

Black Soldiers in Defense of America

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to the media did Johnson attract a small bit of attention.

On the subject of women in the military, another African-American soldier by the name of Deborah Sampson Gannett bravely defended her country during the Revolutionary War.

Other black men like Salem Poor and Peter Salem proudly served their country during the Revolutionary War, yet their skin color mattered in the eyes of white America. At the beginning of the war, George Washington told his military commanders not to hire any "stroller, Negro, or vaga-

bond." The British then seized upon the opportunity to enlist multitudes of black fighters, promising them freedom when the English won the war.

When England lost the war, many African Americans were forced back to their plantations and brutally punished. Others made it out of the New York harbor in overcrowded British ships, only to find their selves taken to the West Indies or the freezing climate of Nova Scotia.

Sadly, many blacks died in the harbor. The ships were overloaded and the British had to refuse them entry or throw them overboard. Those who could not

swim drowned. Many who made it back to shore were met by angry crowds of whites who beat, shot or hung them on the spot.

By 1777, George Washington's Army had dwindled to only 1,400. Frightened America might lose the war, Congress immediately

changed the laws and black soldiers were allowed to join. In 1778, Washington's own unit had 42 black men. By the end of the war, more than 5,000 African-American soldiers had fought in an army of 300,000.

Women sometimes disguised

race of each man in their rosters.

Throughout the War of 1812 and the Seminole Wars of 1816-1842 black soldiers continued to fight bravely and impress. Black men proved they were as good as any white man on the battlefield. Some historians believe the men from Africa were better. Even the Indians were astonished about how tough an adversary the black man was.

During a major battle on Lake Erie with the British during the war of 1812, a black sailor named Cyrus Tiffany braved British fire while rushing through a burning and severely damaged ship. He lowered a row boat and used his body as a shield to save the captain of his ship.

But on land, most black volunteers were still being rejected. A law in Louisiana allowed free blacks with more than \$300 worth of land to join the military. In 1803, blacks and a white officer formed the Battalion of Free Men of Color and opened the doors for more black soldiers. Andrew Jackson approved of the unit and offered to pay them the same wages



Diego, the first mate to Sir Francis Drake, as portrayed by Kevin "Fairfax" Williams.

a most humiliating defeat for England and became a turning point for America in the war.

Although the black fighters received high praise for their part in the victory, most were returned to their prior life as slaves in the South. Black soldiers who fought on the side of the British were severely punished.

Although the initial reasoning behind the Civil War of 1861 to 1865 was to keep the Union together, the issue of slavery was also a driving force.

Abolitionist Fred Douglass insisted that President Lincoln realize the need for more troops, telling Lincoln that men of all colors would be needed to win the war. Douglass also felt that black women could be used in support services such as nursing, food preparation, supplies, and more.

Despite much objection, the Secretary of War approved putting together all-black regiments. In January of 1863, the 54th Massachusetts (Colored) Infantry Regiment was formed. The bravery of the 54th was depicted in the 1990 movie "Glory."

Black soldiers received no pay during the Civil War's first year. By 1865, over 180,000 black men fought in the Army for the Union, making up over 10 percent of the Northern fighting force. Yet less than 100 of these African-Ameri-



A bust depicts the African soldier Estevancio, also known as "Little Steven" who landed in present day Florida with Spanish explorers in the 14th Century.

can soldiers were promoted to the rank of officer.

By 1862, 30,000 African Americans served in the Navy out of a force of 118,000.

One of the most noted stories of the Civil War era was of a black boat pilot. Robert Smalls and seven black slaves commandeered the Confederate ship Planter and brought it into Union territory. As a reward, Smalls was appointed an officer in the South Carolina militia. He was then promoted to an officer and given command of the Planter which was used to fight against the South.



An actor interprets the role of Abraham Pearce, the first African American known to legally have the right to bear arms in 1643.

themselves as men and fought along side their husbands or other family members. A black woman by the name of Cathay Williams changed her name to William Cathay and fought for 18 months. The second time she was wounded a doctor discovered her secret. Her injuries were too serious to go back and fight again. Reluctantly, she resigned from



The media and Army paid little attention to Shoshana Johnson who was wounded and taken prisoner of war in Iraq, compared to her white counterpart Jessica Lynch.

the military, receiving an honorable medical discharge. Some time later when her secret was discovered, she was praised by military personnel for her willingness to fight for her country and bravery in battle.

In contrast, the United States Navy accepted black fighters without any resistance. They needed good fighting men and overlooked the racial issue. By the mid-1770s Navy recruiting posters could be found most anywhere, reading "Ye able backed sailors, men white or black, to volunteer for naval service in ye interest of freedom." However, the Navy decided not to list the

as white soldiers, \$124 and 160 acres of land.

New York became the first state to openly seek black soldiers in the military during the War of 1812. By 1814, between two and three thousand black soldiers were in America's fighting force.

Still, when the British were threatening the city of New Orleans, local military officials refused help from the Battalion of Free Men of Color. Finally, General Jackson ordered the deployment of the black troops. When the British attacked, the Free Men of Color held the center ground of the battlefield, defending two artillery units. It was considered

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