



ALLIES & ENEMIES

ALL THE KING'S MEN— BLACK LOYALISTS OF THE REVOLUTION

by Michael Aubrecht

According to some estimates, over a half million African Americans lived in the Thirteen Colonies at the outbreak of the Revolution. Some were free; many were enslaved. As the Patriot call to fight for liberty grew, the British government sought to undermine the expanding Continental Army by soliciting both free and enslaved African Americans. Perhaps it is understandable why many of them did side with the British. In his article entitled “Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited,” historian James Walker states that “the overriding motive of the escaped slaves and the one that was shared by free blacks who became loyalists, was for security in their freedom.”

Proclamations and War

Whereas General George Washington initially barred further recruitment of African Americans after he took command of the Continental Army in June of 1775, John

Murray—the 4th Earl of Dunmore and Royal Governor of Virginia—formally called on slaves in Virginia to side with the British that November.

His proclamation stated:

“And I hereby further declare all indented servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their duty, to this Majesty’s crown and dignity.”

Governor Dunmore was keenly aware of this offer’s effect. Not only would extra manpower help bolster and support the British troops in Virginia (at this point cut off from reserves in Boston), but the arming of slaves terrified many colonists. Planters abandoned their military posts to protect their families and property from the threat of a slave insurrection.

In response to Dunmore’s decree, the Representatives of the People of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia issued their own counter-proclamation in December of 1775:

“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 this 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

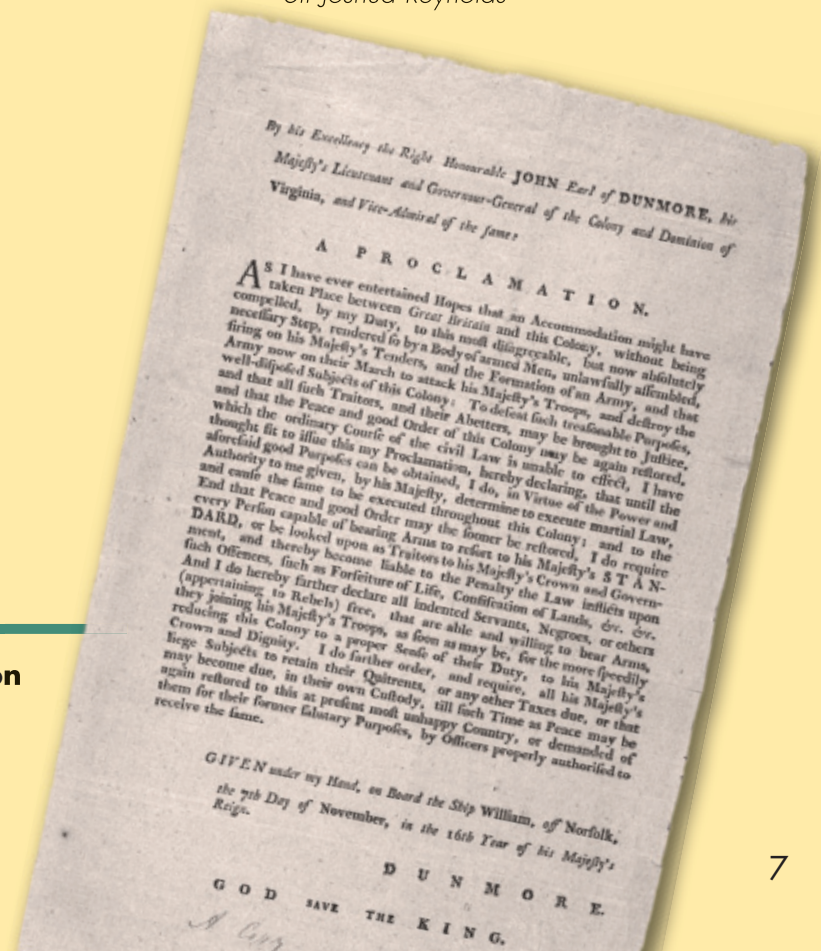


John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore and Royal Governor of Virginia

Sir Joshua Reynolds

A scan of Dunmore’s 1775 proclamation

Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division



Soldiers in the Ethiopian Regiment were outfitted in exceptionally striking uniforms embroidered with the phrase “Liberty to Slaves.”

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 up arms against the inhabitants of this colony, shall be liable to such punishment as shall hereafter be directed by the General Convention. And to that end all such, who have taken this unlawful and wicked step, may return in safety to their duty, and escape the punishment due to their crimes, we hereby promise pardon to them, they surrendering themselves...and not appearing in arms after the publication hereof. And we do farther earnestly recommend it to all humane and benevolent persons in this colony to explain and make known this our offer of mercy to those unfortunate people.”

Patriot newspapers voiced paranoia and called for citizens to practice vigilance and increase security; restrictions on slave privileges, such as meeting in groups or conducting worship services, were immediately tightened. *The Virginia Gazette* published a stern warning to all slaves, stating: “Be not then...tempted by the proclamation to ruin yourselves.” The publication also called Lord Dunmore a hypocrite, being a slaveholder himself, and ordered all servants to “cling to their masters.”

These responses did little to prevent approximately 300 slaves from joining Dunmore’s “Ethiopian Regiment” by December of 1775. They were outfitted in exceptionally striking uniforms embroidered with the phrase “Liberty to Slaves.” In all, it is estimated that close to 800 men eventually joined the regiment, which did see some military action in Virginia at the battles of Kemp’s Landing and Great Bridge before smallpox took a deadly toll on the soldiers.

The Ethiopian Regiment was disbanded in 1776. Three years later, British General Henry Clinton issued the Philipsburg Proclamation, which granted

“every negro who shall desert the rebel standard full security to follow within these lines any occupation which he shall think proper.”

This declaration, which was directed towards all slaves in the United States, instigated a resurgence of enlistees, many of whom were ironically put to work on captured plantations to grow food for the British Army.

Regardless of whether they had been free or previously enslaved, black Loyalists fought with great courage and determination. One who certainly stood out was known as Colonel Tye. This former slave from Monmouth County, New Jersey, had served in the Ethiopian Regiment and fought for the British at the Battle of Monmouth. More notable, though, was the fact that he led a group of white and African American guerrillas in his home state and New York for most of 1779–1780, during which he and his men stole livestock, freed slaves, and captured and executed Patriots. In September of 1780, Tye was wounded while attempting to capture a Continental Army captain, and later died of infection.

Of course, the Loyalist cause itself would eventually die.

Life After Defeat

In 1782, many black Loyalists fled to one of the last British strongholds in the United States: New York City. Once a provisional treaty was signed by Great Britain and the United States in November of that year, General Washington—under orders from Congress—demanded that before the British evacuated the city, they had to return all slaves who had been owned by Americans.



The Freetown Colony in the 19th century

John Leighton Wilson

A black Loyalist and former slave named Boston King later summarized his feelings at learning of this information:

“...the horrors and devastation of war happily terminated and peace was restored between America and Great Britain, which diffused universal joy among all parties; except us, who had escaped from slavery and taken refuge in the English army; for a report prevailed at New-York, that all the slaves, in number 2,000, were to be delivered up to their masters altho’ some of them had been three or four years among the English. This dreadful rumour filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our old masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New York, or even dragging them out of their beds. Many of the slaves had very cruel masters, so that the thoughts of returning home with them embittered life to us.”

To Washington’s dismay, British General Guy Carleton insisted that both Dunmore’s and Clinton’s proclamations should be honored—that is, former slaves should be given “certificates of freedom” and allowed to leave New York City if they could prove that they had served with the British during the war. In the end, and after many meetings between Americans and a British review board, several thousand slaves were allowed to join free black and white Loyalists in departing New York City.

A majority of these black Loyalists eventually settled in what are now Canada’s Maritime provinces—Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. As author Lloyd Dobyns states in his article entitled “Fighting... Maybe for Freedom, But Probably Not”:

“The refugees landed in a cold, sparsely settled, forested place, populated by Scots, Protestants from France, Switzerland, and Germany, and a few of the Mi’kmaq tribesmen who were the original residents. In no time at all, it was clear that whatever

the American blacks were called and whatever they had been promised, they would be treated like slaves and live a life not much better and a lot colder, than they had lived in the American colonies.”

The black Loyalists had an exceptionally hard time obtaining land. According to the Black Loyalist Heritage Society:

“The loyalist colonies were not equipped to maintain the influx of thousands of new citizens. A priority system was established to serve the newest citizens to British North America. White officers and gentlemen were served first in terms of rations and land grants. Ordinary privates and laboring people, among the whites, had to wait. The blacks, coming up last, rarely received the land or rations promised to them.”

A collection of petitions relating to land grants in New Brunswick, written between 1783 and 1854, can be found on the Atlantic Canada Virtual Archives. The Archives' Web site states that

“Although one hundred African American families were eventually granted full allotments in Saint John [New Brunswick's largest city], they soon discovered that their land was almost eighteen miles outside

the town, making communication difficult. Large tracts of land were surveyed for African American settlements on the Nerepis River and Milkish Creek, and St. Martins, but none of these areas was ideal for farming. Like many of the white loyalists, the African American population in New Brunswick often had little or no experience with clearing land, but many white families had the advantage of having at least brought some household goods and money with them.”

Thus it is not surprising that over a thousand black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick—including the former slave Boston King—left for Britain's new Freetown Colony in Sierra Leone in 1792. Yet despite their hardships, some of the black Loyalists who did remain in Canada fought for Britain again during the War of 1812. During this conflict, more escaped slaves migrated to Canada; they were referred to as “black refugees” to distinguish them from the black Loyalists.

The story of the black Loyalists is both tragic and fascinating. Like many Americans, they too fought for freedom and liberty—their *personal* freedom, their *personal* liberty. Today, many proud descendants of these soldiers still reside in Canada and maintain the memory of their ancestors, even as the rest of the world seems to have forgotten the cause and struggle of the black Loyalist.



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