1785 and 1786, black seamen Peter, Will, Abram, Daniel, and Tom were paid sums

⁶¹ Hampton Clerk's Office, Elizabeth City County, *Deed Book* (MS), Vol. 34, p. 387.

ranging from \$138 and \$690. In 1786 Joseph Ranger received one payment of \$92 for one month's service; in 1787 his salary consisted of one payment worth \$230 for two months and seven days' service. James Sorrel, the gunner's mate, served for five years on two or more vessels and on one occasion was given \$4186, or his full pay in one lump sum.⁶³

Pensions were also an important monetary reward for blacks serving in the Virginia Navy. However, securing them appeared to be difficult for a few black sailors. Both Richard Nickens and Joseph Ranger were told in response to their pension petitions that "objections exist, which must be removed, before a pension can be allowed."⁶⁴ No such message appears in Lewis Hinton's pension file. However, like Nickens and Ranger, he had to recount his experiences in the Virginia Navy, including his entrance in the service from his home in Lancaster County in 1778, and his duties aboard the *Dragon* on the Mattaponi and James Rivers, as well as the officers under whom he served. These men finally received pensions late in life, Nickens was eighty-two, Ranger seventy-three, and Hinton seventy-six. Without utilizing too much specious logic, it is difficult to definitively assess why the trio waited until their later years to file pension petitions, but some tentative conclusions may be drawn. Nickens and Ranger appear to have been illiterate; both signed their pension petitions with an "x." Perhaps they were not aware that they were eligible for a veteran's pension until later in life. Or maybe they knew that

⁶² *Military Certificates* (MS), Vol. III, 169, Virginia State Library; Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors*, 22.

⁶³ *Revolutionary Soldiers* (MS), Vol. V, 31, 62, 157, 196, 215, Virginia State Library. The monetary calculations are based on their modern-day equivalency according to the formula provided in John J. McCusker, "How Much is That in Real Money?: A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* Vol. 101, part 2 (1992): 314-315.

they could apply, but being illiterate, did not know how to write a pension application and did not know or could not afford someone to act as their agent in this matter until much later. Long past their prime years of earning potential, the three erstwhile sailors probably felt the financial squeeze of old age, prompting them finally to find the means to file pension petitions. But most important, the United States government did not guarantee Revolutionary War veterans or their widows pensions until June 1832, before this date pension appeals had to have been made to the state of Virginia. Thus, the three black veterans may have felt more confident asking the US government for a pension guaranteed by Congress than taking their chances with the planter-lawmakers of Virginia.⁶⁵

Although individual black seamen benefited from serving in the State Navy, after the war black sailors were still discriminated against. Despite their valuable services, the Virginia legislature still wanted to limit the number of black seamen in an effort to furnish employment to white sailors. Thus the General Assembly passed the following post-war statute:

And whereas the navigating small country crafts by slaves, the property of the owners of such craft, tends to discourage free white seamen, and to encrease the number of such free white seamen would produce public good: *Be it therefore enacted*, That not more than one-third part of the persons employed in the navigation of any bay or river craft shall presume to put on board any such craft as navigators, more slaves than the proportion aforesaid, such owner shall forfeit and pay the sum of one hundred pounds for each offense, to be recovered by action of debt or information, in any court of record... To be enforced June 10, 1786.⁶⁶

It is interesting that this resolution closed by clarifying that this statute did not apply to frontier areas: “nothing contained in this act shall be construed as to extend to the

⁶⁴ War Department, Pension Office, letters to Richard Nickens and Joseph Ranger (undated), from J. L. Edwards, Commissioner of Pensions, open-file report (photocopies), National Archives Trust Fund, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁵ Department of the Interior, Bureau of Pensions, pension files for Lewis Hinton, Richard Nickens, and Joseph Ranger, open-file report (photocopies), National Archives Trust Fund, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 11: 103-404.

navigation of the rivers westward of the Allegheny [sic] mountains.⁶⁷ The implication of this codicil mirrors the model Peter Wood provides in his classic work *Black Majority*, which suggests that frontier societies in which slavery was introduced followed a cycle whereby the slaves in frontier areas start out with a broader set of freedoms than those in settled societies, but over time, as the frontier regions became more settled, planter-lawmakers attempted to curb the various freedoms and initiatives initially enjoyed by the slaves to prevent the bondsmen from becoming too “uppity” or unruly.⁶⁸ The fact that the Virginia legislators were not going to limit the number of slaves working on ships in the western frontier lands past the Allegheny Mountains clearly supports Wood’s contention.

The participation of blacks in the Virginia State Navy is especially significant due to the large number of slaves with previous employment as pilots and mariners that came from the Tidewater region as substitutes for whites, or in pursuit of freedom and property. Blacks not only played significant roles in the Virginia Navy but in other state navies such as those of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Georgia, as well as in the Continental Navy.⁶⁹ Black men who would become leaders of their communities such as James Forten and Caesar Tarrant were shaped by and benefited from their experiences in the newly established navies, which did not appear to initially carry the racist legacy that was already deeply entrenched in the more established militias where initially blacks could muster but not bear arms. This was probably because “from the earliest times Negroes had been signed aboard fishing fleets or employed on coastal vessels that ranged the bays

⁶⁷ Ibid., 404.

⁶⁸ Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonies South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974).

and rivers of the seaboard.”⁷⁰ Thus, blacks established a distinguished record of naval service in the revolutionary war, but the United States Navy, like many other racially institutionalized organizations, eventually stripped blacks of their initial rights—in this case, the ability to serve as regular sailors—only to be forced to restore those rights during the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s.

In essence, the blacks who fought for the Americans were not necessarily automatons who were merely following a chain of command that dictated that they serve the patriot cause. Blacks in Virginia, particularly skilled slave and free pilots, often made a conscious choice to serve the Americans, as they could easily have defected to the British after Dunmore’s call for black participation in the British war effort, and potentially benefited from the immediate freedom offered by the Redcoats. As we will see, freedom may have come sooner with the British, but it was provided with greater risk and peril to the lives of the slaves, who were considered runaways once they entered British service. To avoid runaway status, and the punishments that were sure to come if caught, slaves with skills dear to the Americans, such as pilots and seamen, may have felt that they had more options, causing them to stick around to see what benefits service with the Americans might bring.

⁶⁹ Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), 27-29.

⁷⁰ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 83.

CHAPTER 2

African American Participation in the British Navy in Virginia, 1775-1783

Before analyzing black participation in the British Navy during the revolutionary war, it is important to establish that before the Revolution, blacks had developed a well established tradition of serving in the Royal Navy. Many blacks took service on merchant ships or those of the Royal Navy.⁷¹ In addition, blacks in colonial America, as quasi-British subjects, were impressed into naval service for the crown. For example, the well-known abolitionist and recorder of the evils of slavery and especially of the maleficent middle passage, Olaudah Equiano, served several years in the British Navy. Equiano was renamed Gustavus Vasa by Michael Henry Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy then commanding a trading vessel, who purchased young Equiano from a Virginia plantation owner around the commencement of the Seven Years' War. As that conflict progressed, Pascal was promoted and put in charge of several ships, with Equiano serving on each of these vessels and seeing intense action against the French. At the close of the Seven Years' War in 1763, Pascal sold Equiano to traders bound for the West Indies, his services no longer needed.

Thus, prior to the American Revolution, some blacks served in the British Navy and fought for His Majesty in the Seven Years' War. When war between England and the colonies began, these black seamen, if kept in service by the British, would probably have continued to serve the crown as seamen against the Americans.⁷² In fact, "some of

⁷¹ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 83.

⁷² Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Publication of the Bedford Series in History and Culture, ed. Richard J. Allison (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995), 59-86.

the Negroes who wound up in the royal navy had originally been crew members of ships which British war vessels had seized while enforcing the Navigation Acts.”⁷³

Although there was more African American participation in the British navy than in the Virginia Navy, the details are more vague and a lot sketchier. African American participation in the Royal Navy is particularly significant because “generally the British preferred to restrict the use of armed blacks to actions at sea.”⁷⁴ Heavy black participation in the Royal Navy effectively began with Dunmore’s Proclamation. But some blacks were already absorbed in the British naval force by September 1775, two months before Dunmore’s plea to Virginia’s slaves. In fact, 1775 was the pivotal year for Afro-Virginian participation in the British Navy. In this year, British commander Thomas Gage wrote, “Things are coming to that crisis that we must avail of every resource, even to raise the Negroes, in our cause.”⁷⁵ Gage was only stopped from engaging in this consideration by heeding the advice of Lord William Campbell who advised him not to “fall prey to the Negroes.”⁷⁶ Peter Wood asserts that “this practical alliance [between blacks and the British] emerged most dramatically in Virginia.”⁷⁷ Sylvia Frey agrees with Wood’s assertion and describes how in July, two British men-of-war, the *Mercury* and the *Otter*, arrived in Norfolk from St. Augustine. Under the impression that the British did not hold attitudes inimical to their freedom as the Virginians were thought to, slaves defected to the British in droves. In order to arrest this process, a deputation from the beleaguered port city met with the captains of the two war vessels, John McCartney and Matthew Squire, who both reassured the council that slaves

⁷³ Quarles, *The Negro in the Revolution*, 83.

⁷⁴ Sylvia Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution,” *Journal of Southern History* XLIX, no. 3 (August, 1983): 388.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Wood, *Strange New Land*, 116.

would not be encouraged to join or assist the British Navy. However, the myriad slaves who reached the *Mercury* and particularly the *Otter*, which lay in the York River, were welcomed aboard.⁷⁸

According to Frey, it did not take long for residents in Norfolk and Elizabeth City County (then including Hampton) to conclude that “the British naval force had not only welcomed slaves who came to them, but in some instances had seized and carried away several free blacks.”⁷⁹ The appropriations of African Americans, both slave and free, only worsened as the conflict progressed. In the spring of 1779, the British took at least 500 blacks from Norfolk. Soon after this incident, General Edwards seized 518 Virginia blacks, 256 men, 135 women, and 127 children. Around this time, on June 30, Commander-in-chief Clinton issued the anti-climatic Philipsburg proclamation, which among other things, “promised every Negro who deserted from an enemy master full security to follow any occupation he wished while in the British lines.”⁸⁰ Consequently, some skilled Virginia slave pilots and seamen or perhaps those appropriated by the British, may have decided to serve in the Royal Navy. However, the seizure of free blacks illustrates how African Americans were sometimes forced into both the British Navy as well as the Virginia State Navy (as slave substitutes for whites).

One group of blacks that was discouraged from joining the British Navy were the slaves of American Loyalists to the British crown. Out of the approximately 800 slaves who joined Dunmore, only 100 of them had come with their loyalist owners.⁸¹ Since Dunmore’s “Ethiopian Regiment” was assembled to demoralize the spirited Americans

⁷⁶ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 111.

⁷⁷ Wood, *Strange New Land*, 116.

⁷⁸ Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom,” 377.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

by turning their slaves, members of their own families as famous Virginian statesman William Byrd II expressed it,⁸² against them, known slaves of loyal Americans were not welcomed aboard the *Dunmore*, *Otter*, or other British ships. In Virginia, there was little Loyalist opposition to the Revolution, except in a portion of the western frontier and in the Tidewater counties of Accomack, Northhampton, Norfolk Borough and the surrounding counties of Norfolk, Princess Anne, Isle of Wight, and Nansemond.⁸³

Despite widespread toryism in Tidewater counties, many slaves on Loyalist plantations had relatively easy access to Virginia's various waterways, making it easy for them to escape and mesh with other slaves from patriot plantations who were answering Dunmore's call to the British Navy. Although some of the British captains and other naval officers may have been familiar with some of the more expressive Tidewater Tories, it is not probable that they would know or recognize even the better known Loyalists' slaves. Thus several slaves of Loyalists probably escaped British naval detection, inadvertently hurting pro-British planters.

While the slaves of Loyalists were excluded from Dunmore's emancipation proclamation, they were still perceived to be potential threats as sailors by the Americans and were used by the rebels to facilitate their plans to evacuate Loyalists. Tories in Norfolk and Princess Anne counties were not only ordered to Virginia's interior regions (at least thirty miles away from Dunmore's fleet), but it was also mandated that

⁸⁰ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 113, 115.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸² Byrd referred to his slaves as "my people." See Marion Tingling and Louis B. Wright, eds., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1709-1712* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1941) and Tingling and Maude H. Woodfin, eds., *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1739-1741* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1942).

⁸³ Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore*, 2nd ed., Robert Berkhofer, ed., *Studies in American History and Culture*, No. 34 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982), 3.

the Male Slaves of such suspected persons, above the age of thirteen, and also the slaves of the persons within the Limits aforescribed, be immediately taken into the custody and safe keeping of some officer, at our posts in Norfolk and Princess Anne, to be conveyed to some place off Navigation, and to be returned to the owners after they have settled at some secure place, upon the further Order of this Committee.⁸⁴

Here again, in general, slaves were used as pawns to help advance the position of one side over the other. In the process, blacks were potentially prevented from joining the Royal Navy for their own personal gain or with their loyalist owners.

Dunmore's dramatic plot failed to reach its projected climax because his plan to house blacks and British in close quarters proved untenable. Shortages of life-sustaining necessities weakened and killed the overcrowded crew. By spring 1776, "an outbreak of smallpox in the crowded camps finally reduced the tide of hopeful refugees."⁸⁵ Disease rates were particularly high among black crewmembers. This condition probably existed because due to the expense, blacks were not provided with smallpox inoculations at the same rate as whites.⁸⁶ Dunmore lamented that "I could have expected two thousand blacks; with whom I should have had no doubt of penetrating into the heart of this Colony."⁸⁷ Instead, when Dunmore departed the Elizabeth River in the spring of 1776, he left behind at least 150 dead blacks, taking no more than 650 alive with him.⁸⁸

Thus, although joining in arms with the British seemed the swiftest course to freedom for Virginia's African Americans, it was often the most perilous. After the blacks served their purpose, as manpower for the British or as mere pawns to threaten the colonists and show them that their slaves could conveniently be used against them, blacks were often left to their own devices, to starve or to be punished by the Americans. For example, a

⁸⁴The Virginia Committee of Safety, "Unanimous Resolution for the Evacuation of Parts of Norfolk and Princess Anne Counties," April 10, 1776 in Robert L. Scribner and William James Van Schreeven, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, 7 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981) 6: 370.

⁸⁵ Wood, *Strange New Land*, 118.

⁸⁶ Frey, "Between Slavery and Freedom," 390, 392.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Wood, *Strange New Land*, 118.

Hessian soldier, Captain Johann Eswald testified how the British during the siege of Yorktown and Gloucester drove off a group of destitute blacks.

I would just as soon forget a cruel happening. On the same day of the enemy assault, we drove back to the enemy all of our black friends, whom we had taken along to despoil the countryside. We had used them to good advantage and set them free, and now, with fear and trembling, they had to face the reward of their cruel masters. Last night I had to make a sneak patrol, during which I came across a great number of these unfortunates. In their hunger, these unhappy people would have soon devoured what I had; and since they lay between two fires, they had to be driven out by force. This harsh act had to be carried out, however, because of the scarcity of provisions; but we should have thought more about their deliverance at this time.⁸⁹

Thus, due to the treachery of the British, some Afro-Virginians, particularly those with seafaring skills, may have found it safer to stay around and be absorbed into the American cause than to run for immediate freedom and possibly face sickness, death, or betrayal at the hands of the British.

The Virginia Convention passed a law making defection to the British a capital offense, but it also decreed “that slaves taken in arms would be transported and sold in the West Indies.”⁹⁰ Since the masters of captured slaves would have to be compensated for the loss of their slaves’ labor however, other arrangements were often made for blacks caught joining British forces. For example, having one ear severed, or being placed in the pillory punished rebellious slaves who could also be subject to up to thirty-nine lashes upon a bare back. In one instance, a group of four slaves were made to toil in Fincastle County lead mines. Other captured fugitives were jailed in Williamsburg. “The black crews of several vessels ‘supposed to be British property’ were also ordered sold at public auction by the convention, with the proceeds paid to the state.”⁹¹ Thus, those slaves with piloting and seafaring skills may have thought it more propitious to take their

⁸⁸ Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom,” 391.

⁸⁹ Joseph P. Tustin, trans. and ed., *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal, Captain Johann Ewald* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 335-336.

⁹⁰ Frey, “Between Slavery and Freedom,” 384.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

chances with the Americans than to further risk their lives and opportunities for permanent freedom by siding with the British.

All of this is not to say that blacks assisting the British were all desperate refugees who gave no valid explanation for their actions. Joseph Harris, a runaway ex-slave, piloted the *Otter*, having been recommended by George Montague, another British navy officer, to Captain Squire. Montague wrote of Harris: "I think him too useful to His Majesty's service to take away," because of "his being well acquainted with many creeks in the *Eastern Shore*, at *York*, *James River*, and *Nansemond*, and many others," and "accustomed to pilot."⁹² Lamentably, the Virginia records are largely mute on the frequency of free blacks joining the British Navy. However, at least one free black, a man from New York named John Marrant, chose to join the Royal Navy. Free blacks such as Marrant can serve as a test case to show that, independent of the institution of slavery and the desire to shed one's slave status, blacks still made a conscious choice to join the British Navy. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that "Free blacks were as able to decide their future as well as any free white, and many were loyal to the British government."⁹³ Free blacks joining British forces may have been motivated by a desire to leave the country. After the war, Marrant resettled in Nova Scotia, where the British had established a colony for black sailors and soldiers who served in the royal armed forces.⁹⁴

⁹² George Montague to Matthew Squire, July 20, 1775, *American Archives*, 4th Series, II, 1692, quoted in Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 29.

⁹³ "The Employment of Blacks in the British Army," available from His Majesty's 64th Regiment of Foot, hosted by Central Virginia's Community Online, <http://www.cvco.org/sigs/reg64/black.html>, p.1 of 2. The statement of purpose for the historical reenactment group, His Majesty's 64th Regiment of Foot, is "to faithfully recreate the 64th Regiment of Foot as it was during the period of the American Revolution." The 64th was a regiment of the British Army that fought in the Revolutionary War in Virginia. Therefore, I believe this site to be a trustworthy source of information and impressions about the employment of blacks in the British Army.

⁹⁴ Winslow, *Afro-Americans '76*, 49.

In fact, during the American Revolution some 26,000 African Americans escaped to British lines and thence to freedom in Canada and Europe.⁹⁵ In his study on slave runaways in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 to 1787, historian Lathan Windley asserts that for blacks “the best opportunity for leaving the country was during the course of the American Revolutionary War.”⁹⁶ This is mainly because the British shipped many slaves out of the nascent United States for resettlement (and sometimes re-enslavement) in Jamaica, England, Nova Scotia, and later, Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone project is particularly interesting because it was a colonization effort galvanized by the London-based Committee for Relief of the Black Poor in 1786. This benevolent society, comprised of white abolitionists, planned to send blacks living in England to the newly established West African colony of Sierra Leone. “These black men and women, most living in London, either had fought for the British during the American Revolution or had been slaves to American Loyalists and had fled with them to England.”⁹⁷ Hence the capital of Sierra Leone was called Freetown. Consequently, slaves in Tidewater Virginia who wished to leave America altogether may have been more likely to join British forces, particularly the easily accessible Royal Navy.

Windley suggests that Virginia slaveowners may have feared that their slaves boarded British vessels or otherwise escaped to Charleston or New York. According to Windley, “many of the thousands of slaves who were successful in getting to the British were

⁹⁵Of this 26,000, some 4000 left from Savannah, 6000 from Charleston, and 4000 departed from New York during the evacuations of these cities. In addition, 5000 blacks left with the British before the Yorktown surrender. The remaining blacks were carried away on private vessels or went off with the French. From Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 172.

⁹⁶Lathan Algerna Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787*, Garland Series, Graham Hodges, ed., *African American History and Culture* (New York: Garland, 1995), 128.

⁹⁷Equiano, *Olaudah Equiano*, 13.

shipped out of the country, especially during the evacuation of Charleston and New York.”⁹⁸ Hence:

Robert Taylor of Smithfield, Virginia, writing to Neil Jamieson in 17[sic], noted that “when the British under General Leseley [sic] came to Portsmouth in October, 1780, several of my negroes ran away...I apprehend are either now in Charles Town or New York...”⁹⁹

Elsewhere in Virginia, “on the very day of the Yorktown surrender, General George Weldon placed sentinels ‘all along the beach’ to prevent [blacks] from reaching the vessels of the royal navy.” Governor Thomas Nelson wrote to Cornwallis within twenty-four hours of the capitulation to urge the general to prevent blacks from boarding the sloop *Bonetta*, which was sailing to New York to announce the British surrender. Nelson warned that the ship might be laden with slave stowaways.¹⁰⁰ Some Tidewater Virginia slaves then, perhaps those without skills such as slave pilots, decided to leave America altogether, using opportunities offered by the Royal Navy to flee the country.

However, for those without piloting skills (and perhaps even for those with them), it was sometimes difficult to reach British forces. Only two of four Hampton slaves attempting to reach the British warship *St. Albans* reached their destination, the other two perished in the process. Another trio of unfortunate Norfolk slaves found refuge on a British ship, but the Americans shortly captured the vessel. Two black crewmen were taken when the Virginians seized the British boat *Hawk Tender* in late October 1775, when Dunmore ordered six tenders, on which other blacks were aboard, to cannonade Hampton.¹⁰¹ The deposition of Ralph and John Grissoll, taken upon the trial of runaway slaves in Stafford County makes painfully clear the privileged position slave pilots occupied in the slave community. Apparently, in late May 1776, four slave men took

⁹⁸ Windley, *Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina*, 128.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁰ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 158-59.

advantage of the upheaval caused by the Revolution in Virginia to make an escape. According to the Grissolls's testimony, the two presumably related men were asleep in the sailors' quarters of a small schooner around midnight when they heard clamoring on deck. Asking "Who's there[?]" and being answered with the threat: "Don't speak or the worse shall come of you," the two men were ordered by an unseen marauder to "steer the schooner to Coon [Coan] River." Promised no harm would come to them if they honored this request, the two sailors came aboard deck, discovering the intruders to be "four Negroe Men." The slaves, "Not being able to manage the vessel" themselves, were allegedly duped by the Grissolls, and taken to Maryland, where the sailors "contrived to have them taken, except Mr. George Brent's Charles."¹⁰²

This occurrence is instructive on a couple of different levels. First, that these slaves could not pilot a boat for themselves made them vulnerable and apparently, except for perhaps one fugitive, impeded their efforts to escape bondage. This example illustrates the relative power in the slave community that pilots could exercise in terms of mobility. Second, although ignorant of piloting, these slaves instead may have relied on their strong grasp of local geography in order to "break for the bay and try to establish contact with one of Dunmore's roving tenders."¹⁰³ Since these slaves did not have pilots' skills to offer the more discriminating Americans, it is probable that they sought to answer Dunmore's open call for slaves.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 28, 117.

¹⁰² Deposition of Ralph and John Grissol concerning Slaves in Stafford County," in Scribner and Van Screeven, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6:305.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 31 ln. 9.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, historians have struggled to explain African American motivations for fighting on the side of the Americans or the British during the Revolutionary War. In his landmark study, *The Negro in the American Revolution*,¹⁰⁴ Benjamin Quarles argued in 1961 that most blacks did not have loyalty to any particular cause, but rather were loyal to the principle of freedom.

Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those “unalienable rights” of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken. Whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American or British could count on a ready response from the blacks.¹⁰⁵

Quarles was the first major historian to offer the interpretation that blacks participating in the Revolutionary War were like shrewd mercenaries who would render their skills and services to whomever dangled the prospect of freedom before them. In the case of skilled slave Virginia pilots, they were quickly absorbed into the State Navy. In “The Revolutionary War as a Black Declaration of Independence,” Quarles fine tuned his original 1961 argument that slaves were loyal to the principle of freedom and that they ran to whomever created an image of liberty. By 1983 Quarles explicitly concluded that the bondmen flew to the British in greater number because Dunmore’s Proclamation

¹⁰⁴ The pioneering free black historian William C. Nell completed the first study on African American participation in the Revolutionary War in 1852. An avid abolitionist, Nell did not want the achievements of African American soldiers and sailors who fought for the liberty of their white masters, if not their own freedom, to continue to go unnoticed. As the introduction to *Colored Patriots of the Revolution* suggests, this work paints blacks who fought for the Americans as long-suffering saints who primarily placed no self-interests at all in their decision to defend the rebel cause. *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* was obviously a piece of propaganda for the abolitionist cause; Nell exclusively discussed the contributions of black patriots to the revolutionary war effort and selectively excluded the numerous accounts of blacks serving in the royal forces because it did not suit his purposes. See Harriet Beecher Stowe’s introduction to the book in William C. Nell, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston: Robert F. Walcutt, 1855), 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, vii.

promised immediate freedom, as opposed to possibly attaining freedom at some indeterminate point on an American whim.

Sylvia Frey's study *Water from the Rock* offered the first book-length extension of Quarles's work. However, instead of refuting Quarles, she extended and amplified his argument and evidence. For example, by the second chapter she went beyond Quarles by explicitly stating that "the American Revolution in the South was a war about slavery."¹⁰⁶ Frey maintained that chattel slavery was a large issue in the Revolutionary War in the South because the colonists needed to "weaken slaves' zeal for service with the British, which threatened to expose the moral absurdity of a society of slaveholders proclaiming the concepts of natural rights, equality and liberty."¹⁰⁷ Frey added a new twist to Quarles's and other earlier scholars' work in her estimation of slaves who stayed on the plantation:

Their choices seemingly limited to the relative security of the slave or freedom in the grave, thousands of slaves stayed on the farms and plantations. These were not, as they were later made out to be, necessarily loyal slaves. Rather they were, like thousands of whites, neutral, neutrality for them was a survival mechanism.¹⁰⁸

While skilled slave pilots and seamen may have been quickly absorbed into the fledgling Virginia Navy, their loyalty may not have been to America, but to the principle of freedom, as Quarles noted.

Since women typically did not operate sea and river craft in eighteenth-century Virginia, this paper has not focused on African American women's participation in the Virginia or British navies during the age of the Revolution. However, in her article, "Race, Sex, and Self-evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the

¹⁰⁶ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 118.

American Revolution” Jacqueline Jones argued that black women “contributed to the definition of liberation in these turbulent times.” “Indeed, through their modest everyday struggles, these wives and mothers offered a vision of freedom that was, by virtue of its consistency and fairness, more enduring than the one articulated so eloquently by the Founding Fathers.”¹⁰⁹ Some women were involved in the war effort, particularly on the side of the British. Like most men, many slave women valued freedom highly and denied the opportunity to help the Virginians in any meaningful way, rushed to the British for protection and liberation. We may never know exactly in what capacity these women were used, but we can assume that those who remained healthy might have served as servants, cooks, or even concubines.

In his recent study, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, W. Jeffrey Bolster contended that men such as the black pilots and seamen who served in the Revolution as patriot allies were part of a much wider network of people and places than were the average plantation slave. Thus, skilled slave pilots, having perhaps more varied and positive experiences in their quasi-free occupations, may have been less motivated to leave the country with the British, and more inclined to stay where they enjoyed a modicum of respect and “success” within the confines of slavery.¹¹⁰

This is not to say that there were no skilled slave pilots and seamen who served the British Navy; since they fought for America’s opponent in the Revolution, the records pertaining to them are more difficult to locate. However, it has been acknowledged that “blacks were utilised by Dunmore as pilots on the Chesapeake, and its associated

¹⁰⁹ Jacqueline Jones, “Race, Sex, and Self-evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the American Revolution.” In Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman ,eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 296.

waterways,” and that “to man the small craft that scurried in and out of the river settlements, harassing the plantations, the British depended largely on ex-slaves, particularly as pilots.”¹¹¹ But sadly, the fragmentary state of the sources here makes it difficult to more fully substantiate the motives of the pilots and seamen who fought for the British. The resulting portrait of these men is thus incomplete.

But it is still important to try to find out exactly what the motives of Afro-Virginian pilots and seamen were during the American Revolution. As with those blacks who sailed with the Americans, the impulse to join the British Navy was not borne out of a special affinity for England or whites. In fact, “according to the Lutheran clergyman Henry Muhlenberg, the belief that a British victory would bring freedom was said to be almost universal in slave society.”¹¹² This notion helps to explain why hundreds of Afro-Virginians would seek service and refuge in the reasonably accessible British navy. Only by progressively digging deeper will we stand a chance of appreciating and understanding the depth of African American participation during the Revolutionary War in Virginia.

¹¹⁰ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), passim.

¹¹¹ His Majesty’s 64th of Foot, “The Employment of Blacks in the British Army,” 1; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 28- 29

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 115.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

The Archives of Virginia. Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia
 Land Bounty Warrants
 Military Certificates, Vol. III
 Revolutionary Soldiers, Vol. V

Hampton Clerk's Office. Elizabeth City County, Deed Book, Vol. 34.

The Archives of the United States, Washington, D. C.
 Pension Claims Papers, National Archives Trust Fund

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Barron, James. "The Schooner *Patriot*." *The Virginia Historical Register and Literary Advertiser*, Vol. I, No. 3 (July 1848).

Virginia Gazette

OTHER PRIMARY SOURCES

Bockstruck, Lloyd DeWitt, ed. *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants Awarded by State Governments*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1996.

Brumbaugh, Gaius Marcus, ed. *Revolutionary War Records: Virginia Army and Navy Forces with Bounty Land Warrants for Virginia Military District of Ohio, and Virginia Military Scrip; from Federal and State Archives*. Vol. 1, Virginia. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Edited by Richard J. Allison. New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Hening, William W., ed. *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia*, 13 vols. Richmond: J. G. Cochran, 1819-1823.

MacGregor, Morris J. and Bernard C. Nalty, eds. *Blacks in the United States Armed Force Basic Documents*, 13 vols. Vol. 1, *A Time of Slavery*. Wilmington, DE:

Scholarly Resources, 1977.

Mays, David J., ed. *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton*, 2 vols.
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1967.

Scribner, Robert L. and James Van Schreeven, eds. *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*, 7 vols. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981.

Tingling, Marion and Louis B. Wright, eds. *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1709-1712*. Richmond: Dietz Press, 1941.

_____ & Maude H. Woodfin, eds. *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover 1739-1741*. Richmond: Dietz Press, 1942.

Tustin, Joseph P., trans. and ed. *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal, Captain Johann Eswald*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Albert, Peter J. and Ronald Hoffman, eds. *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989.

Aptheker, Herbert. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. New York: International Publishers, 1940.

Bennett, Lerone. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 6th ed. Chicago: Penguin, 1987.

Bolster, W. Jeffrey. *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Brown, Kathleen M. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Frey, Sylvia. "Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution." *Journal of Southern History*, XLIX (August 1983): 375-398.

_____. *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Greene, Robert E. *Black Defenders of America 1775-1973: A Reference and Pictorial History*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1974.

- Hast, Adele. *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore*, 2nd ed. Robert Berkhofer, ed., Studies in American History and Culture, No. 34. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982.
- His Majesty's 64th Regiment of Foot, hosted by Central Virginia's Community Online. "The Employment of Blacks in the British Army. Available from <http://www.cvco.org/sigs/reg64/black.html>.
- Jackson, Luther Porter. *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*. Norfolk: Guide Quality Press, 1944.
- Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. "The Angola to Virginia Connection: 1619-1999," pamphlet. Williamsburg, Virginia.
- Lindermeyer, Otto. *Black and Brave: The Black Soldier in America*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.
- McCusker, John J. "How Much is That in Real Money?: A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States." *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 101 (1992): 297-373.
- Nell, William C. *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. Boston: Robert F. Walcutt, 1855.
- Paullin, Charles O. *The Navy of the American Revolution*. New York: Haskell House, 1971.
- Quarles, Benjamin. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961.
- Sanchez-Saavedra. *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution, 1774-1787*. Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1978.
- Selby, John. *Dunmore*. Williamsburg, Virginia: Virginia Independence Bicentennial Commission, 1977.
- _____. *The Road to Yorktown*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976.
- Stewart, Robert A. *History of Virginia's Navy of the Revolution*. Richmond: Mitchel & Hutchkiss, 1933.
- Tate, Thad. *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965.
- Thornton, John. "The African Experience of the '20. and Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619." *William and Mary Quarterly*, LV (July 1998): 421-434.

- White, David O. *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783*. Chester, Ct.: Pequot Press, 1973.
- Windley, Lathan Algerna. *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787*. Graham Hodges, ed., Garland Series, African American History and Culture. New York: Garland, 1995.
- Winslow, Eugene. *Afro-Americans '76: Black Americans in the Founding of Our Nation*. Chicago: Afro-Am Publishing, 1975.
- Wood, Peter. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974.
- _____. *Strange New Land: African Americans 1617-1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

VITA

Born 4 September 1974 in Charleston, West Virginia. Graduated Wilde Lake High School in Columbia, Maryland June 1992. Received a Bachelor's of Arts in History from Hampton University. Graduated as class salutatorian, December 1995. Entered The College of William and Mary as a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History, August 1997. Currently a Ph.D. candidate in that same department and recently passed the qualifying examinations with distinction.