

The “Black Regiment”

Of the American Revolution

Bill to Create the Black Regiment

On February 14, 1778, the Rhode Island Assembly voted to allow “every able-bodied Negro, mulatto, or Indian slave in this state to enlist into either of the Continental Battalions being raised.” The Assembly said that: “every slave so enlightening shall, upon the passing muster before Colonel Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress and be absolutely free.” Owners of the slaves enlisted were to be compensated by the Assembly for the market value of the slave.

- Every able-bodied Black and Native American man could enlist
- If served through the war soldier would have freedom
- Their owners were paid
- 225 men enlisted, 140 Blacks so was called “Black Regiment”

The Law was repealed a few months later.



Valley Forge Roots of Regiment Idea

Before 1778 Blacks had not been allowed to serve in the Continental Army. Rhode Island had trouble meeting the required number of soldiers with just white men. To solve the problem, General Varnum wrote to George Washington with the idea of allowing the ranks to be filled with free Blacks, enslaved Blacks and Indigenous People. He asked Washington to send soldiers from Valley Forge to recruit these men. In the Preamble to the letter, Varnum wrote that “the wisest, freest, and bravest nations having liberated their slaves (had) enlisted them as soldiers to fight in defense of their country.” Varnum lists the Field Officers in Command as Colo. Greene, Lt Colo. Olney and Major Ward. George Washington did not respond to Varnum’s letter, but he sent it to the Rhode Island Governor to handle.

They were officially the First Rhode Island Regiment, but people called them “The Black Regiment.”



Reasons for Joining

Economic benefits: steady pay, food, clothing, and equipment. Finding employment was hard for free Blacks and indigenous men. There was a promise of equal pay as other soldiers.

More control of their own lives: This was a way of getting out of enslavement if they served until the end of the war.

Belief in American Cause: Many Black Patriots hoped that core messages of the American Declaration of Independence would someday lead to an end of slavery.

Idea of the adventure of military life, travel, being part of a unit.

Some enslaved men were forced into service by their white enslavers. Masters who may have been drafted into service could send a substitute.

Black Regiment's Service

The soldiers in the Black Regiment had only 3 months to prepare before they would see battle. The White officers put them through training drills, but there was little confidence that the men would make good soldiers. Their uniforms were basic white hunting shirts. The regiment was part of Patriot troops trying to free Aquidneck Island from British control in August of 1778. The French allies who were suppose to help left for Boston after storms damaged their ships, so the Americans had to retreat off the island. The Black Regiment was positioned defending a redoubt (earthen work fortification) off of West Road in Portsmouth. This was an important spot to hold the American line.

Three times the regiment pushed back Hessians (German) soldiers. This gave the Americans time to get off the Island. This fight was known as the Battle of Rhode Island. After the British left Rhode Island, the Black Regiment worked with French Engineers to build Butts Hill Fort in 1780-1781. They left with French and American forces for battles in the South and they fought in the last battle at Yorktown in 1781. After the war they had their freedom, but their families did not. Life was often difficult, especially for those wounded in battle. Their bravery helped Americans accept their worth. Slavery began to be abolished.



Painting of Black Regiment Soldier