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United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research

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USCTI Expands to Revolutionary War

Since the establishment in 1998 of the United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research at Hartwick College, the national membership body has embraced the Civil War as its signature focus. Members have been encouraged to become private collectors of memorabilia that would enhance the preservation efforts of the general membership. This was no less true for the founding president of the USCTI, Harry Bradshaw Matthews. The privately owned collection amassed by him today includes more than 2,500 items that expands beyond Civil War memorabilia. It is used as the primary resource supporting the work of the USCTI, including expanded efforts.

Today, the USCTI has good reason to expand its preservation efforts to include the role of African American soldiers and their white officers spanning the period from the Revolutionary War through World War II. There are now items within the Matthews Collection that can provide assistance to researchers looking for family and local history connections to patriots of the multiple wars. A sampling of the holdings regarding the Revolutionary War are identified below by date.



THE BOSTON MASSACRE

Source: *The Negro in American History*, John W. Cromwell, 1914.

Courtesy: The Matthews Collection

- ❖ *History of the American Revolution, Vol II*, David Ramsay, 1811.
- ❖ *Cato Freedom: A Connecticut Soldier's Pension File for a New Yorker of Otsego County*, 1818.
- ❖ *Battles of the United States by Sea and Land*, Henry B. Dawson, 1858.
- ❖ *Rhode Island Historical Tracts No. 10 in Historical Inquiry: Attempts to Raise A Regiment of Slaves in Rhode Island*, Jeremiah Olney, 1880.
- ❖ *History of the Negro Race in America*, Vol. 1, George W. Williams, 1885.
- ❖ *Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States*, Joseph T. Wilson, 1889.
- ❖ *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*, Vol. B, 1896.
- ❖ *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State*, James A Roberts, 1898.
- ❖ *American Revolution in New York*, Division of Archives and History, Albany: University of the State of New York, 1926.
- ❖ *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Sailors in the Revolutionary War*, Luther Porter Jackson, 1944.
- ❖ *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783*, David O. White, 1973.

Future issues of the *Civil War Digest* will share reference sources pertinent to the Spanish-American War and the World Wars.

The Revolutionary War: A Common Ground Link to the Past

While the nation applauded the announcement in February that the new American Revolution Center

at Valley Forge has a combined \$13 million in private and public funds to launch its remembrance of Revolutionary patriots, there has been quite a different story regarding the 20-year effort to have a memorial built in the nation's capital to honor the 5,000 black patriots. The major advocate for the memorial was led by Lena Santos Ferguson, who had petitioned in 1980 for membership with the Daughters of the American Revolution, which was not finalized for four years.

Ferguson became a member of the DAR in 1984. As a part of the final decision, she was promised by the DAR that research resulting in a book would be published honoring the estimated 5,000 black Revolutionary War patriots. In 1986, Ferguson and her nephew, Maurice Barboza, were instrumental in having President Ronald Reagan authorize the planning for a structure honoring the black patriots of the Revolutionary War. Unfortunately, a decade later there had been only one-third of the \$9 million necessary to break ground for the memorial. The slow pace of fundraising resulted in Barboza's removal in 1992 as president of the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Foundation, the primary advocate for the memorial. The organization disbanded in 2005 because of the lack of progress.

A second effort was launched by Barboza in 2005, in memory of his aunt, which included the push for the DAR book, as well as a renewed call for the memorial under a new name, the National Mall Liberty Fund DC. The fund's Web site provided a valuable resource by listing on its site the names of many of Connecticut's African



GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON

Source: *Battles of the United States by Sea and Land*,

Henry B. Dawson, 1858

Courtesy: The Matthews Collection

American patriots. Supporters of Barboza's efforts included such prominent U.S. Senators as Christopher J. Dodd, Elizabeth Dole, Charles E. Grassley, and Barack Obama. The Senators sponsored legislation to extend the time limit for completing the memorial, which was challenged by the National Park Service. In May 2008, the DAR announced the release of a publication titled *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War*. The names of 5,000 black soldiers and 1,600 Indians are identified, some by location of residence.

While efforts to build a national memorial honoring the African American Revolutionary War patriots were centered in Washington, DC, there were other efforts occurring at the state level. Prominent among them was the successful progress made in New Jersey. Included within the New Jersey African American History Curriculum Guide was Unit 4 devoted to "Blacks in the Revolutionary Era, 1776-1789." It was prepared in 2003 by Deborah Mercer and Edith Beckett of the New Jersey State Library. Five years later, "Oh Freedom!" was launched as a traveling exhibit commemorating the state's black patriots, as well as the legislative act that freed Negro Prime on November 21, 1786.

In South Carolina, Illinois, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and other states, tributes have been made during the past decade to honor the heroics of black soldiers from the Revolutionary War. The Internet is filled with such stories. In New York, tribute to the black patriots is not a frequent occurrence, evidenced by the difficulty of locating such stories. There is, however, a story emerging that has become a primary concern of the USCTI for Local History and Family Research at Hartwick College.

The Search for Cato Freedom

Five years ago Leigh Eckmair, a USCTI member from Gilbertsville, New York, passed along to Matthews a reference to a black Revolutionary War soldier named Cato Freedom who was interred at a burial site in Otsego County. The immediate response was to locate the patriot's name on a listing provided on the Internet by the National Mall Liberty Fund DC. The Internet listing included one Cato Freedom as a patriot of Connecticut. The two reference sources, however, were filed until recently.



BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL

Source: *Battles of the United States by Sea and Land*, Henry B. Dawson, 1858

Courtesy: The Matthews Collection

During April 2009, Cato became the topic for a research study prepared by Matthews for the members of the Harriet Tubman Mentoring Project, which is composed of Hartwick students who are connected to the USCTI. The first step in documenting Cato was for the members of the Tubman Project and their advisor to review various history books in the privately owned Matthews Collection for the Preservation of Freedom Journey Classics in search of clues.

Most prominent among the reference sources were the following:

1. *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, William C. Nell, 1855 – During the Revolutionary War there were difficulties recruiting soldiers for the Continental Army. In order to address this issue, the colony of Connecticut created a company of black soldiers. The only white officer who volunteered to command the company was Colonel David Humphreys. In Nell's book, he identified 56 privates in Humphreys' group, including one Dick Freedom.
2. *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State*, James A. Roberts, 1898 – The New York government authorized that any slave who enlisted and served for three years or until discharge would be declared free. The book index included reference to the men of all the regiments of New York, as well as those soldiers who later applied for pensions. It did not include a single soldier surnamed Freedom, although there were some soldiers identified as "colored."
3. *The Negro in the American Revolution*, Herbert Aptheker, 1940 – Rhode Island and Massachusetts passed legislation in 1778 authorizing freedom to those slaves who served in their respective state forces. Also, it was revealed that the group under Colonel Humphreys' command, the Second Company of the Fourth Regiment, included three black soldiers named Freedom.
4. *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783*, David O. White, 1973 – The author revealed that in 1776 Connecticut was given a quota of eight regiments to fill for the Continental Army. An incentive for a slave to enlist was the promise of freedom after serving a three-year term or to the end of war. In 1781 the Second Company of the Fourth Regiment was formed with 48 black soldiers in addition to white officers. The list of privates in Colonel Humphreys' group included men with the surname of Freedom, but not one of them had the first name of Cato. The eight regiments were reduced to five during 1781 and 1782. Another reorganization in 1783 resulted in all the men, black and white, being integrated within the regiments.

Armed with the above information, the students of the Tubman Project and Matthews suspected that Cato Freedom would be connected to Connecticut, although he would reside after the conflict in New York.



Front: Khadian Thomas '09; Back: Brittanie Kemp '11;
USCTI/Tubman Mentors, viewing Cato Freedom's tombstone

The researchers ventured to the Research Library of the New York State Historical Association in nearby Cooperstown. The staff at the library was very open and willing to assist the researchers, who knew only that Cato Freedom served in a Connecticut regiment during the war. Based upon that information, the following sources were identified for review:

1. *Register of American Revolutionary Soldiers of Otsego County*, Alma Francis Jones Slawson, 1963, revised 1970 – Cato Freedom was initially identified as Cato Freeman, with the correction noted. He was 96 years of age when he died in 1828. The book also indicated that he served with Connecticut and appeared on the pension roll of 1818 at the age of 71 years. His wife, Parmelia, had died in 1821 at the age of 59 years.
2. *Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives: Bicentennial Edition, National Genealogical Society*, 1976 – Cato Freedom's pension number was identified.
3. *Letter from the Secretary of War, Transmitting a Report of the Names, Rank, and Line of Every Person Placed on the Pension List in Pursuance of the Act of the 18th of March, 1818, 1820, 1955*, Southern Book Company – Cato Freedom was identified as a private in the Connecticut line.
4. *Record of the Service of Connecticut Men in the War of the Revolution, II. War of 1812, III. Mexican War*, Stephen R. Smith, 1889 – Cato Freedom was identified as a private in the Connecticut line.

The next step in the investigation was for Matthews to purchase a copy of Cato Freedom's pension file. Form 85A Full Pension File Pre-Civil War was completed online and submitted with a \$50 fee for documents from Cato's pension file. His pension number was the major information provided, along with the name of his wife, and the regiment he served in. Within days the pension file helped to solve one problem, which led to another. Specifically, Cato, his wife, and daughters were identified as residing in Burlington Township, Otsego County, New York in 1818. Cato's pension file indicated that the soldier enlisted in 1778 for three years, serving in Captain Sheldon or Douglass Company in Colonel S.B. Webb's Regiment. Further, that he resided in Burlington, Otsego County, New York and died there on February 13, 1830.

The information in the pension file contradicted some of the notes in Slawson's book.

The researchers next returned to NYSHA's Research Library for a second search. It was time for them to try to identify the specific burial site of Cato. Once again, with the complete cooperation of library staff, the correct reference source was identified.

Butternut Valley Cemetery (Also Known as Brick Schoolhouse Cemetery), Virginia A. Schoradt, 1998 – There was no Cato Freedom identified, but rather one (colored) Cato Freeman, who died on May 19, 1828 at the age of 96 years. His wife, Parmelia, was identified as the spouse of (colored) Cato, who died on April 19, 1838 at the age of 73 years.

Once again, Cato Freedom's pension record contradicted the information inscribed on his tombstone. Did he die in 1828 or 1830 and was he one and the same as Cato Freeman? If so, when did his name change? What was consistent, however, was that Cato served with the Connecticut line, his wife was named Parmelia, his daughter was named Charlotte, their burial site was correctly noted, as was their racial designation as "colored."

A sunny day in May provided a perfect opportunity for an outing to the Butternut Valley Cemetery, just over the Burlington line, near Cooperstown. Two Tubman Mentors, Brittanie Kemp '11 and Khadian Thomas '09, traveled with Matthews the 20-odd miles leading to the well-manicured burial site. The researchers expected to find a very small tombstone, if any at all, preserving the memory of Cato Freedom. What they found instead, however, were three large, well-preserved tombstones for Cato Freeman, Parmelia, and their daughter, (Mrs.) Charlotte Jackson. The researchers were not surprised, however, by the inscriptions. One final reference that was catalogued in the Matthews Collection following the cemetery visit was



Harry Bradshaw Matthews
Butternut Valley Cemetery

the DAR book *Forgotten Patriots*. The only new information acquired from it was that Cato Freedom was a resident of Woodstock, Connecticut during the Revolutionary War. The additional book entries made clear that there was not a single black patriot named Cato Freeman in the Connecticut line. Thus, Matthews and his student assistants concluded that they had enough evidence to confirm that they had found their Revolutionary War soldier.

From a genealogical perspective, Charlotte's tombstone provided clues in regard to the progression of the family through the decades. She was married to Anthony Jackson and died June 29, 1853. This information made it possible to follow the couple in census records. In 1830, Anthony was the head of his household in Burlington, which included himself and four females. The composition of his homestead had not changed by 1840. Fifteen years later, however, Anthony was still a landowner in Burlington and had been remarried to Catherine Louise from New York City.

It was not long after the 1855 census that Anthony's name disappeared from the records. African American Jacksons, however, continued within the Otsego County documents providing the clue that the family's legacy continued into the Civil War period.

The name Cato Freedom will now be preserved by a new generation as reminders of the earliest links in the Freedom Journey.

Some Black Soldiers of the Revolutionary War Credited to New York

Source: *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State*, James A. Roberts, 1898

Credit: The Matthews Collection

THE LEVIES – (WEISSENFELS)

Black Walter (colored)
Brave Boy (colored)
Solomon White (colored)

THE LEVIES – (PAWLING)

Benjamin Johnson (colored)

THE LEVIES – (WILLETT)

Tunis Brown (colored)

UNKNOWN REGIMENT

“Dick” (mulatto)
Peter Green (negro)
“Jeffrie” (Indian)
Mink McVandoore (negro)
Jack Murray (negro)
Titus (negro)

DUTCHESS COUNTY – SIXTH REGIMENT

Benjamin Cone (colored)

ORANGE COUNTY MILITIA – THIRD REGIMENT

Dick (colored)

ORANGE COUNTY MILITIA – FOURTH REGIMENT

Robin (colored)
Samuel Semans (colored)
Tom (colored)

TRYON COUNTY MILITIA – FIRST REGIMENT

Tom (colored)

WESTCHESTER CTY MILITIA – SECOND REGIMENT

Aaron Palmer (colored)
Toney (colored)



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