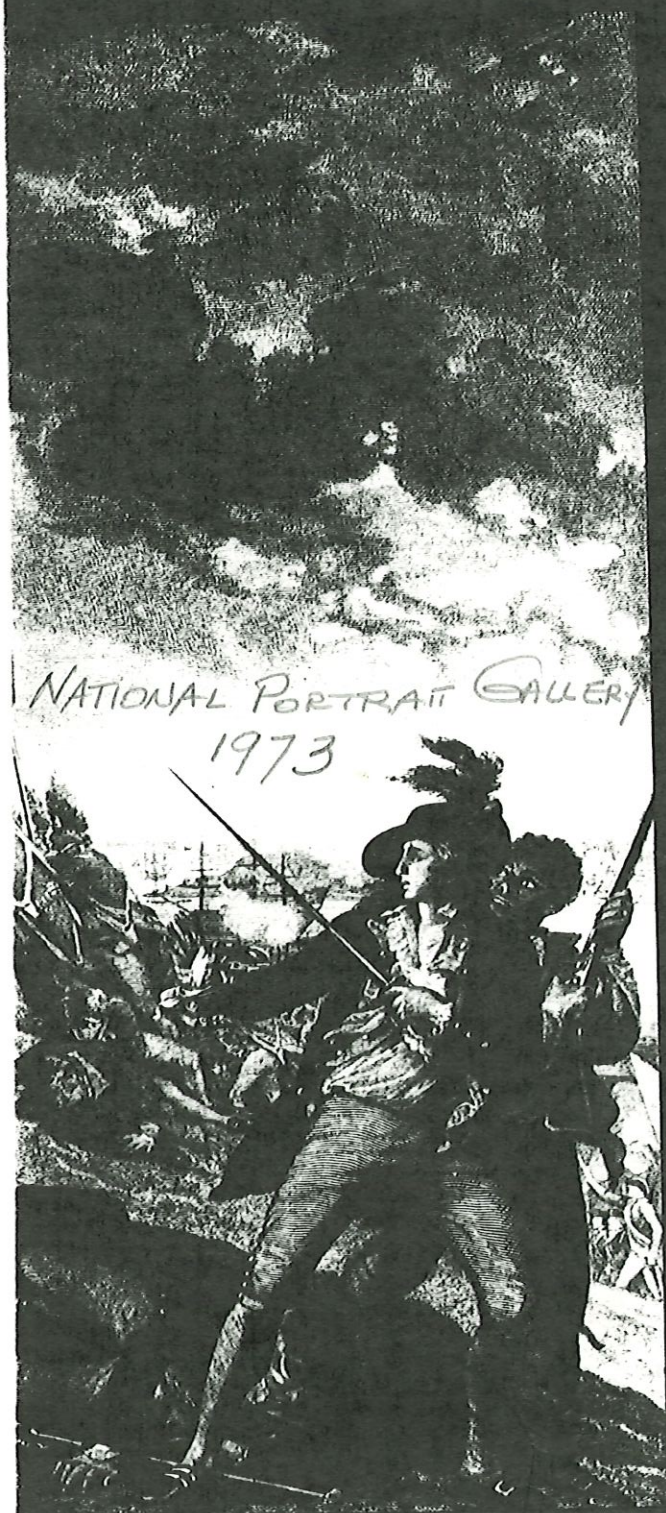


*The Black Presence in the Era
of the American Revolution*

1770-1800





1. Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences. Samuel Jennings, 1792. Library Company of Philadelphia.

The celebration of a Revolution, especially one that promised liberty and justice for all, may provide an opportune moment for a fresh view of one feature of the event that for two centuries has been absent from the official rhetoric of the Fourth of July. It is the aim of this book, and its array of pictures and documents of the time, to restore to the national memory an historic fact that has been long suppressed or forgotten—the living presence of black men and women during the thirty years that stretched from the martyrdom of Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre of 1770 to the conspiracy of Gabriel Prosser in Virginia at the turn of the century.

In 1855, when William C. Nell, the pioneer black historian and abolitionist, published his *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, it was his friend, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote the introduction to the volume [figure 2]. In considering the services of the black soldiers and sailors who had fought for the independence of the new Nation, she observed: “We are to reflect upon them as far more magnanimous,” because they served “a nation which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals, and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake. It was not for their own land they fought, not even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit.”

Not all were Patriots. As Benjamin Quarles points out in his study of *The Negro in the American Revolution*, the role of the black soldier in the Revolutionary War

can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor a people, but to a principle. 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.

Thus Thomas Peters of Virginia, for one, accepted Lord Dunmore’s promise of freedom, joined the British army, sailed with the king’s fleet to Nova Scotia, and ultimately returned to Africa to play a part as founding father of Sierra Leone. That for blacks the Revolution was incomplete would be clear enough at an early stage. “This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*,” cried Frederick Douglass to the whites in his audience at Corinthian Hall in Rochester nine years before the Civil War.

Long nourished—or starved—on a stale textbook version of the Revolution that pictured a few million whites split into Patriots and Tories; while half a million slaves toiled quietly and loyally in the fields—a notion not entirely lacking in Samuel Jennings’ anti-slavery painting of 1792, the first of its kind by an American artist [figure 1]—for some of us the sheer existence of a black Revolutionary generation may come as news from a buried past.

Since that fateful day in the summer of 1619 when twenty kidnapped Africans dragged their feet onto American soil, the Nation’s slaves had never rested in their chains. Emerging now from the enforced anonymity of

Entries are arranged to correspond to exhibit sequence.
Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.
Figure numbers refer to those reproduced in the text.

1. Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences

Samuel Jennings (active in Philadelphia 1787 to ca. 1792)

Oil on canvas, 1792

60¼ x 73

Lent by Library Company of Philadelphia

Figure 1

2. *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*

by William C. Nell

Boston, 1855

Lent by Library of Congress, Rare Books Division

Figure 2

3. *Service of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812*

by William C. Nell

Boston, 1851

Lent by Howard University Library

4. *The Loyalty and Devotion of Colored Americans in the Revolution and the War of 1812*

by William Lloyd Garrison

Boston, 1861

Lent by Library of Congress, Rare Books Division

5. Advertisement, William Brown of Framingham, Massachusetts, for his runaway slave, "Crispas"

Boston Gazette, October 2, 1750

From original in Massachusetts Historical Society

Figure 4

6. "The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street, Boston, on 5 March 1770, by a party of the 29th Regiment"

Paul Revere (1735-1818)

Line engraving, State II, 1770

9⅞ x 8⅞

National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection

Figure 3

7. Broadside, "An account of a late Military Massacre at Boston, or the consequences of quartering troops in a populous well-regulated town, taken from the *Boston Gazette*, March 12, 1770"

Engraved and printed by Paul Revere

19 x 15⅞

From original in The New-York Historical Society

8. Diagram of the Boston Massacre, drawn for use in the subsequent trial

Paul Revere (1735-1818)

Ink on paper, 1770

8¼ x 13

From original in Boston Public Library, Mellen Chamberlain Autograph Collection

Figure 5

9. Verdict of the coroner's jury upon the body of Michael Johnson

[Crispus Attucks]

March 6, 1770

12¼ x 7⅞

Lent by The Bostonian Society

10. *The Trial of William Weems, James Hartegan . . . for the murder of Crispus Attucks . . .*

Boston, 1770

Lent by Williston Memorial Library, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts

11. Entry from diary of John Adams, July 1773: Letter of Adams (pseudonym "Crispus Attucks") to Governor Thomas Hutchinson

From original in Massachusetts Historical Society

Figure 6

12. "The Boston Massacre . . . Commemorative Festival in Faneuil Hall," with speeches by William C. Nell, Dr. John Rock, Theodore Weld, and Wendell Philips

The Liberator, March 12, 1858

From original in Library of Congress

13. Letter, Frederick Douglass to the Citizens' Committee

October 5, 1888

10½ x 8, four pages

Lent by Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division

Only the last page of this letter is in Douglass's hand. The first three are written by the second Mrs. Douglass.

14. *A Memorial of Crispus Attucks, Samuel Maverick, James Caldwell, Samuel Gray, and Patrick Carr*

The Boston City Council

Boston, 1889

Lent by Library of Congress, Rare Books Division

Account of the ceremonies for the unveiling of the monument dedicated to those who fell in the Boston Massacre.

15. *The Appendix: Or, Some Observations on the Expediency of the Petition of the Africans*

by "A Lover of Constitutional Liberty"

Boston, 1773

Lent by Library of Congress, Rare Books Division