

TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES: DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

“He enlisted to obtain his freedom”: Slavery and Freedom in the American Revolution

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On March 18, 1818, *An Act to provide for certain persons engaged in the land and naval services of the United States in the Revolutionary War* became law. It provided a lifetime pension for those who had served nine months or longer in the Continental army or navy. Officers would receive twenty dollars per month; enlisted men would receive eight. Not all veterans were eligible, however. Former soldiers and sailors needed to be resident citizens of the United States and of “reduced circumstances in life.” Pension applicants also were required to state under oath that they had served and to provide details of their service. Further, they would need to declare that they were in serious economic need.

Among the first soldiers to apply for these pensions was a man named Cato Greene. Just two weeks after the pension law went into effect, he began to gather the necessary legal paperwork. The commander of his regiment, the First Rhode Island, attested that “Cato Green, a man of colour, in the year 1778, inlisted [sic] ... into the Regiment [then] commanded by Colonel Greene of the Rhode Island Line, on the continental establishment.” The 1818 pension law required that Greene have served for at least nine months. In fact, he remained in the army until June 15, 1783, when General George Washington issued him an honorable discharge certificate.¹ Greene included this document with his successful pension application. He was awarded a lifetime stipend of eight dollars per month effective April 3, 1818.

Two years later, Congress enacted further requirements for pension recipients. Not only did the pensioner need to affirm that he was in “reduced circumstances,” he now needed to submit an inventory of all his worldly possessions. No pensioner would continue to receive his monthly stipend after March 4, 1820, until he “shall have exhibited to some court of record ... a schedule, subscribed by him containing his whole estate and income (his necessary clothing and bedding excepted)” Just over 6,500 former soldiers lost their pensions as a result of this new requirement. In 1823, Congress passed another law to reinstate some of the lost pensions.²

¹See “Discharge Certificate for Private Cato Greene from Military Service, Rhode Island, 06/15/1783,” <http://research.archives.gov/description/7455392>.

²William Henry Glasson, *History of Military Pension Legislation in the United States*, New York, 1900, a doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, available at: <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=>

By June 6, 1820, the eighty-year-old Greene had submitted the necessary inventory of his possessions and never lost his pension. His property consisted of, he said, “One acre of land in Cranston [Rhode Island], and a very old house thereon, 4 chairs very old, some knives and forks and 1 table.” Further, he was “so old as to be unable to work.”³ He was twice widowed and had no children to help support him. He died at the age of 86 in September 1826.

Cato Greene’s fascinating pension application is contained within the holdings of the National Archives. In addition to describing his property, his 1820 affidavit also provides biographical detail of his life in Africa and subsequent enslavement. He stated that “he was a native of Guinea [in west Africa] and brought to this country and sold as a slave” in Rhode Island. He was enslaved by William Greene, governor of Rhode Island from 1778 to 1786. After years of enslavement, Cato Greene was quite clear regarding his motivation for enlisting in the Continental Army. During the war, he stated, “he enlisted to obtain his freedom.”⁴

Since Greene was enslaved, enlisting became an option only when the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a slave enlistment law in February 1778 permitting it. Throughout the Revolution, there had been significant disagreements among Americans regarding the enlistment of free blacks or slaves. For example, Rhode Island had excluded blacks from service prior to the February 1778 law. However, pressing manpower needs briefly overcame this bias.⁵ Rhode Island, due to British occupation of Newport and a large portion of the rest of the state, could not meet its congressionally-assigned enlistment quota. For a majority of the Rhode Island General Assembly, allowing slaves to serve as soldiers seemed to offer a solution. The slave enlistment law stated, “Whereas, for the preservation of the rights and liberties of the United States, it is necessary that the whole powers of government should be exerted in recruiting Continental battalions . . . [i]t is voted and resolved, that every able-bodied negro, mulatto, or Indian man slave in this state, may enlist . . . to serve during the

²(...continued)

P6FDAAAIAAJ&dq=%22Military+Pension+Legislation%22&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=64NB10xJUe&sig=qkioVACgY-p2qWqod5FdgBtGCfl@sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result. Cited in Will Graves, “Pension Acts: An Overview of Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Legislation and the Southern Campaign Pension Transcription Project” at <http://revwarapps.org/revwar-pension-acts.htm>.

³See “Pension Affidavit of Cato Greene, 06/06/1820,” <http://research.archives.gov/description/7455390>.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Michael Lee Lanning, *African Americans in the Revolutionary War* (New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 73-81.

continuance of the present war with Great Britain.”⁶ For their military service, each new soldier would be “discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been encumbered with any kind of servitude or slavery.” Their former owners could receive up to 120 pounds in compensation. William Greene, for example, received 120 pounds for allowing Cato to enlist in the Continental Army.⁷

The slave enlistment law remained in effect for only four months. In June 1778, a newly elected legislature quickly overturned it. But Cato Green and the other slaves who had enlisted were allowed to continue to serve. The law had been controversial from the start. Indeed, some Rhode Island legislators issued a formal dissent when it passed. The dissenters stated that they had logistical concerns. More importantly, however, they also feared that slave regiments would appear antithetical to the philosophical underpinnings of the Revolution. They wrote, “The raising of such a regiment ... would ... produce an opinion in the world, that the state had purchased a band of slaves to be employed in the defence of the rights and liberties of our country, which is wholly inconsistent with those principles of liberty and constitutional government, for which we are so ardently contending”⁸

The conflicting opinions raised by the Rhode Island slave enlistment law highlight the complexity of the issue of race and slavery in the newly formed United States. Were the dissenting Rhode Island legislators concerned only about slaves serving as soldiers but not opposed to the institution of slavery generally? Indeed, Rhode Island and other northern states were involved directly and indirectly with slavery through the so-called triangular trade. Cato Greene might well have been brought to North America on a ship owned by a Rhode Islander. The Rhode Island legislature’s debate and Cato Greene’s pension application provide us with a potentially quite insightful view of the complex intellectual, economic, and social landscape of late eighteenth-century America.

This economic intertwining of northern as well as southern states with the institution of slavery might also shed further light on the often discussed contradiction of the Revolutionary cause. The United States fought for both the “unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and maintained slavery. The inherent contradictions between the language of the Declaration of Independence and the reality

⁶*Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, edited by John Russell Bartlett, vol. III, 358-359. See: <http://books.google.com/books?id=9IsaAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP9#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁷*Rhode Island Historical Tracts*, No. 9, Providence, 1880, “The Treasurer’s Account of the Negro Slaves Inlisted into the Continental Battalions, to whom They Did Belong and the Valuation of Each Slave, with Notes Concerning them, 1778,” 53. See: <http://books.google.com/books?id=LYNAQAAMAAJ&lpg=PR1&ots=R19SfJzbKl&dq=Rhode%20Island%20Historical%20Tracts%2C%20No.%209%22%20%201880&pg=RA3-PA53#v=onepage&q=%22cato%20greene%22&f=false>.

⁸*Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, vol. III, 361.

of slavery would not be resolved until slavery's abolition nearly ninety years later. Cato Greene and others could not wait so long. Greene seized the opportunity offered by the Rhode Island legislature. He won his freedom by literally putting his life on the line as a soldier.⁹

⁹Cato Green's pension affidavit and the honorable discharge from the army that he received from George Washington are currently part of the National Archives' Records of Rights exhibit. See: <http://recordsofrights.org/>.