



# LESSONS IN PATRIOTISM FROM BLACK HEROES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Unfortunately, far too many Black Americans are told that they should not feel at home in this country. Powerful institutions in our nation—from the media and academia to Hollywood and government—tell us that America is a systemically racist country, irredeemably stained by the painful legacy of slavery. By emphasizing that what we have in common (sharing the promise of America) is far less important than our differences (skin color), these efforts serve only to divide us along racial lines and pit Americans against each other.

For example, recently, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (funded by American taxpayers) posted the following: “Systems of oppression are individual, institutional, and societal and their effects on people have a long history deeply rooted in American culture.” (*Social identities and systems of oppression 2021*).

It is undeniable that throughout American history, institutions of oppression, such as slavery and Jim Crow laws, have had long lasting impacts. These actions were rooted in blatantly racist and evil ideas, yet their existence became incompatible with the more deeply rooted values of America—freedom, equality, and self-governance. Incorporating these values in our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights made a belief that “all men are created equal” systemic in American society. While pockets of systemic racism exist in society, America and its founding are not systemically racist. Over time, the values and aspirations of our Founder Fathers have always triumphed against the immoral institutions that still existed when America’s history began, and those established in later stages.

The greatness of America, however, lies in the fact that through the Lord’s guidance, imperfect people were able to set in motion the principles which catapulted the United States into the greatest and most prosperous nation in the world. Americans of all skin colors have fought and died for the ideas and ambitions espoused by men like Thomas Jefferson, *in spite* of their personal flaws, not in agreement with them. It will always be a testament to how virtuous our most deeply rooted values—freedom, equality, self-governance—were and still are today.

The Boston Massacre in 1770 is often cited as the event with the first casualties of the American Revolution, even though the “shot heard round’ the world” would not be fired for five more years. At this protest-turned-massacre, five American patriots died, and six more were wounded when British soldiers opened fire on unarmed colonists. The very first man killed in the massacre, and therefore the first death of the American Revolution, was a whaler named Crispus Attucks—a man of mixed African and Indigenous ancestry. (*Crispus Attucks*

(*U.S. National Park Service*)). In this sense, America's first spark towards revolution and independence began with the selfless sacrifice of an African American in pursuit of freedom.

Once the battles of Lexington and Concord kicked off, and the Revolution formally began, Black patriots were once again eager to join the front lines and make the ultimate sacrifice for the American experiment in self-governance. And while many enslaved people fought because military service was a means of gaining their freedom, other freed Black men fought for the dream of a free and prosperous America.

One striking example is Barzillai Lew, a free Black man who served his country in the French and Indian War as a fifer and drummer and later fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill. (*Barzillai Lew (U.S. National Park Service)*). He was one of an estimated three dozen Black men at that famous battle.

Another great Black patriot is Peter Salem. Salem originally served as one of the first "minute-men" at Lexington and Concord, and he was then freed by his owner so that he could stay enlisted in the Continental Army. Later, at the Battle of Bunker Hill, Salem gained fame for killing Major John Pitcairn, an influential Marine Service Officer fighting on behalf of the Royal Navy. (Coleman, 2020).

Black patriots left a mark on the American Revolution collectively, too. In fact, one of the most famous units during the Revolution was the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. This unit was comprised mainly of Black soldiers, all of whom showed valor and great success in battle. One French officer in Virginia noted when these soldiers were gathered, they were the "most neatly dressed, the best under arms and the most precise in all their maneuvers." (Coleman, 2020).

Valor on the battlefield was not the only way Black patriots made an impact. Some left their mark by working as spies. One individual, James Armistead Lafayette, posed as a runaway slave and was hired by the British to spy on the American army. Little did the British know, Lafayette was acting as a double agent and instead spied on them. He first served under the turncoat, Benedict Arnold, and then under Lord Cornwallis as a double agent. In this risky undercover role, Armistead delivered falsified reports to the British about the Americans' movement while writing very accurate and detailed explanations of the British plans for the Americans. One of his most significant accomplishments was relaying information about 10,000 British reinforcements en route to the Battle of Yorktown. When General Lafayette and General Washington blocked these reinforcements, the Americans won what became the final battle of the Revolution. Without Lafayette's message, history may have played out very differently. (*James Armistead 2020*).

As the immortal stories of these patriots demonstrate, the American Revolution both began and ended with the sacrifice and bravery of Black Americans. The truth is, Black patriots were instrumental in the founding of this country, and to claim that our nation's ideals are inherently racist blinds society from the reality of who made the ultimate sacrifice almost 250 years ago.

During this very same time period, the notions of natural rights and liberty were being asserted for the first time, most notably through the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. Ultimately, the principles that underwrote these two founding documents

were incompatible with slavery and put the barbaric practice of it on a path to eventual extinction.

Consider the following: during the Revolution, the nascent state of Pennsylvania passed the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. While this law did not ban slavery immediately, it abolished the practice over time, along with making the importation of slaves illegal and requiring owners to register their slaves. (Cannon).

In this case, simply stating the facts is not enough. To truly understand the hearts of these patriots, examining the words of the law reveals the true intentions and values of the first Americans. The introduction to the 1780 Pennsylvania law stated:

*“When we contemplate our abhorrence of that condition to which the arms and tyranny of Great Britain were exerted to reduce us; when we look back on the variety of dangers to which we have been exposed, and how miraculously our wants in many instances have been supplied, and our deliverances wrought, when even hope and human fortitude have become unequal to the conflict; we are unavoidably led to a serious and grateful sense of the manifold blessings which we have undeservedly received from the hand of that Being from whom every good and perfect gift cometh. Impressed with these ideas, we conceive that it is our duty, and we rejoice that it is in our power to extend a portion of that freedom to others, which hath been extended to us; and a release from that state of thralldom to which we ourselves were tyrannically doomed, and from which we have now every prospect of being delivered. **It is not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of an Almighty Hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile as well as the most barren parts of the earth are inhabited by men of complexions different from ours, and from each other; from whence we may reasonably, as well as religiously, infer, that He who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally his care and protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract his mercies.** We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage.” (An act for the gradual abolition of slavery. (1780))*

From this initial anti-slavery act flowed many others. In 1783, a Massachusetts court held under the state constitution that slavery was illegal. In response, the legislature banned slavery in Massachusetts immediately. The following year, Connecticut and Rhode Island followed the Pennsylvania model and enacted their own gradual abolition laws. (Cannon). Meanwhile, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 (which helped set governance laws west of the Appalachians) included a ban on slavery in all new territories.

As demonstrated by these laws, the end of slavery would ultimately come about by the very ideals America was founded upon: freedom, equality, and self-governance. According to our forefathers, human equality extended to all people regardless of “complexion.” Even though slavery was not immediately abolished, the principles they enacted ensured that no such institution could ever be compatible with the doctrines of America.

Many of the Founding Fathers themselves also took ardent positions on abolishing slavery and the ultimate truth of equality regardless of skin tone. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, said that “their natural faculties are as good as ours” when dealing with the question of whether Whites were superior to Blacks. (Miller, 1964, p. 41). Likewise, George Washington

wrote “there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery].” (*Founders online: From George Washington to Robert Morris, 12 April 1786*).

John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, shared similar views with Hamilton. Jay believed “that men should pray and fight for their own freedom and yet keep others in slavery is certainly acting a very inconsistent, as well as unjust and perhaps impious, part.” (*The founding fathers and slavery 2022*).

The very author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, realized the immorality of slavery. In his original draft of the Declaration, he criticized King George III in writing:

*“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, & murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.”* (*Declaring independence: Drafting the documents Jefferson's "original rough draught" of The declaration of independence 1995*)

This is not to say that the first Americans were perfect men without flaw—that is certainly not the case. The reason the above quote was not in the final Declaration of Independence was because of vehement objections from the Southern colonies. However, these snapshots do demonstrate the sentiment shared by our Founders regarding equality. In this manner, slavery was ultimately a deviation from American principles rather than an embrace of them.

Even the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, provided an avenue for the end of the slave trade. Because the Constitution needed southern states to agree on ratification, it initially provided that it would not prohibit the “importation of such Persons” until 1808. (U.S. Const. art. I, § 9). Right on cue, in 1806, Thomas Jefferson called for a ban on the importation of slaves in his State of the Union Address. In 1807, a bill was proposed, passed by Congress, and signed by President Jefferson that abolished the slave trade on January 1, 1808, the earliest date possible. (Lloyd & Martinez).

The story above does not ignore the evils of racism or slavery that existed throughout our history, nor does it try to justify these actions. The history of any nation has its sins, and we have plenty of them here. However, the true story of Black history in American life does reveal one fact that gets left out of the Progressive narrative: America is not a racist nation. America is not a country founded on systemic oppression. Instead, America was built on the values of freedom, equality, and self-governance, and these values serve as an eternal promise to all her citizens.

Throughout our history, America has always fought for those who are oppressed. Be it the colonists under the tyrannical hands of the British, the slaves in bondage to their owners, or

the citizens of other nations under the abusive hands of an authoritarian fist, America has stood for freedom throughout her life. America does not claim to be perfect; she only claims that she was founded on the pursuit of freedom, and we will pursue that noble promise to the end of our days. We look back with gratitude to our Founders, not because of their perfection, but rather the exceptional actions that God worked through them to found the greatest nation on earth.

Even in the modern-day, people of power with money and influence have sown seeds of racism and division to tarnish the foundation laid by our founding fathers. Planned Parenthood and a flawed welfare system, both powered by our tax dollars to some degree, are evidence of manipulation for selfish gain. However, this does not mean that America is a systemically racist nation. People of goodwill are waking up to the fact that racism is not good for America. As the one blood human race, living in America, we must work together to overcome this stumbling block that prevents true greatness.

The radical left claims that America does not have the interest of Black citizens in mind, but this denies what many Black patriots fought for. When the Black colonists took up arms, it was because they saw the hopeful future that could be achieved when the ideals of America sprung forth.

In closing, there is one more Black Patriot to highlight as proof of American values in action. Lemuel Haynes was abandoned by his family at only five months old and sold into indentured servitude. In 1774, he enlisted as a minuteman during the American Revolution when he was freed. Haynes later became the first Black man in the United States to be ordained as a minister, where he pastored churches with both all-white and mixed-race congregations. During one sermon on George Washington's Birthday, Haynes looked back to his past war experience and declared,

*"Perhaps it is not ostentatious [bragging] in the speaker to observe that in early life he devoted all for the sake of freedom and independence, and endured frequent campaigns in their defense, and has never viewed the sacrifice too great." (Lemuel Haynes 2021).*

The Black Patriots of the American Revolution fought and died because they believed that the American promise held true as their promise, too. It is shameful when educators try to teach Black History separate from the story of American history and tell our young people that American history does not apply to them because they look a certain way. This attitude is a betrayal of the sacrifices Black Americans have made in pursuit of American values. Instead, we must come together as one people under our shared values, because at the end of the day, Black history *is* American history.

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