



Discovering African-American patriots

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Page One

Researcher reveals unheralded veterans from state who fought in the Revolutionary War

The names Polydore Rodman, Prince Jencks and Scipio Brown might not ring many bells these days, but with Rhode Island Independence Day on Friday, it should be known that they were part of a largely overlooked group who took part in America's War of Independence.

All were African-Americans from Rhode Island, some slaves, some freemen, who volunteered to fight to break the grip of colonialism and establish a republic. At least 285 such individuals can now be tied to a Rhode Island community by birth, place of enlistment or residence.

These are the findings of Maurice Barboza, founder and president of the National Mall Liberty Fund, based on research performed by the Daughters of the American Revolution. He has immersed himself in the subject and stands at the forefront of a project to raise money and establish a monument near the National Mall in Washington dedicated to "black patriots."

A bill authorizing the erection of a monument is making its way through Congress.

"No one was coerced" in the Revolutionary War, Barboza said from his office in Washington. "These were volunteers. The history was buried and people were made to believe blacks were not part of the Revolutionary War history.

"Towns in Rhode Island today likely contain citizens -- African-Americans and others -- who are descended from these black patriots."

He said African-Americans served in all the major battles -- Lexington, Concord and Yorktown among them. They were described as "Negro, black, mulatto, mustee (mixed ancestry), yellow, colored, free, born Africa, part Indian, man of color, mixed descent, slave and enslaved," Barboza's records show. They served as "soldier, sailor, marine, laborer, cobbler, cook's mate, barber, drummer, fifer and gentleman soldier." They sailed aboard the sloop Providence.

"All were placed in harm's way by their own decisions," Barboza said. "They served in regiments alongside whites. If you had an ancestor from South Kingstown who served, it is likely they served next to a black patriot.

"This is very empowering, and this is what this project is all about. It isn't just a memorial of ancient history, but a sign that as a nation we are bound together."

Barboza said he has a particular fondness for the Ocean State: "In 1778, Rhode Island did something that no other state did -- offer immediate freedom to any slave who agreed to serve in the Revolutionary War. The state also provided for pay and gave the opportunity to win bounty land, just like any other person who served in the war. After the war, the General Assembly passed legislation that required communities where these patriots enlisted to provide for their welfare if they needed help and assistance.

"This state was far ahead of others in offering the opportunity to get out of slavery," he said.

Barboza said he was asking each state legislature to pass a resolution urging Congress to approve the monument. He said he got an "encouraging call" Wednesday from the office of Governor Chafee.

He is also sending notifications to 29 Rhode Island communities that have been connected to the black volunteers, urging them to approve their own resolutions and list the names of local black patriots.

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