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AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

African American boys were heroes, too. They served with men in the American army and navy. One boy who served in both the army and the navy was James Forten.

One day in 1775, nine-year-old James was working in the grocery store near his home. James was a free African American living in the city of Philadelphia. He heard men talking about General Washington and his army. James listened eagerly. How he wished he could be a part of the American struggle for freedom!

When James went home, he begged his mother to let him join the soldiers. His mother insisted that he wait until he was older. She reminded him that his family needed him. Ever since his father had died, times had been hard for the Fortens.

In 1777, when James was 11, he could wait no longer. He became a drummer boy in a militia unit for a short time. Four years later, he signed up to be a powder boy on a ship named the *Royal Louis*.

The colony of Pennsylvania ordered the *Royal Louis*, a **privateer**, to go to sea. Its mission was to seize the cargo of British **merchant ships**. As a powder boy, James had many duties. During battle, his job was to carry gunpowder to the guns and cannons. This was extremely dangerous work.

Soon after setting sail, the *Royal Louis* saw its first combat. It was a tough, bloody battle. James was in danger every minute. He carried gunpowder and cannonballs to the artillery crew. Explosions boomed all around him. The *Royal Louis* captured a British merchant ship.

The next time the *Royal Louis* met the enemy, it was not so lucky. Three British warships overpowered the American privateer. The *Royal Louis* was seized by one of them, the *Amphyon*.

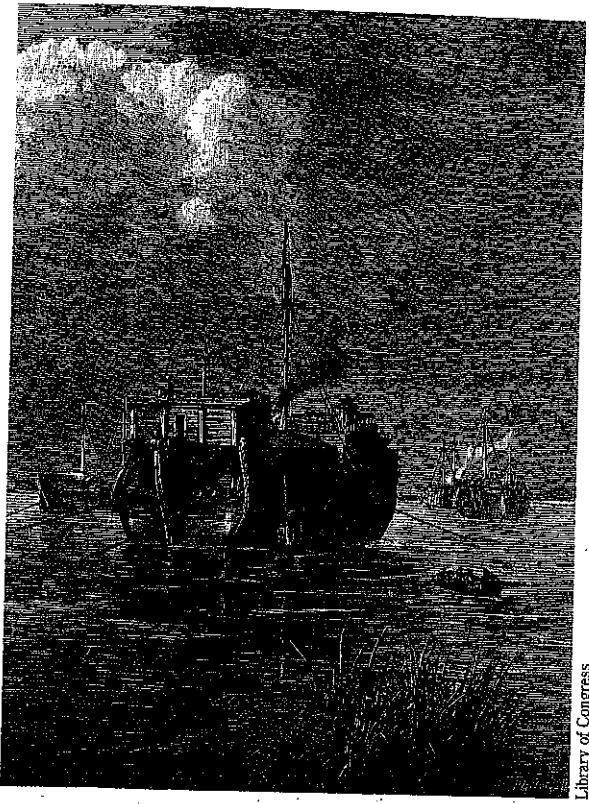
As an African American, James knew he was in terrible danger. He was born free, but the British did not know that, nor did they care. The British navy usually put white American sailors in prison. They sold black sailors into slavery in the **West Indies**.

James became friendly with the son of the *Amphyon's* captain. This British boy was amazed by how well James could play marbles. The captain's son convinced his father to let James return with them to England. James refused the invitation. He told them, "I am here a prisoner for the liberties of my country; I never, never shall prove a **traitor** to her interests!"

Fortunately, the captain did not sell James into slavery. He sent James to a British prison ship named the *Jersey*. The captain asked the commander of the *Jersey* to make James part of an exchange of prisoners. This eventually would make James free. An exchange of prisoners occurred when Britain and America would agree to swap a certain number of their prisoners. This allowed both countries to get back some of the soldiers they had lost.

Life on board the *Jersey* was pure misery for James. When he learned that an American officer was about to be exchanged, he had an idea. Why not hide himself in the officer's chest of belongings? What an excellent way to escape! But, at the last minute, he changed his mind. He let a younger boy who was very sick go in his place.

After seven months of suffering, there was an exchange of prisoners. James was finally set free. Ragged and without shoes, he walked home to his family in Philadelphia.



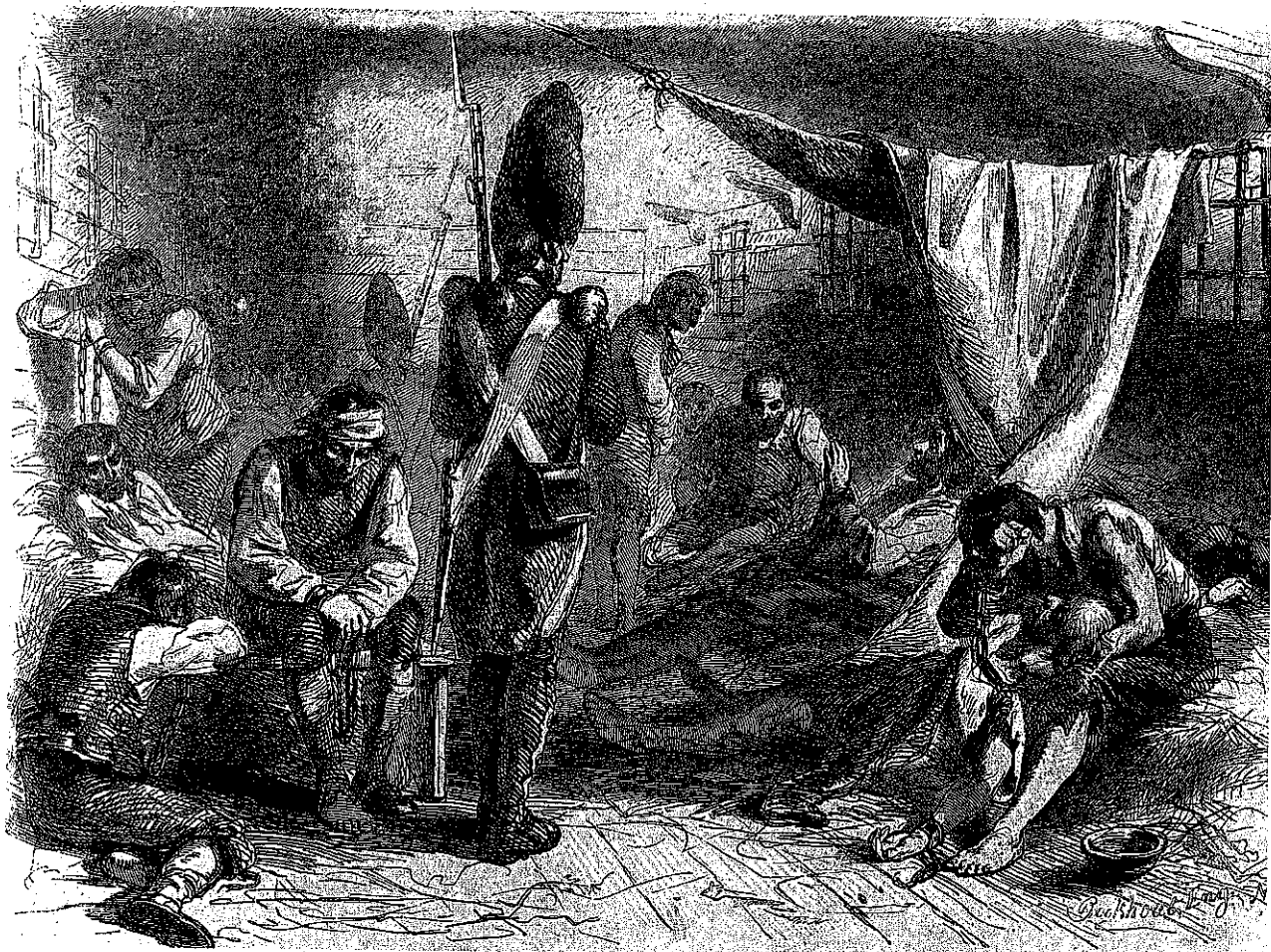
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ELEVEN THOUSAND
AMERICANS DIED ON THE
BRITISH PRISON SHIP
JERSEY DURING THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR.
MOST DIED FROM
DISEASE AND STARVATION.



The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

JAMES FORTEN GREW UP TO BECOME A FAMOUS AMERICAN. HE INVENTED A NEW WAY TO RAISE SAILS ON SHIPS. HE OWNED A SAIL-MAKING COMPANY AND BECAME WEALTHY. DURING THE EARLY 1800s, HE WORKED TO CONVINCe WHITE AMERICANS TO PASS LAWS OUTLAWING SLAVERY.



FOR SEVEN MONTHS, JAMES FORTEN LIVED IN THE TOTAL DARKNESS OF THE *JERSEY'S* HOLD. (THE HOLD IS THE AREA WITHIN THE HULL OF THE SHIP. IT IS BELOW THE MAIN DECK.) A THOUSAND MEN AND BOYS WERE CRAMMED INTO THIS SPACE WITH JAMES. THERE WAS VERY LITTLE FOOD, AND THE FEW MORSELS THEY HAD WERE ROTTEN AND MOLDY. LICE AND RATS PESTERED THE PRISONERS AND SPREAD DISEASES.

African American Minutemen

In the spring of 1775, the villages and towns of Massachusetts were buzzing with activity. The American colonists were fed up with British rule. They wanted freedom from British **tyranny**. White and black men formed **militias**. They prepared to fight the British. These soldiers were called **minutemen** because they promised to fight at a minute's notice. Early on the morning of April 19, the British marched toward the town of Concord. They planned to seize the patriots' military supplies. The minutemen rushed to defend their property.

Peter Salem is probably the best known of all the African American minutemen. He was a slave who lived about 15 miles from Concord. His owners, the Belknap family, gave him his freedom so that he could join the minutemen. He fought at the Battle of Lexington and Concord. But he is better known for his actions at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

The Battle of Bunker Hill came two months after Lexington and Concord. The minutemen were determined to force the British army and navy to leave Boston. On the night of June 16, 1775, they prepared for a battle on top of Breed's Hill. This hill and Bunker Hill overlooked all the British ships in Boston Harbor.

All night, black and white minutemen made a structure out of earth. These **earthworks** were like a huge wall. They were tall, but they were also dug deep into the ground. They protected the minutemen as they attacked the British.

The next afternoon, on June 17, the British charged up Breed's Hill. When they came close to the earthworks, the minutemen opened fire. They killed and wounded many British soldiers in that first attack. The British had no choice but to **retreat** down the hill. They tried to attack the earthworks a second time. Once again the minutemen's guns forced them back.



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JOHN TRUMBULL'S PAINTING *THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL* HELPED MAKE PETER SALEM, SHOWN IN THE FAR RIGHT CORNER, A FAMOUS HERO. MANY HISTORIANS THINK THAT HE PROBABLY DID NOT KILL BRITISH MAJOR JOHN PITCAIRN. THE AIR THAT DAY WAS FILLED WITH SMOKE, DUST, AND NOISE. THERE WAS NO WAY TO KNOW WHO FIRED THAT SHOT. EVEN SO, THE STORIES AND THIS PAINTING ARE STILL IMPORTANT. THEY SHOW THAT AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS WERE FIGHTING EARLY IN THE WAR.

the second attack, the
minutemen faced disaster: they
no more gunpowder. The British
ormed the earthworks a third time.
Now there was nothing to hold them
back. They captured Breed's Hill and
Bunker Hill. British Major John Pitcairn
leapt on top of the earthworks. He
shouted, "The day is ours!" According
to stories told after the battle, Peter
Salem had some **ammunition** left.
He shot and killed Pitcairn.

A strange thing happened in the months
after the Battle of Bunker Hill. Army
officers prevented black soldiers from
enlisting. When Washington was
gathering soldiers for his army, he was
told to exclude black men. African
Americans could not understand this.
Why should they be turned away? Hadn't
they fought bravely all through 1775?

There were a number of reasons for this
new policy. White slave owners were
complaining to the government. They did
not want their slaves to become free by

joining the army. They said that the
government should respect their rights to
their "property." The government agreed.

White leaders and slave owners were
also afraid to give guns to slaves. They
feared that the slaves would use guns to
start a **rebellion**. Perhaps they would
free all the slaves. This would mean the
end of slavery.

By December 1776, Washington and
other generals had to change their policy.
Thousands of white soldiers had left the
army. There were too few men to make
a strong fighting force. To make matters
worse, the British were enlisting slaves
and free black men. The British promised
freedom to any black soldier who joined
them. The American army could not
afford to grow weaker while the British
became stronger. Ever so slowly, the
American military let African American
soldiers sign up.



Salem Poor



Gallant Soldier

A BLACK MINUTEMAN NAMED SALEM POOR FOUGHT SO BRAVELY AT THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL THAT 14 WHITE OFFICERS HONORED HIS HEROISM. THEY SIGNED A PETITION AND SENT IT TO THE GENERAL COURT IN MASSACHUSETTS. IT SAID THAT SALEM POOR "BEHAVED LIKE AN EXPERIENCED OFFICER, AS WELL AS AN EXCELLENT SOLDIER." IN 1975, 200 YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL, THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE ISSUED THIS POSTAGE STAMP. IT CELEBRATES SALEM POOR'S COURAGE.