

# Crossing the Lines: African-Americans in the New York City Region during the British Occupation, 1776-1783

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Evert Byvanck waited until he could actually hear the Battle of New York before vacating his country house in August 1776. He had taken the precaution of moving out of his city residence before the cannon thundered from across the East River. Now, on August 31, Byvanck realized that his person and possessions would not even be safe at his Corlear's Hook country estate. Consequently his slaves, Sam, Cato, and Prince, loaded up Byvanck's skiff with two chests of clothes, one box of earthenware, one box of periwigs, and a bundle of clothes for themselves. They sailed up the river to Harlem where the three slaves hauled the boatload of articles to a gentleman's house near the slip. Next morning, Byvanck dispatched Sam and Cato to help Byvanck's son move his household to the new family refuge at Horseneck, Connecticut. The elder Byvanck instructed his remaining slave, Prince, to load a cart with his master's small trunk, the master's son's books, and a treasured spy glass, after which master and slave proceeded to Horseneck.

Once they had arrived in Connecticut, Byvanck sent Cato with a bundle of clothes to his wife and child at Alexander Forbush's house in Hackensack, New Jersey, where Cato was to work for his victuals until Byvanck needed him. With Cato gone, and Prince busy setting up the new household, Byvanck had to hire a Negro man named Jack to accompany Sam and his eldest son to Manhattan, where they were to retrieve chests of clothes, two feather beds, furniture, linens, guns, powderhorns, saddles, bridles, and Byvanck's sword. Sam had hardly returned from that excursion when he turned around again toward Manhattan, this time with the elder Byvanck, to gather up yet more of the contents of the country house.

By the time they left on this trip, the war had reached their once-tranquil country retreat. A heavy cannonade peppered the Evert estate with shot and ball. Byvanck climbed over the back fence and crept up to the house to find the overseer and his family taking shelter behind the building. With much prodding, the overseer ventured down to unlock the back gate so that Sam and the wagon could come up to the house. Whether crouching on top of the rig or leading the cart by the horse's reins, Sam made a clear target for the guns across the river. Yet the cannon's fire was imprecise, and so the slave and cart negotiated a cratered field with no incident. Next day, Sam drove Byvanck into the now quiet city, where the slave ran errands while his master got a shave and had his wig dressed. Byvanck bought a quarter mutton and "lett Sam carry it to my House." But no sooner had the turnips and other greens

flavored the meat, than the final alarm warned that the King's troops were about to land in the neighborhood. Byvanck ordered his man Sam to harness the horse to the chair and off they went to Connecticut.<sup>1</sup>

In their complex, multi-stage retreat to safety, the Byvanck family made not a single move without its slaves. Every juncture of Evert Byvanck's progress featured Sam, Prince, or Cato. For one solid month, from mid-August to mid-September, Sam lifted upholstered chairs, looking glasses, and periwig boxes onto carts, and then coaxed horses or oxen to move the tightly-packed vehicles over the rubble roads of Manhattan and the rutted lanes of rural Westchester county and southern Connecticut. In terms of energy expended, this month of toil may have been nothing out of the ordinary for Sam. As a slave, his daily routine revolved around the needs and wants of his master. In all of the various exoduses from the city between the spring of 1775 and the summer of 1776, thousands of enslaved people like Sam did the actual moving of people and goods to safe havens.

The enslaved population was mobile in other ways as well, often independent of the wishes of their masters. The war provided unique opportunities for freedom as British and Americans vied for the labor of African Americans, at the same time striking a blow to the other side by depriving it of black workers. Shortly after installing the Byvanck family in their new abode, one of the Byvanck slaves ran away to Long Island. Overcoming fear of the unknown, the new refugee placed his bet on the British as the more likely liberators of America's enslaved population. Thousands of African Americans did the same, creating another network of people on the move in the region of occupied New York. Like so many of their white counterparts, the blacks put their personal hopes above the dictates of political or military authorities. They were certainly savvy enough to realize that an ardent attachment to King or Congress was unlikely to be of benefit to them. So they cautiously maneuvered among the rival claims of both sides, ever alert for openings that the war itself might furnish for a better life. Whereas the consolidation of controls over the black population in the pre-revolutionary period may have reinforced apathy and fatalism, the new wartime opportunities provided substantive options to the enslaved. On the other hand, this new freedom of movement behind British lines fostered tensions, not least of which occurred in the black community itself, for there were free and unfree blacks, and the opportunities for men far outweighed those for women. Still, the presence of the British army in the New York theater throughout the war provided unaccustomed leverage for blacks and seems to have inspired those who moved into the city to gain their freedom.

Enslaved men like Cato, Sam, and Prince were a striking presence in revolutionary New York. Among the novelties of the colonies noted by newcomers was the presence of substantial numbers of African-Americans on

the islands of New York Bay. One Hessian soldier found a significant number of slaves present in the city when the British force marched into town, as well as some free blacks on Staten and Blackwell's Islands. The use of slave labor was so widespread on Staten Island that non-propertied white men, unable to find employment there, tended to make their living on the sea.

The Hessians took note of the African-American community not only because it was an interesting novelty, but because it constituted a substantial part of the New York Bay population. According to the 1771 Census, blacks comprised 14 percent of the city's inhabitants. In the western counties of Long Island, almost a quarter of the population had African ancestry. On Staten Island, one in five faces was black. The African-American population threshed the grain and herded stock on Long Island. Blacks swept the chimneys, drove the carriages, and dressed the hair of their masters in the great houses of New York. They worked the docks, cobbled shoes, and performed other artisanal trades in the public world of the city's business community.<sup>2</sup>

African-Americans had been performing these jobs since the early days of Dutch rule in the island city. With the introduction of British control in 1664, the laws governing black life became more restrictive. On two occasions, the city's blacks witnessed attempts by groups of their brethren to use violence against the white regime. In both cases, in 1712 and 1741, the white community crushed the agitators, and then passed more repressive laws to further curb the movement of the city's black population.<sup>3</sup>

When Parliament passed tax measures in the 1760s, thousands of Americans raised their voices in protest. Men who had taken for granted the presence of slave labor and expressed nary a moral quibble over its morality, suddenly thundered about the great evil. Of course, these blistering condemnations which appeared in American newspapers had nothing to do with the slavery hitherto known and lived by Americans, but with a slavery to come — an imminent slavery that the English would foist on the Americans if not stopped. During the summer of the Stamp Act controversy, New Yorkers read and discussed a series of articles in the *New York Gazette or Weekly Post Boy* written by John Morin Scott under the alias "Freeman." "The English government cannot long act towards a Part of its Dominions upon principles diametrically opposite to its own," claimed Scott, "without losing itself in the Slavery it would impose upon the Colonies." Another animated essayist on the Stamp Act crisis envisioned slavery's diffusion over time. "Awake! Awake, my countrymen, and, by a regular and legal opposition defeat the designs of those who enslave us and our Posterity." The visionary writers of the protest movement could see far afield in some respects, but their scope did not encompass the slave advertisements just inches from their editorials in the city's press.<sup>4</sup>

Slaves were largely unaffected by the British revenue acts. Taxes and duties were the headaches of free people. The enslaved community had nonetheless imbibed a constant stream of rhetoric about the natural-born rights of everyman, and more importantly, about the evil of slavery. New Yorkers had hitherto glided along with this largely unquestioned fixture in the colony's life. Even though the debate had steered clear of existing chattel slavery, the notion of slavery's evil essence was sounded again and again during the revolutionary crisis.

In the ten years after the Stamp Act, blacks also witnessed their neighbors challenging the natural order of things. While the enslaved community realized that the rhetoric of freedom and slavery did not apply to them, they could take some heart in the occasional pronouncements of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, a small group in New York. Even though a number of New York Quakers owned slaves, individuals in their community had testified against chattel slavery since early in the century. In 1718, an influential Friend from Flushing, William Burling, publicly proclaimed his concern in meeting about the enslavement of human beings. The sporadic nature of these pronouncements in an enclosed religious meeting of a small and normally quiet sect may not have been much of a beacon to the oppressed. But blacks might have gained hope from Pennsylvania, where in 1755 the powerful Yearly Meeting of Friends condemned the slave trade, and in 1758 placed offending members "under discipline." Three years later, the Pennsylvania Assembly slapped a prohibitive duty on each slave imported into the colony.<sup>5</sup>

Not until the eve of the Revolution did New York Quakers move on the slavery question. Spurred by the Philadelphia Meeting pronouncement, New York Friends moved at their 1774 Yearly Meeting to discipline those who bought or sold slaves or those who held slaves past the age of 18 (if a woman) and 21 (if a man). Such "disorderly persons" would be put "under dealings," that is, a committee of Friends would visit them to discuss this issue. In May, 1776 a committee charged that "a considerable number" of Friends still owned slaves. Not until late 1778 did the meeting disown its first two slaveowners in the New York area.<sup>6</sup>

Such movement on the slavery issue was in the future for Prince, Cato, and Sam in the summer of 1776. While they may have been aware of promising glimmerings from the small meeting house on Green Street, the actions of an eccentric little sect did not affect others' slaves. New York's enslaved community found more hopeful signs originating from English sources.<sup>7</sup>

An event that no American slave could ignore occurred in Virginia in November, 1775. That year, the debate about Parliament's power over the colonies had erupted in full-scale military action. Minutemen had faced off against the redcoats in Massachusetts; Americans had invaded Canada; and in Virginia, the royal governor, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, had fled to a

British warship in the face of a determined rebel force. Dunmore figured that this desperate situation called for desperate means. On board his floating haven on November 7, the royal governor issued a proclamation which declared "all indented servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty's troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing the colony to a proper sense of their duty, to His Majesty's crown and dignity." While inducing nightmares of slave insurrection in the dreams of whites, Dunmore's Proclamation gave concrete hope in the here-and-now that any male slave working for a rebel master could reap the benefits of freedom — determining his own destiny, protecting his family, and passing a legacy of freedom to his descendants.<sup>8</sup>

News of Dunmore's gamble raced up the coast; it took but a week to reach Philadelphia. There, a black man insulted a white "gentlewoman," and when scolded, spat back, "Stay you d[amne]d white bitch 'till Lord Dunmore and his black regiment come, and then we will see who is to take the wall."<sup>9</sup> In New York, a black woman named her son after Lord Dunmore, prompting the following lines, published in the *New York Journal*:

Hail! Doughty Ethiopian Chief!  
Though ignominious Negro Thief!  
This black shall prop thy sinking name,  
And damn thee to perpetual fame.<sup>10</sup>

American Whigs roundly condemned Dunmore's action, and in the process, insulted and vilified the black people who worked for them. Within a month, white revolutionaries had constructed their own story about Dunmore's proclamation. Enumerating all the possible ways that Dunmore could betray the black volunteers, they anticipated every fear experienced by blacks who contemplated a move to the British. Dunmore sold off some black volunteers to the West Indies, claimed the Americans, in order to finance his campaign. Others were coerced into back-breaking labor in the swamps, or were delivered back to masters who signed the Oath of Allegiance to the British. Any of the "unhappy creatures" who had second thoughts about joining the British, found themselves forced to stay as cannon fodder. The Americans tried to sow the minds of blacks outside Virginia with misgivings enough to keep them in their place.<sup>11</sup>

The American army was not about to emulate the British. The prospect of blacks with guns led the Americans to shoulder out slaves and freemen from their forces as early as mid-1775. In July, General Horatio Gates instructed recruiting officers not to enlist blacks. Washington later amended Gates' ruling by ordering that free blacks who had already enlisted could be re-enlisted. The Continental Congress then supported Washington's decision but closed the door on further black volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

The words and actions of both sides made it obvious to the observing slave that his chances for a better life rested with the British. To a white man like Lutheran minister Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the belief on the part of the black community that a British victory would mean universal manumission seemed preposterous. But to a black man sizing up the conduct of both sides, it is not at all surprising that he might decide to support the only party that had made a promising offer.

Still, it was the war itself that provided the real opportunities for black men and women. War upset the smooth-running combination of legal authority and neighborhood custom that upheld the institution of slavery. Chaos shook the mainstays of the social order to create new spaces and new options for oppressed people: the master's absence; additional opportunities for hiring oneself out given enlistment demands on poor white laborers; the value of a slave's muscle to both armies. The enslaved had more options than ever before, and they moved in various ways to improve their lot. Benjamin Quarles, the distinguished historian of blacks in the Revolution, encapsulated the community's motivation in this way: "The Negro's role in the revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle" — namely freedom.<sup>13</sup>

The enslaved community responded in different ways to their new opportunity. Some opted actively to support one side or the other; others chose to see what openings each new day would bring. Some blacks in the countryside around town had families, a bearable routine, and a decent master. They weighed the risks of running away, along with the probability of getting their entire family across military lines, and decided to stay with "the devil they knew." Others chose to support the American cause, figuring that if they proved themselves in the revolutionary war effort, they could make the words of the Declaration of Independence apply to them.<sup>14</sup>

A sizeable number of blacks, however, took another risk. They ran away from their masters and set their eyes on the Promised Land of English guarantees. Thus, "what in peacetime was a rivulet [of runaways] became in wartime a flood." A statistical study of runaway ads in the mid-Atlantic revolutionary era newspapers shows an enormous jump in number during the revolutionary period, particularly in the war years.<sup>15</sup>

On December 23, 1776, a refugee from the Beekman family made a simple notation in a pocket diary: "Hanover and John went off." Hanover and John, both in their early twenties, had served the wealthy Beekman family in New York City, and like Evert Byvanck's slaves, had assisted in moving their master's household, this time to Essex County, New Jersey. Like the Byvanck example and thousands of runaways before them, the Beekman slaves chose to risk capture in order to realize a better life. What propelled them to bolt is a mystery. Perhaps the enticing prospect of work for pay and freedom to go

where they would have emboldened them to fly from what they knew toward the unknown.

Of course, Beekman did not take this outrage lying down. Although he had moved out of the city, he enlisted the aid of a Tory printer in New York City, Hugh Gaine, to get his money's worth from his human investment. "You may well believe that this leaving me at this time, is very aggravating and ungrateful," wrote Beekman to Gaine. "The disappointment is the greater as they are both able and sober fellows and good [drivers?]." Determined never to have either man under his roof again, Beekman asked Gaine to have the men picked up and sold at either private sale or public vendue. Whether Gaine felt inclined to perform such a favor or not, the British did not allow such transactions. Thus we find that Hanover and John were subsequently seen "strolling about the town."<sup>16</sup>

Some runaways were sufficiently close to the city to avail themselves of support networks in their effort to escape. A thirty-year-old man named Pomp, described as Guinea-born but a good English speaker, fled his master in Poughkeepsie and was thought to be across the river in Ulster City with "some disaffected people." His master was convinced that he was bound for the British lines.<sup>17</sup>

While some fleeing slaves had undoubtedly planned their flight with such safe harbors in mind, others resorted to different means. The master of runaway Tom thought it probable that the slave would try to pass as a free Negro. Jabey's master conjectured that the thirty-five-year-old 6'3" runaway would head for the Hudson River and sign up on a ship. Other runaways used forged passes, or, if light-skinned, claimed they were white or painted their faces to enhance their light color.<sup>18</sup>

The master of a "Negro Girl" from Talbot County, Maryland, probably never dreamed that his "wench" would gather up her three-year-old child and attempt to reach the British army. Yet this desperate and hopeful woman did precisely that, though she fell just short of her dream. She was captured on the outskirts of Philadelphia and held until her master could claim her. Her captor placed an ad in the newspaper claiming that she was trying to reach the British army.<sup>19</sup>

Evidence of the black community's new mobility exists also in the letters of spurned masters who gripe about the scarcity of labor in their communities. With Hanover and John in New York City, William Beekman complained to his brother that there was no "boy" to be had in rural New Jersey. Even local farmers forbade their sons to work for anyone else. Another Beekman in Esopus, New York, grumbled that with the unannounced departure of his "once faithful [but] by now ungrateful villin" coachman (a white servant), he was "now obliged to do all the work" on his place since he could not "hire any Person here either black or white." Yet another Beekman refugee, this time

Gerard Beekman in Philadelphia, developed a new appreciation for his runaway slave; although the man was a “Teaser and a Drunkard,” he was the only slave left in the Beekman household. “My Wench and my Littal [York?] Sam is run to New York,” complained the now servantless merchant. Gerard Beekman was hurt and inconvenienced, but worst of all, he was a Master with no one left to master over. His fury was evident when he ended a letter to his brother with the request that his love be conveyed to his sisters and brothers and “all the wites in the house.” A fortnight later, Beekman had settled down and found it in his heart to send his love to *all* in the house.<sup>20</sup>

Americans took notice of the movement of blacks to British encampments throughout the war. They regularly scooped up slaves whom they suspected of planning to defect to the other side, subjecting them to incarceration and interrogation. Their masters would then be required to post a bond “for their Good Behavior in future,” thus guaranteeing added vigilance on the part of owners. New York authorities also regulated the types of servants allowed to accompany Loyalists sent to New York. Governor George Clinton denied Loyalist William Smith the use of able-bodied slaves. “The slaves he might have sold if he had pleased,” grouched Clinton. But the governor, a law clerk in Smith’s office before the war, relented on Smith’s “hardy Scotch hireling[s?].” Those he would exchange for Americans held by the British in New York City.<sup>21</sup>

In New Jersey, legislators constantly modified the act preventing movement from and to enemy lines. No sooner would the Assembly plug one hole than its constituents would find another. It took the fifth iteration of the movement laws to acknowledge that blacks posed a special problem: they were then singled out for whippings, ear croppings, pillories, or service on board a vessel of war. Later in 1782, the state assembly specified the exact punishment for escaping slaves and minors — lashes on the back not exceeding thirty-nine in number.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas a significant number of blacks had to find a way into the city, others had never left it, whether by choice or by command of their masters. When William Smith fled the city in the 1775-76 exodus, he left a black man and woman at his town-house. Many families, if they could spare them, left slaves in town to watch over their homes and forward any letters. Smith’s slaves may have felt fortunate that they were the ones left behind, even after their master’s house burnt down in the 1776 fire. Similarly, William Beekman left three of his slaves in the city, hiring them out to a Loyalist friend. Beekman’s sister, another refugee in New Jersey, owned a family of slaves who stayed with her Loyalist nephew, whether by command or choice is not clear.<sup>23</sup>

Slaves were not the only blacks to remain in town when the British invaded. Freeman too wagered on the British. David King, a shoemaker, carried letters back and forth between the city and British warships in 1776. His service to the Royalist governor, William Tryon, ended when crew members of the *Duchess*



*of Gordon* deserted to the Americans, informing them that King and other blacks were playing a double game. With a price on his head, King fled to Rhode Island.<sup>24</sup>

John Jackson, a last and heel maker in town, paid a high price for refusing to serve in the rebel militia. He ultimately lost his house and everything in it. Later on, while serving in the British navy, he lost his right leg as well. John Ashfield, a free black, worked for the British during the war. Afterwards, Ashfield's father elected to stay in New York City, while his son went to England, there to wait table in a Public House. While father and son may not have seen eye to eye on the political issues of the day, each gambled on the best option available at the end of the war.<sup>25</sup>

So many slaves and free blacks remained in New York City that a slavemaster remarked in 1776, "I believe the Chief of the Blacks are encouraged by some secret enemies to stay in the city as they were seen to muster in large companies." For the blacks who remained, the British could not arrive soon enough, and to their great satisfaction the British army made quick work of the rebels in the city of New York. The blacks who stayed behind joined their white neighbors in presenting a scene of "universal joy" to the British invasion force.<sup>26</sup>

The British issued no universal manumission decree. They encouraged the slaves of rebels to come in and work for the army while at the same time supporting the property rights of Loyalists in town. This was an informal arrangement since the British issued no formal proclamations until 1778 and 1779. The situation was murky enough to encourage such rebel slave owners as William Beekman to think that they could somehow extricate their property from town or arrange to sell their runaway slaves on the block in New York.

Beekman's gambit might have worked in simpler times. The irritated slavemaster certainly acted as if there were no war, and no new boundaries between himself and his friends in New York. But Beekman soon realized that a new order prevailed in town. When he asked Loyalist Hugh Gaine to round up his runaway slaves and sell them, the Loyalist printer did not even put a runaway ad in his newspaper.

The British in any case prevented such transactions. Every slave who crossed the lines represented labor power that the British army could use and the Americans could not deploy. Twenty-five-year-old Hanover and twenty-year-old John, the former Beekman slaves, freed European soldiers from the manual tasks of maintaining an army. The British also noted the presence of "Negroe Vagabounds and Straglers" who stuck close to the army and got in the way. In November, 1780, the city Commandant ordered that "all male Negroes not employed in any of the public departments or are not the property of inhabitants" were to assemble on the commons near Bridewell prison to be assigned a job. Those not complying would be expelled from the

city. In 1782, a similar proclamation appeared, this time summoning unemployed blacks to the green before the Provost. In each case, the intimidating presence of a prison formed the backdrop for these convocations. But true to their 1779 proclamation freeing blacks who fled rebel masters, the British did not threaten to sell unemployed blacks or transport them to the West Indies. If they did not comply with British directives to work, they could return to American-held territory as "free men" who would most certainly be re-enslaved.<sup>27</sup>

By arbitrarily freeing certain blacks and keeping others enslaved, the British heightened the tension in the occupied city. Blacks who had the misfortune of belonging to Loyalist masters watched as others were freed in a trice. We cannot fathom the heart of a well-dressed and refined female house servant who beheld the presence of rough field hands from New Jersey, suddenly freed. How did she feel when friends and neighbors who were enslaved before the occupation, returned to town as new people, simply by dint of the political persuasion of their former masters?

Unlike her freed brethren, the female slave was especially subject to the vagaries of her condition. The buying and selling of slaves continued in occupied New York, as in the 1777 sale of a "Negro Wench with Two Children." Of course, her children shared this vulnerable condition. As she passed by the coffee house in the fall of 1780, she might have seen the public auction of "a likely Negro Girl, about eight years old."<sup>28</sup> Female slaves comprised three-quarters of the sale ads in Rivington's newspaper (the few males sold were most often boys). One such sale involved a Loyalist master who decided to leave for England, divesting himself of all human property including a fifteen-year-old "wench."<sup>29</sup>

That some blacks were freed and others were not made the vulnerability of the enslaved population glaringly apparent. A few female slaves elected to avoid being sold by running away. Sarah, a mulatto woman, ran away after being accused of theft by her mistress, and was "known to be secreted in this city." The ad for two runaway wenches with a baby boy indicated that they were "lurking about this city," and promised trouble to those who harbored them. When a Virginia woman named Pamela ran away, her owner imagined that "some evil-disposed persons encourage her in this way." Whether those who harbored runaways comprised a network or were simply individuals who responded to specific cases, their presence in town was all too keenly felt by masters.<sup>30</sup>

Twice as many men as women ran away. Males simply had more opportunities. The army could absorb them and ships in the city's harbor could spirit them away. Luke, an eighteen-year-old hairdresser, had last been seen with an officer to whom he had hired himself out. Peter's owner had seen the fourteen-year-old a number of times with an officer of one of the new

corps. The owner believed that Peter had tricked the officer into believing he was a freeman. Masters of vessels were often warned not to hire runaways. Many young men were thought to have gone off “a-privateering”; some fled one ship to take advantage of better opportunities on another. One sage master bowed to the reality that once his slave was aboard ship, the possibility that he would get his man back was slim. So the master made an offer. He stipulated that the ship captain could keep the slave provided he paid the slave’s wages to the master. Virtually all runaway male slaves were below the age of 25. The rigorous life on a privateer did not appeal to older men with families they were not prepared to desert.<sup>31</sup>

As runaway ads indicate, black men helped their own case by asserting their freedom. British policy made this claim possible because it unofficially continued Lord Dunmore’s Virginia proclamation. Dunmore’s proclamation heavily implied that men only need apply, a fact not lost on the Americans who noted in the *Virginia Gazette* that since only those who could bear arms were freed, this left women, children, the aged, and sick to the mercy of irate masters.<sup>32</sup>

In anticipation of the 1779 southern campaign, the British made official pronouncements about the status of refugee blacks. On June 7, 1779, the commandant of New York, David Jones, issued the following order to his troops: “All Negroes that fly from the Enemy’s Country are Free — No person whatever can claim a Right to them — Whoever sells them shall be prosecuted with the utmost severity.” Unlike Dunmore, Jones made no distinction between men and women. However, an official proclamation issued later that month by Commander-in-Chief Sir Henry Clinton, hinted that this arrangement was limited to male slaves. Setting the scene of his proclamation by noting the use of Negroes in the Continental army, Clinton promised that captured blacks in rebel uniform would be sold back into slavery, while those who took refuge with the British army could not be sold. “I do promise to every Negroe who shall desert the rebel standard,” wrote Clinton, “full Security to follow within these lines any Occupation that he shall think proper.” The inclusion of the male pronoun in the last sentence betrays the intention of the British. But the proclamation was vague enough to offer hope to all members of the African-American community. Within a year of the proclamation’s issue, the British complained about the number of black women and children flocking to British posts. General Pattison instructed an officer at one New Jersey stronghold to prevent women and children from “passing the North River,” because otherwise they would become “a burden to the town.”<sup>33</sup>

The American reaction to Clinton’s proclamation was muted because it did nothing to change the de facto situation behind British lines. Clinton had simply made official what had transpired for years. The state assemblies, however, responded with long overdue laws forbidding the seizure, kidnapping,

or sale of "Negro slaves belonging to Persons residing within Places under the Power of the Enemy, which have absconded from their owners and come into this State." Although claiming humanitarian motives, the New Jersey assembly waited for the British offer to extend its own. But the motivation of state legislators mattered little to slaves of loyalist masters in New York. Neighboring New Jersey had extended an offhanded invitation, couched in penalties for those who re-enslaved blacks fleeing from New York.<sup>34</sup>

If a slave managed to cross the Hudson River into the city, his troubles were far from over. Young black men were as vigilant as their white counterparts when the rumor spread that His Majesty's fleet was in search of "volunteers." Not only freemen but slaves of Loyalists could be swept up by a naval press gang. A refugee could also face the nightmare of successfully crossing the lines only to be claimed as a slave by a white Loyalist in New York. Dinah Archey of Virginia said that she had come in five years before "agreeable to his Excellency General Hows Proclamation." A certain William Farray had since claimed her as his slave. Although Farray could produce no bill of sale, the police prevaricated on making a decision on the case, forcing Dinah to appeal to General Carleton. Casting herself as a "Poor pensioner," Dinah suggested how the British general should proceed in this matter: if Farray had no legal paper, Dinah asserted then he had no claim.<sup>35</sup>

As part of the civilian community of New York, African Americans shared many of the same headaches as their white brethren with respect to military demands. But if a black man's house were confiscated by the army, he had fewer options and could expect no alternate accommodation. Although John Jackson exhibited enough disaffection to be driven from his home by the Americans in 1776, he returned to British-occupied New York to find his property and goods in the possession of His Majesty's troops. Jackson's best alternative was to join the British navy.<sup>36</sup>

Another black New Yorker, Thomas Farmer, saw his house taken by the barrackmaster. Like Jackson, Farmer saw his best option as joining the military, becoming an officer's servant in the 64th regiment. Yet another freeman, Inchu Moore, rented a cellar kitchen in the city for eight pounds per year until a white man offered the landlord double that amount. Although Moore claimed that the landlord wanted to keep his original tenant, the determined white renter apparently had connections. Moore appealed to the mayor's office, where an official told him "that it was a Pity that we Black folks that came from Virginia was not sent home to Our Masters." Moore found it "hard" that he got no satisfaction from the town officials and "very hard" to be "abused so by this Man and his journeyman." While Moore had to swallow such talk, he felt confident that he could lodge a complaint with no damning repercussions, and that justice might prevail — a situation undreamed-of in his slavery days back home. Undeterred by the initial rebuff, Moore continued up the line of power to present his case to the commander-in-chief.<sup>37</sup>

When the British invited African-Americans to New York, they framed their invitation as a work contract. A black man could choose from any occupation available to blacks. Most found work on privateers or as teamsters. Approximately fifty men even managed to procure coveted carting licenses because of the scarcity of white laborers in town. Otherwise, refugee blacks occasionally found work as drivers when the army needed them. Ten blacks comprised one-tenth of the British Commissary Department in 1781. In 1779, General Clinton appointed a Commissary of Captures whose job was to convert captured moveable property to use for the King's army. An offshoot of this office was the Commissary of Captured Cattle, managed by three cattle rangers, each with a party of ten mounted blacks. While employing blacks in one area of the Commissary of Captures, the British enumerated "Negroes" along with cattle and rice in another area of this department, the Commissary of Captured Forage. Expediency, not justice or humanitarian motives, ruled the day with respect to black men.<sup>38</sup>

The war nevertheless created new spaces for African-American men. The army and its vast labor pool periodically moved out of the city on campaign, leaving jobs vacant. The war also made possible individual instances of extraordinary opportunity. Samuel Burke, a black man from Charleston, South Carolina, managed to get to England before the war, where he entered the service of a royal governor, William Browne. En route to the Bahamas, Samuel and his master were captured and imprisoned in Hartford, Connecticut. Once exchanged and in New York City, Burke "assisted in raising his [Governor Browne's] regiment" because Burke "could speak the Irish tongue." Samuel Burke's fortunes continued to rise high when he married a free Dutch mulatto woman who had a fine house and garden. His domestic arrangements at Number 5 Dutch Street were interrupted when the barrackmaster expropriated the house for His Majesty's use, leaving Mrs. Burke "in a very distressing condition." The best the displaced New Yorkers could do was to obtain a certificate from Governor Browne indicating the value of the house. This provided little comfort to Mrs. Burke who reckoned that her best option was to join her husband "in all his Marches and Routes" when he went south with the army.<sup>39</sup>

Samuel Burke, Thomas Farmer, and John Jackson decided that their best move was to join the military when their houses were occupied by the British army. It seems that the high officials whose signatures graced the British proclamations wanted blacks primarily as laborers for the British war effort. As an orderly book put it, Negroes' "employment will save the troops much Toyl and Fatigue." Blacks could wield a shovel and pick-axe, drain a ditch, and perform menial duties for British and Hessian officers. Their contributions to the war effort gained a kind of recognition on occasion, as when a fortification in town was called "The Negro Fort" either because the blacks built it or manned it.<sup>40</sup>

The British allowed a small number of blacks to shoulder guns, but for the most part African Americans served as support personnel. In the early months of the war, Loyalist provincial corps recruited blacks only to be ordered, in the interest of respectability, to cease such activity and to discharge all "Negroes, Mullatoes, and other improper persons." The British authorized separate black units with white officers, like the Black company of Pioneers headed by Scots Captain Allan Stewart. Just before the Philadelphia campaign, this company numbered seventy-nine men, fifteen women, and eight children. On the march to Philadelphia, Stewart picked up twelve more recruits. By the occupation of the Quaker City, there were two corps of Black Pioneers, the other headed by a French and Indian war veteran of Irish extraction, Richard Robert Crowe, who had fled his home in South Amboy and been jailed by the rebels for seventeen weeks. The Black Pioneers each received a great coat, a small sailor jacket, one pair of woolen trousers, a white shirt, and one hat. The women, as usual, had to fend for themselves. In Philadelphia, these black men had to "attend the Scavengers" to "assist in cleaning the streets and removing all newscances [nuisances] being thrown into the streets." They were also ordered to fill up the old necessities and make fresh ones in the rear of the lines." There is no reason to believe that the Black Pioneers did not also sweep the chimneys and streets of New York.<sup>41</sup>

Many black men who crossed the lines provided yet another service to the British, namely military intelligence. After five days of hiding in a barn, Joe, the servant of a militia captain, fled Morristown with his wife, Dinah; later he disclosed troop movements and the very low morale of American soldiers. Another black refugee, Mermaid Loo, crossed the lines with information about militia drafts raised around Fishkill to confront the Tories and Indians just north of Albany. Three of Loyalist David Ogden's Negro slaves managed to cross the lines to Long Island, where they informed their master that his estate, including the three slaves themselves, were to be attainted and sold. The messengers must have been taken aback when their master directed his anger at them for fleeing, rather than at the rebel authorities for the imminent confiscation of his worldly goods. Ogden claimed that once the New Jersey authorities understood that he had crossed the military lines to get medical treatment, his property would be restored. He chastised his servants for lessening his credibility with the New Jersey authorities. In March 1779, the British command kept the entire city on alert because of a black's testimony about a rebel-led insurrection whose aim was to burn down the town. (A Hessian soldier complained that he and his fellows were not allowed to undress for several nights). Occasionally, blacks gathered information in a systematic way, functioning as spies for the British. Benjamin Whitecuff circulated in New Jersey for two years before capture by the Americans. Whether as informants, guides, or spies, African Americans brought valuable information to powerful men, thereby enhancing their own sense of importance.<sup>42</sup>

When the British enticed African Americans to their side, they envisioned vast labor battalions in the service of the army. But the exigencies of war increasingly made them think of black men as soldiers. When expedient, the British used a few armed freemen to complement their fighting force. With the advent of the southern campaign, the British turned even more to the black soldier.

With the main army directed southward, some New York Loyalists volunteered to shoulder military duties which included harassing the enemy around New York. These units felt no compunction about including blacks in their numbers.<sup>43</sup> The Loyalist regiments were a different breed from their European counterparts. They had a long history with their enemies that had in recent years concluded with the Loyalists' flight from their communities and the confiscation of their worldly goods. Many were eager to seek revenge, to inflict damage for damage's sake, and to confiscate goods with abandon as partial compensation for their own losses. Officially-constituted military organizations like the Associated Loyalists would also provide an object lesson to the hesitant British about how the war should be waged -- with conviction and unrelenting drive. A unit headed by Major Thomas Ward occupied a post at Bergen Point to "annoy" the New Jersey coast.

The exploits of the Associated Loyalists were faithfully chronicled in the Tory newspapers of the city, although the racial composition of these bands was not mentioned. One quarter of Ward's four-hundred-man force was black, and from the complaints lodged against them, it is obvious they were armed. A Loyalist sympathizer living near Orangetown claimed that a "party of negroes" raided his farm and carried off horses from the property. Suspecting that the raiders came from Ward's company on Bergen Neck, the victim's nephew trekked down to the post only to see his uncle's horses hauling wood about the neighborhood. The uncle then enlisted the help of a prominent merchant in town, William Bayard, which necessitated some quick explaining on the part of Major Ward. Ward claimed that he bought the horses from the blacks under the impression that they were rebel property. As Ward had only made a down-payment on the horses, the committee charged to arbitrate the case recommended that Ward hold back any monies due the blacks until the money value of the horses had been collected. The arbitrators' report included no testimony of, or defense by, the accused.<sup>44</sup>

When not raiding rebel territory, Ward's company cut wood in the neighborhood of its post, which raised more cries from loyal landholders in the region. In 1782, the civilians procured the help of William Van Schaack, a prominent lawyer refugee in town. The complainants charged that Ward's men continued to cut more than the allotted amount of wood, giving little compensation to the owners. The main offenders, they claimed, were "the Negroes" of Ward's group. So thorough were Ward's men that of the 3825

potential cords on Justice Freeland's land, they left standing trees for only one hundred cords of wood. Johannes Van Buskirk estimated that on his seventy-two acre farm, only forty-five of 1,800 cords of wood remained. Other landholders were wiped out.<sup>45</sup>

Refugee military units alienated Loyalists and Rebels alike on their missions to round up prisoners, cattle, and cords of wood for the city. After the British defeat at Yorktown, the refugees' activities elicited less support from the community they served. In the waning days of 1781 and into 1782, many Loyalists saw, if they had not already, that a day of reckoning might well come at the hands of the rebels. The Associated Loyalists viewed these concerns as over-anxious fretting, continuing to believe that they could somehow prevail if only they could pound the rebels harder. Perhaps in an attempt to distance themselves from the Associated Loyalists, the city's newspapers began to highlight the group's African-American members. In February 1782, American forces raided the Bergen post. It was reported that the advanced sentry for the Loyalist refugees was "a Negro Man" who suffered a bayonetting by the rebels. In June, a band of refugees, "forty whites and forty blacks," raided the town of Forked River, destroying the saltworks there. Despite the British order to cease offensive war, the racially-mixed Loyalist bands persisted in carrying the war to their enemies, exacting a last measure of retribution before they abandoned the stage to their adversaries. The Forked River raid even elicited disgust on the part of the Loyalist newspapers. "Thus are they conciliating the affections of the Americans," William Lewis noted with irony in *The New York Mercury*.<sup>46</sup>

By the time the Loyalist press had acknowledged the African-American presence in Ward's company, the period of blacks' active service was coming to an end. Not three weeks after the Forked River raid, a group of twelve to fifteen blacks from Ward's unit ambushed and killed a white slavemaster who had gone to New York to see about some runaway slaves. Armed black men acting in maverick fashion were not to be tolerated. After the fearsome report of their neighbor's murder, the people of the Bergen vicinity heard the cheering news that refugee blacks would henceforth be disarmed.<sup>47</sup>

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The American Revolution provided the first real opportunity for African-Americans to alter their fate radically. Under slavery's yoke, their choices were limited. A slave could slow the pace of work, feign illness, or even run away, though runaways typically headed for an uncertain future in a new neighborhood, where if caught they would be returned to their master's fury. Never before the Revolution had runaways a place of asylum secured by one of the most powerful armies on earth. The war also claimed many masters around New York, whose absence from the household emboldened servants



to set their own work schedule or even to flee. To an eighteenth-century African-American, who normally had to swallow humiliation on a daily basis and could not protect his family, life in the occupied zone must have seemed a great release, despite continued hard work and a double standard with respect to fairness.

Moreover, even those blacks who remained with their owners found that with the British army so near, they had leverage with their masters they had never before enjoyed. For Mrs. Bancker, a city refugee living in the Hudson Valley, a move to the town of Esopus was out of the question because her "wench," Sarah, had refused to go. Mrs. Bancker's husband acquiesced to this state of affairs although the Bancker's son, Abraham, could not fathom why their decision should be "held in competition with the stubborn will of a slave."<sup>48</sup> Another New York City refugee noted a distinct change in her slaves' demeanor once her husband died. They had become "very saucy," and when an "ill-natured Person" told them their Master had freed them, they demanded to "go to the office" and look at the will. One of the "wenches" struck Mrs. Beekman as so intransigent that her mistress gave the woman to her daughter and son-in-law, as "she wanted a Master."<sup>49</sup> Yet another husbandless woman in the Hudson Valley pleaded for the return of her mate, imprisoned by American authorities for disaffection, because her "servants have got so bad as they will do nothing but what they please." The woman's brother, an officer in the American army, entreated Governor Clinton to allow his sister's husband "to make his own House his Prison" because "the Negroes have got to be ungovernable and of consequence but very little labour Done and no care taken. "Without black labor," Colonel Woodhull saw his sister's family "a-going to Destruction Head Long in a most Rappid manner."<sup>50</sup>

With the possibility that their slaves would cross the lines, while others in town might disappear on a privateer, masters were more willing to accommodate their servants. One sale ad featured a twenty-four-year-old black sailmaker who wanted to continue in town laboring at his sails rather than go to sea. The advertisement was most forthcoming in admitting that the craftsman could simply walk his master's investment onto a boat and into the wide horizon beyond, never to return. Another advertisement announced the sale of a young Negro woman with four children. "They are not sold for any fault," claimed the seller, but because the woman had a husband in town and the mistress did not want to part them. While it is entirely possible that the owner acted out of humanitarian motivation, her liberality may have been influenced by her slave's enhanced chances for successful flight.<sup>51</sup>

The odds of successfully escaping bondage were heightened in a wartime city that already had a large number of freed blacks. Masters suspected that persons in town abetted the independent behavior of their enslaved servants. The most common suspects were masters of ships, as the sea had traditionally

offered employment to black men. But the owners also suspected the black residents of the town, whether family members, sweethearts, or friends. In January 1782, an ad appeared featuring “a small black girl named Sue of Mary stolen by her mother, named Pender, a Virginia wench.” In October, fourteen-year-old London ran away and was believed to be living with his mother in or about town. In November 1783 a husband plucked his wife out of her master’s house. These family reconstitutions occurred after the Battle of Yorktown, when talk of the British abandoning the city was rife. A master’s decision to leave would mean that a mother would never see her child again, impelling her to ensure her child’s continued residence in town.<sup>52</sup>

Family networks were not the only ones operating in the city to spirit away enslaved people. When 22 year-old Mattis ran away, his master believed he had no intention of fleeing but was “seduced and is still secreted by someone.” When sixteen-year-old Jack left his owner, the latter offered one guinea for the slave’s return, and five guineas for “discovering such person or persons who may have employed, harboured, concealed, or entertained such negro boy.” When 26 year-old Venus walked out of her master’s house, the newspaper advertisement offered a three guinea reward for information about the persons who put an ad about Venus in another city newspaper the previous day. Venus’ former owner suspected that these people were “the persons who decoyed the wench away, and if they are not black in color, they are black in actions,” he declared. Directing all his ire and frustration at Venus’ collaborators, her owner concluded, “they may be ashamed of their name, for they dare not sign it to the advertisement.” The advertisement in question, written in black dialect, exposed Venus’ master as a cheat who stole the money with which she planned to buy her freedom.<sup>53</sup>

Massa, me see in a newspaper, Mr. B\_d\_e advertise poor Venu for runaway. True, Massa, me live with Mr. B\_d\_e. Mr. H.\_\_ brought me from Philadelphia and sold me to Mr. B\_d\_e. I had ten pounds that was given by my old Massa to Mr. B\_d\_e to keep me. masa tell me, “Venus, you work, get more money to buy yourself free.” My husband and me get forty pounds, by working very hard; me give all to Mr. B\_d\_e; me ask Mr. B\_d\_e, “Me be free.” no, you black [devil?] you get no money.” Me tink no right for a French gentleman to cheat poor Negro. Now Mr. B\_d\_e, as you a French gentleman, please give back the money to my poor husband, then me comes home again.

Evidence of greater leverage on the part of blacks was not limited to the point of sale or the networks aiding runaways. Slaves could inform on masters who violated the laws. When an escaped American soldier made his way from a British prison ship to Long Island, he found a sympathetic woman to feed

and clothe him. Letting his guard down, he moved freely about the property only to be warned by his protector to be more careful. "For God's sake, don't let that black woman of mine see you," she exclaimed, referring to the slave woman washing on the stoop of the house, "for she is as big a devil as any of the King's folks and she will bring me out." The possibility of incarceration in the Provost put the soldier's hostess in mind of the lot of her husband, who had rotted there for two years only to have died in prison three weeks before. The tables were turned for the woman washing clothes on the stoop. With a mistress closely associated with an enemy of his Majesty's government, the enslaved woman had new power over her mistress — a scenario scarcely to be imagined before the war.<sup>54</sup>

While some slaves, particularly women, continued to labor quietly while keeping a sharp eye out for opportunities, others, particularly men, expressed themselves with little reserve. The father of an American prisoner in New York complained that his son was marched through the city streets followed by "Negro Boys" who "grossly insulted" him. One can only guess at the elation felt by these young blacks who could now belittle men who resembled their masters. An enslaved man in New Jersey so incensed his master that he found himself in jail awaiting the auction block "for no fault," said the newspaper ad, "but a fancy tongue."<sup>55</sup>

A "fancy tongue" could take many forms: defiance, sarcasm, rage, sullenness. "Milford" Smith of Philadelphia demonstrated yet another variation of "fancy tongue," or threatening speech, when he used the unbowed, intelligent, rational speech of a self-assured man. "Milford" had labored as a slave in Philadelphia for Margaret Child, a widow in financial difficulties. When the British entered Philadelphia, Milford had been hired out to an American resident of the city, Robert S. Jones. By the end of the British occupation, Milford decided to join the exodus to New York City, signalling his new life with the addition of a surname, a marker typically denied black slaves. Milford the slave now became "Milford Smith," a man who could control his own identity. Milford Smith had not been in New York for two months when a friend, probably Anthony Benezet, the prominent Philadelphia Quaker, crossed the lines and informed Smith that Mrs. Child was anything but quiet about his departure. Indeed, she had tried to enlist the support of the New York State Assembly as a "distressed widow" who had promised Milford his freedom once she died, but now was so angry at his action that she wanted him sold or arrested. In her deposition, Mrs. Child signalled out the baneful meddling of Anthony Benezet, who "makes it his business to help all Negroes in obtaining their freedom." Benezet apparently had drawn up the legal document that left the slave free after her decease, which was sealed and put with her will. In a fit of anger, she destroyed the addendum on hearing that Milford had run off with the assistance of a certificate that Benezet had made,

replete with Mrs. Child's forged signature. At the end of her appeal, the deserted mistress was forced to acknowledge Milford's new surname. "[He] calls himself Milford Smith," she sniffed.

The newly-surnamed Smith, now of New York, was quite anxious about his status behind British lines because his mistress was not one of the rebel supporters who fled town at the British advance. She stayed behind as a loyal, law-abiding civilian under the occupation. The British never encouraged the slaves of Loyalists to abscond, which forced Smith to make his side of the story the official one. He wrote to Mr. Jones, the man for whom he worked before his flight, and asked that Jones take the certificate from Benezet's hand and have it recorded in the proper office. It is the tone of Milford Smith's letter that is most striking. "Hon'd Sir," wrote Smith to Jones, "I beg leave to return you my sincere thanks for your kindness to me when I was in the family and I am heartily sorry it was not in my power to wait upon you before leaving the city with the King's army." Here is a most genteel communication whose formality is indicative of equal writing to equal. That Smith could not "wait upon," that is, pay a social call on Jones' family before his departure, sounds odd coming from a fleeing slave. There is no hint of sycophancy, inferiority, or subservience in this letter, which may have irritated Mr. Jones. For instead of aiding Smith, he turned the letter and certificate over to Mrs. Child.<sup>56</sup>

The appearance of surnames in the African-American community of revolutionary New York was a harbinger of future developments. While still-enslaved blacks were denied the dignity of a surname, those who crossed the lines appeared in newspapers and military records with family names, even when they committed infractions. When four men from the "Virginia Company of Blacks employed as laborers in the service of the Royal Artillery" deserted, the advertisement proclaiming their disappearance and probable resort to privateers, listed their full names — Toliver Pearce, Benjamin Sawyer, Ralph Henry, and David Cooper. In other efforts to retrieve their property by providing all possible information, masters were forced to acknowledge the runaway's surnames. "Tony" sometimes called himself "Anthony Frost"; "Caesar" now goes by the name "Julius Caesar"; "Jem" went among his companions by the Name "James Jackson." In military units, African-American men not only adopted surnames but military ranks as well. During the court martial of a group of black men accused of killing a white slaveowner (who had just sold the wife of one of the accused in New York City), the men referred to one another as Lieutenant, Colonel, and Sergeant. When questioned by the court about the origin of these titles, the white officer in charge explained that the black men appointed themselves and "them they obeyed as implicitly as if he had appointed them." The men of the black community (in contrast to the women) transformed diminutives and added the dignity of a surname, thereby erasing a marked distinction between the free and the unfree.<sup>57</sup>

The changed circumstances of life for African Americans in occupied New York charged many with a new confidence. Milford Smith's genteel letter, Dinah Archey's petition to Sir Guy Carleton, and Inchu Moore's complaint to Sir Henry Clinton all bespeak an assurance that black freemen before them rarely exhibited. Freemen before the war had learned that the best policy was to lay low in the barely tolerant white society that surrounded them. While occupied New York was little more tolerant, Smith, Archey, and Moore were among those in the community who dared to test the limits of their new-found freedom. No case better illustrates this new confidence (and the bounds within which it operated) than the testimony of Murphy Steel, a soldier in the Black Pioneers. He wrote to the military commander of New York City not as a petitioner or a complainant, but as a mouthpiece of God. While sitting in the barracks on the East River, Steel heard a disembodied voice that called him by name and instructed him to "go and tell Sir Henry Clinton to send word to General Washington that he must surrender himself" lest the wrath of God fall upon the rebels. And who would be the instruments of the wrath of God? The voice ordained that if Washington did not heed Clinton's request, then Clinton should threaten to "raise all the Blacks in America to fight against him." The voice instructed Clinton to inform King George of his command.<sup>58</sup>

The voice was persistent in its attempt to rally Steel into action. After several more episodes, the Voice greeted the black soldier on one of the main streets of New York City. Steel in effect pleaded with the voice to leave him alone, admitting that he was afraid to do the voice's bidding "as he did not see the person that Spoke." Steel's interlocutor then revealed that he was the Lord. Murphy Steel could not then resist the command of God to inform Clinton and Cornwallis that "the Lord would be on their Side."

A black man had presumed to tell Sir Henry Clinton what to do. Sir Henry elected to keep this testimony to himself, perhaps surprised and amused, or perhaps moved by it. But the only way Steel could have presumed to instruct a British major general was to couch his instruction as a religious imperative. Steel, one of a long line of oppressed people to use religion to cross new boundaries and to give public utterance to thoughts and aspirations, made clear to General Clinton that God impelled him to act. The Black Pioneer also provided details meant to reassure Clinton that his spiritual revelation was legitimate. According to Steel, God's voice was male and called Steel by name. Perhaps anticipating the objection that the black man was intoxicated when he heard the voice, Steel mentioned that the Voice came several times, finally following him out into the public sphere of the street. Lest anyone accuse him of listening to heathen voices, Steel demonstrated skepticism in his account with respect to the Voice's identity. In fact, he admitted his own fear at the prospect of instructing Sir Henry because of his uncertainty about the voice's identity. While not attributing his fear to his "lowly" station,

Steel signalled to Clinton that he knew his place — that he would not have bothered Clinton if not for this heavenly call. Steel cast himself as a good soldier who obeyed the commands of his superior.

While we can watch Murphy Steel build his case in this letter to Sir Henry Clinton, we cannot as readily ascertain his motivation. In the summer of 1781, he may have felt frustrated that he lingered in New York while the real military action was being played out in the southern campaign. Perhaps Steel was angling for a transfer to General Cornwallis, whom he mentioned at the end of the letter. On the other hand, Steel may have been a man of deep religious conviction, who marveled at the wondrous changes ordained by God in his own life. If God could deliver him from his master, put a gun in his hand, and allow him a freedom of movement he had never experienced before the war, Steel may well have thought that he and his black colleagues could bring Washington down and “put an end to this rebellion.” His wartime experiences certainly emboldened him to write an exhortatory letter to a major general, suggesting that he and his brothers could take care of a situation that the British army could not.

Black voices continued to probe, push and challenge throughout the British occupation of New York. In the last months of the war, a small contingent of African Americans who had not already fled to the British warships expressed their anger at being “delivered in so unwarrantable a manner.” They objected to the arbitrary assignment of their persons to the departing ships, “insisting on their rights under the proclamation,” noted a Hessian observer, even if that meant making personal deals with the rebels so as to stay in America.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike their fellows under American rule, African Americans in the British zone insisted on “their rights” as early as 1783. For them, a British proclamation rang out louder than the Declaration of Independence. For all Britain’s inconsistency and less-than-humanitarian motives, the British army was the first major institution to liberate significant numbers of the enslaved in American history. While the Americans talked a fair game and struggled with the reality of slavery in their society, the British literally paid blacksmiths to remove iron shackles from slaves’ feet.<sup>60</sup>

Fifty years after the Revolution, David Walker, an African-American abolitionist and writer, acknowledged this fact when he claimed that America’s opponents in the Revolution had historically been the American blacks’ best ally. The English, he claimed, “have done one-hundred times more for the melioration of our condition, than all the other nations of the earth put together.” No doubt influenced by the strong abolition movement in the British Isles, Walker, who wrote for an abolitionist newspaper in New York, acknowledged that the English had been “for many years. ..the greatest earthly friends” of the blacks.<sup>61</sup>

Walker's tack was not the one used by most abolitionists after 1783. If anything, the black community wanted to downplay its wartime alliance with the British, stressing instead its contribution to the American cause. But the significant movement across military lines during the war was so dramatic that the memory died hard in the white community, particularly since continuing controversy about British or American compensation for departing slaves lived on through the turn of the century. Unlike its northern neighbors who passed gradual abolition legislation earlier, New York did not put one on its books until 1799.

While black movement during the war frightened and embittered some whites, it forced others to reassess their opinions about blacks and freedom. Early in the war, an Englishman who had recently landed at New York fell in with a "poor negro man" on his evening walk through town. After a thoroughly pleasant conversation, the white newcomer exclaimed, "I did not expect to find half his Sense or Sensibility in any of his Complexion." The white man's surprise would be amplified a thousand-fold as more members of the white community in the New York area acknowledged, either willingly or begrudgingly, that the world had not come to an end because blacks worked for wages, strolled down the streets, and made decisions for themselves.<sup>62</sup>

No matter what the callous motivation or inconsistency of the British, an enslaved African-American could cross the lines to a better life between 1776 and 1783. Like others during the war, New York's blacks put their own priorities before adherence to either cause. Even for the minority who remained in familiar surroundings rather than face the unknown in 1783, the experiences of the war years could not be extinguished. The black community learned that liberation need not come in ones or twos; major power centers could be moved to hasten the day of deliverance. African-Americans also learned more about preserving their families in circumstances that dwarfed the already fierce challenges of everyday life under slavery. Their ingenuity in spiriting their brethren out of the master's grasp would serve future generations when the children and grandchildren of the revolutionary cohort crossed new lines to freedom. The black participants in the American Revolution carried their stories with them into the new American Republic, creating new networks of hope in the African-American community.

## Notes

1. Evert Byvanck, Memorandum, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Evert Byvanck folder, New-York Historical Society [hereafter NYHS].
2. Evert Byvanck to John Byvanck and Garret Abeel, January 20, 1778, Henry Bogart Papers, New York State Library, Albany, NY; "Description of New York, Long, and Staten Islands in 1776," in William L. Stone, ed. *Letters of Brunswick and Hessian Officers during the American Revolution* (Albany, 1891), 188-202; William E. Dornemann, ed. "A Diary Kept by Chaplain Waldeck during the Last War," *Journal of Johannes Schwalm Historical Association*, 37; 1771 Census, Strachey Papers, Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
3. A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (New York, 1978), 131-135.
4. Dorothy Rita Dillon, *The New York Triumvirate: A Study of the Legal and Political Careers of William Livingston, John Morin Scott, & William Smith, Jr.* (New York, 1949), 88; *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, October 21, 1765.
5. Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York, 1991), 54 & 72.
6. Minutes of Monthly Meeting at New York, Flushing, and Newtown, February 2, 1775, Haviland Record Room, New York. The first two disowned were John Way and Samuel Doughty on September 2, 1778. For James Way, see Monthly Meeting Minutes, September 2, 1778; January 6, 1779; February 4, 1779; March 3, 1779; April 7, 1779.
7. It is possible that blacks in New York had heard of the Sommersett decision whereby a British judge in 1772 ruled in favor of a slave whose master wanted to forcibly transport the man to Jamaica to be sold. The judge, Lord Mansfield, ruled that it was illegal for a foreign slavemaster to forcibly remove his slave from England. See Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 313-368.
8. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 19.
9. *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, December 14, 1775 as quoted in Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 77.
10. Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 31.
11. *The New-York Mercury*, December 18, 1775.
12. *Journals of the Continental Congress*, IV: 60; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 16. When Congress established troop quotas by state in 1777, the New England states began to allow masters to use slaves as substitutes. New York did not move on this issue until 1781 when it granted bounty land to any person who delivered a healthy slave to a warrant officer.
13. Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, vii.
14. *Ibid.*, 120.
15. *Ibid.*, 115; Billy G. Smith, "Runaway Slaves in the Mid-Atlantic Region during the Revolutionary Era" in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Charlottesville, 1995), 225.
16. Pocket diary, December 23, 1776, Folder 12; William Beekman to Hugh Gaine, December 23, 1776, Folder 8; Abraham Delanoy to William Beekman, March 10, 1783, Folder 14, William Beekman Correspondence, Box 17, NYHS.
17. September 2, 1779, *New York Packet* (Fishkill).
18. June 25, 1778, *The New York Packet*, (Fishkill); *The New York Packet*, June 25, 1778; *The Royal Gazette*, September 21, 1782, March 15, 1783.
19. April 4, 1778, *Pennsylvania Evening Post*.
20. William Beekman to James Beekman, November 27, 1778; ? Beekman to Brothers, August 11, 1777; Gerard Beekman to William Beekman, August 3, 11, 31, 1778 in Box 17, Folder 9 of William Beekman Correspondence, NYHS.
21. William Livingston to Richard Bache, May 22, 1777, Prince et al, eds. *The Papers of William Livingston* II: 338; George Clinton to George Washington, September 7, 1778, *Public Papers of George Clinton*, IV: 7.
22. "An Act more effectually to prevent the Inhabitants of this State from Trading with the Enemy, or going within their Lines, and for



other Purposes therein Mentioned" in *Records of the States of the United States* (N.J., B.2, reel 4), microfilm, State Library of New Jersey; "An Act for Preventing an Illicit Trade and Intercourse between the Subjects of this State and the Enemy," Sixth session.

23. William Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 270; William Beckman to Mr. Hardenburgh, April 6, 1777, William Beekman Correspondence, NYHS; William Walton to Cornelia Walton, September 1, 1783, [Beekman Papers], NY-HS.

24. David King, Loyalist Claims, 013/114/685. There is some question as to why King would flee to Rhode Island. Newport was not occupied by the British until December, 1776.

25. John Jackson, Loyalist Claims, 013/114/532; John Ashfield, Loyalist Claims, 012/99/135

26. Abraham Bancker to his father, September 17, 1776, Bancker Papers, NYHS.

27. *Royal Gazette*, November 4, 1780, July 12, 1782.

28. *Royal Gazette*, November 22, 1777; September 2, 1780. For More on black women's experiences during the war, see Jacqueline Jones, "Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Slave Women during the Era of the American Revolution" in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1989), 293-337.

29. *Royal Gazette*, August 26, 1780; on the number of sale ads featuring women, over twice as many ads in Rivington's paper for females than for males. Almost all the males sold in occupied New York were young boys, aged fourteen or less. With respect to runaways, ads for males outnumbered those for women by three to one.

30. *Royal Gazette*, August 15, 1778; August 19, 1780; August 23, 1780.

31. *The Royal Gazette*, October 11, 1777; November 1, 1777; March 6, 1779; July 17, 1779; August 16, 1780.

32. Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 24.

33. "Orders relative to Refugee Negroes," Daniel Jones, June 7, 1779 in James Pattison Papers, microfilm, The David Library of the American Revolution; Proclamation, June 30,

1779, Sir Henry Clinton in *The Royal Gazette*, July 3, 1779; James Pattison to Abraham Cuyler, may 25, 1780 in "Letters of General Pattison," *NYHS Collections*, [1875], 397. By "North River" Pattison is referring to the Hudson.

34. "A Supplement to the Act intituled an Act to explain and amend an Act intituled An Act to Prevent the Subjects of this State from going into, or coming out of, the Enemy's Lines without Permissions or Passports, and for other Purposes therein mentioned," December 25, 1779 in *Records of the States of the United States* (N.J., B.2, reel 4), microfilm, State Library of New Jersey.

35. Loyalist Claims, Thomas Wood, 013 or 012 /25/539-41; Petition, Dinah Archey, August 8, 1783, Henry Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

36. John Jackson, Loyalist Claims, 013/114/532.

37. Loyalist Claims, Thomas Farmer, 012/99/167; Petition, Inchu Moore, February 10, 1779, Henry Clinton Papers, v. 52, #25, Clements Library.

38. Graham Russell Hodges, *New York City Cartmen, 1667-1850* (New York, 1986), 64; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 134; "Orders for Commissioners of Captures," Clinton Papers, v. 65:13, Clements Library.

39. Loyalist Claims, Samuel Burke, 012/19/339.

40. Orderly Book, p. 27-28, Captain De Peyster's Papers, 1741-1836, NYHS; Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 131.

41. Orderly Book, King's American Regiment, March 16, 1777, Clements Library; "State of the Black Company of Pioneers," July 13, 1777 and September 17, 1778, Henry Clinton Papers, Clements Library; Loyalist Claims, Richard Robert Crowe, 013/17/309-323; William Howe's Orderly Book, February 20, 1778; March 15, 1778; March 24, 1778. Captain Allan Stewart figured on a list submitted to Henry Clinton of those soldiers receiving half-pay who did not deserve it. See Clinton Miscellaneous, v. 243, Henry Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

42. Testimony, October 29th, Mermaid Loo to Henry Clinton, Clinton Papers, v. 127:14; David Ogden Petition, July 20, 1777.

Revolutionary Documents, Item 38, New Jersey State Archives. With respect to the Ogden story, one must keep in mind that he is trying to get back into the good graces of the American revolutionaries so that he can return home. Still, the flight of three slaves would hardly help Mr. Ogden's case. For Hessian soldier testimony, see "The Journal of John Charles Philip Von Krafft, 1776-1784," *NYHS Collections* (1882), 82. For Whitecuff's spying, see Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 142.

43. One of the more effective bands of volunteers was a multi-racial group led by a black named Tye. For more on this extraordinary character, see Graham Russell Hodges, "Black Revolt in New York City and the Neutral Zone: 1775-83," in Paul A. Gilje and William Pencak, eds. *New York in the Age of the Constitution, 1775-1800* (New York, 1989), 20-47; see also Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 147. Here, Tye's band is characterized as a group operating "in a somewhat free-lance fashion," suggesting that it was not formally recognized by the British.

44. William Bayard to Captain Murray, November 14, 1780, Clinton Papers, v. 130:14, Clements Library; Petition, December 5, 1780, Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

45. "Abstract of the Evidence of James Stringham, with regard to the Quantity of Wood Cut," Clinton Papers, v. 189:22; Loyalist claims, 013/87/104.

46. *New York Mercury and General Advertiser*, February 8, 1782; June 21, 1782.

47. D. Romeyn to R. Varick, July 20, 1782, Richard Varick Papers, NYHS.

48. Evert Bancker to Abraham Bancker, September 23, 1780 and Abraham Bancker to Evert Bancker, October 7, 1780, Bancker Papers, NYHS.

49. Evert Bancker to Abraham Bancker, September 23, 1780, and Abraham Bancker to Evert Bancker, October 7, 1780, Bancker Papers, NYHS; Mary Beekman to William Beekman, March 7, 1782, William Beekman correspondence, NYHS.

50. Petition to Governor George Clinton, March 28, 1780 and Jesse Woodhull to George Clinton, undated, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, v.5, 568 and 555.

51. *Royal Gazette*, February 10, 1779; March 10, 1779.

52. *The Royal Gazette*, January 26, 1782; October 30, 1782; November 19, 1783.

53. *The Royal Gazette*, July 6, 1782. *New York Mercury*, July 5, 1782.

54. Charles I. Bushnell, *The Adventures of Christopher Hawkins* (New York, 1864), 99-100.

55. Jacobus Van Zandt to Robert Morris, November 18, 1777, Miscellaneous Van Zandt, NYHS; *New Jersey Gazette*, February 11, 1778.

56. Milford Smith to Robert S. Jones, August 5, 1778 and Margaret Childe to the Members of Congress for the State of New York, August 18, 1778 in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, v. 3, 610, 662. It is also possible that someone else wrote the letter for Smith.

57. *Royal Gazette*, February 27, 1779; August 29, 1781; August 17, 1782; September 17, 1783. For more on slave naming, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro of the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 51-52. For development of slave naming after the revolution, see Gary Nash, "Forging Freedom: The Emancipation Experience in the Northern Seaport Cities, 1775-1820" in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1983), 20-27. For court martial see PRO, wo 71-154.

58. Testimony, Murphy Steel, August 16, 1781, Clinton Papers, v. 170:27, Clements Library.

59. Bernhard A. Uhlendorf, ed. *Revolution in America: Confidential Letters and Journals 1776-1784 of Adjutant General Major Baurmeister of the Hessian Forces* (New Brunswick, 1957), 569.

60. John Andre, "Expenditures on the Public Account," February 21-September 1780, Clinton Papers, v. 86:5a, Clements Library. It should be noted that other African Americans were inspired by the whig rhetoric of independence and freedom, and made significant advances particularly in Massachusetts. See A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. *In the Matter of Color*, 85-99. One of the more notable cases in New York concerned a black man who worked for Benedict Arnold.

He was one of the men who unwittingly rowed the general down the Hudson to British ships. Once in New York, the black man was told he was to serve as a coachman to Mrs. Arnold once she arrived. He refused, insisting that he return to West Point. Arnold threw his servant into a prison ship in the New York harbor until the black man relented. No sooner released and fitted out with a complete suit of livery, Arnold's man fled the British lines. Such behavior, noted the white woman who wrote about it, evinced "few stronger instances of

attachment and honor" to the cause. See Kitty Livingston, May 12, 1781, John Jay Papers, Colombia University.

61. David Walker, "Walker's Appeal, With a Brief Sketch of His Life" in *The American Negro: His History and Literature* (New York, 1969), 53, 66, 86. Just four years after Walker wrote this piece, Parliament passed the Emancipation Act of 1833 which outlawed slavery in all parts of British America.

62. Edward H. Tatum, Jr., ed. *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 144.