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The British Colonial Marines: Freed Slaves and the War of 1812

By Robert Alexander Armour

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Author's Note: In recognition of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 and its impact on our county, the ECMHS Bulletin is devoting several issues to covering the war. This is the third of four installments, covering the military use by the British of former slaves; the final installment will describe the British invasion of Essex County in December, 1814.

Given a bright red jacket, military arms, and an official name, runaway slaves joined the ranks of the British army and earned the opportunity to fight against their former masters. Releasing lifetimes of anger and frustration, they quickly gained the respect of the British command. They also instilled fear and anger in the white population of the Chesapeake area. Fear that armed ex-slaves could lead an insurrection of the sort that had recently risen in the Caribbean; anger at the loss of so much valuable property. As Colonial Marines, small numbers of the newly trained soldiers fought alongside the regular British marines in battles from the Eastern Shore, to Baltimore, to Tappahannock.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the British invasion of Essex County in December, 1814, was the role played by freed slaves. The British had long recognized that slavery was a serious vulnerability to the Americans and were not reticent in exploiting it for their own gain. They encouraged slaves to escape their masters and assist in the war, causing fear and consternation among American whites, especially those of Virginia where slave rebellion had a history. They were not anti-slavery so much as eager to advance their own cause. Here we will examine the use

the British made of freed African Americans during the war and the effect on the white Americans, especially those of Essex County.

A Revolutionary Precedent

It started with John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, His Majesty's General Governor of the colony of Virginia. As Virginia patriots agitated against the British Crown, Lord Dunmore took action.

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry delivered his famous call to arms at St. John's Church in Richmond. Cries against the government spread across the colony and Dunmore became peevish. On April 20 he sent royal marines from a ship anchored on the James River to empty the powder magazine in Williamsburg and render the muskets stored there useless. The citizens of the town gathered in protest and only the actions of cooler heads prevented a riot. When confronted, the governor claimed that he had ordered the mission to protect the town from "an intended insurrection of slaves." He was lying. Later

he explained himself more honestly:

"The Series of Dangerous Measures pursued by the People of this Colony against Government, which they have now entirely overturned, & particularly their having



John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, His Majesty's General Governor of the colony of Virginia.

(www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists)

come to a Resolution of raising a Body of armed Men in all the Counties, made me think it prudent to remove some gunpowder which was in a Magazine in this Place, where it lay exposed to any Attempt that might be made to seize it, & I had Reason to believe the People intended to take that step."

A group of slaves went to the governor to offer their services, but he rebuffed them. Nevertheless, slaveholders in the area did not trust his plans. Their suspicion was justified. He fled to a ship off the wharves at Yorktown, where he supervised raids in the area for provisions and encouraged slaves to join him. The House of Burgesses declared that he had resigned, but he fought back from the safety of his birth on the ship. The flames of Dunmore's anxiety were fanned even higher when news arrived from the north of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

On November 7 he issued his famous proclamation declaring that a state of martial law was in effect across the colony until peace and order could be restored. He went on: "*and I do hereby further declare all indentured 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 maybe, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to proper Sense of their Duty. . . .*"

It is unclear how many escaped slaves reached Lord Dunmore, but by early December he was pleased he had formed the Ethiopian Regiment of some 300 men, with special uniforms bearing a patch reading "liberty to slaves." They joined another regiment formed from loyalists from Norfolk, where merchants generally supported the Crown. On December 9 Dunmore's troops encountered an American force at Great Bridge over the Elizabeth River near Norfolk, which resulted in a clear American victory.

George Washington, however, was alarmed. The day after Christmas he wrote to his friend, Richard Henry Lee, of his concerns about Dunmore's actions: he describes them as "diabolical schemes" and then continued "*If, my dear man, that man is not crushed before spring, he will become the most formidable enemy America has.*" Washington was especially concerned about Dunmore's plea to slaves: he is sure that Dunmore's forces will increase greatly "*if some expedient cannot be hit upon to convince the slaves and servants of the impotency of his designs.*"

Washington, himself, was not decided about the use of African Americans in the Continental Army. At first, he was opposed to any use of them, but when recruiting became critical he modified his views. Most of the former slaves who escaped to join with Dunmore were employed in menial military tasks, and Washington had a similar view. He agreed that free men of color might be employed for servile army work, such as

serving as wagoners. He still advised against the use of slaves for fear they might desert to the enemy, taking their wagon-horses with them.

The use of Blacks by the British during the Revolutionary War established a precedent that became fulfilled during the War of 1812. In neither encounter did their use have much of an impact on the outcome of the wars, but the threat of armed slaves remained a continuing alarm for white slaveholders. The fear was soon realized.

The Fear Realized

Following the Revolutionary War, dread of the potential for a rebellion among slaves was widespread. In 1800 Virginia had a total population of 885,171, of which 346,671 were slaves. Fear that one person in three was slave and could engage in armed rebellion was constant and warranted. In 1791 slaves in San Domingo by the thousands had brought havoc to their country, slaughtering countless whites and burning plantation houses and crops. The result led to the freeing of people of color and a change in state government. Reports of the holocaust quite naturally fed the unease of white Virginians. It is this fear that the British would exploit during the War of 1812, and which became real during the invasion of Essex County.

Then slave rebellion came to Virginia in 1800. An event now called Gabriel's Conspiracy ignited white anxiety throughout the Commonwealth. Gabriel was a blacksmith owned by Thomas Henry Posser of Henrico County. Respected for his courage and intellect, Gabriel¹ was a literate man, standing some six feet two or three. During the spring of this year, he joined with other slaves working on the north side of Richmond to plan a wide-spread insurgency that – it was hoped – would lead to their freedom. Many skilled slaves were hired out to whites in need of particular workmen, and as a result, moved freely about the area. Gabriel met with Sam Byrd, Jr., who probably first proposed joint rebellion, and they spread the call to action. Taking advantage of occasions to meet, such as religious celebrations and funerals, the conspirators shaped their plans and recruited like-minded friends and relatives.

The plan called for a nighttime attack on Richmond, with the hope of overcoming the residents and capturing Governor James Monroe. A small group of insurgents would set fire to one part of the city, while the main group would wait until citizens ran to the fire and then move in to take over the town and capture arms. Initially the rebels were armed with scythes

¹ Gabriel has no last name. Some accounts of the events add to him the name of his owner, but this practice is suspect and not followed here.

turned into swords at their smithies, hand-made pikes, and a few firearms, but their goal was to arm themselves from the stores of weapons in the city. Obviously such a plan would call for a sizable force. Byrd estimated he had recruited some 500 men, but other estimates ran into the thousands.

The attack never took place. Rain canceled the attack on the appointed night in August, and by the next day the conspiracy had been exposed by slaves loyal to their owners. Suppression of the revolt was swift and effective. Patrols hunted down the rebels and brought them to justice, as it was known in the day. Seventy-two men were arrested and tried. Twenty-six – including Gabriel – were found guilty and hanged. Executions were held in public with the intent of instilling fear and terror among those who might follow the lead of Gabriel and Byrd.

The revolt was put down, but the anxiety it raised among white Virginians was serious. One writer to the Virginia Gazette thanked the governor for his quick actions but asserted, “no person can repose in security and safety,” and he added that his wish was for “security of property and safety of person and of life.”²

Fear for life and property did not diminish over the next few years. Toward the end of 1801 and into the spring of 1802, Santo, a follower of Gabriel who missed punishment, led another uprising to little effect other than to stir up the whites. In 1805 another disturbance came even closer to home for those whites in Essex County. At Chatham Manner upriver on the banks of the Rappahannock in Stafford County, approximately 60 to 90 slaves worked. The overseer demanded the slaves return to work sooner after the Christmas celebration than the slaves felt justified. The slaves rebelled and overcame and beat the overseer and four others who came to his aid. An armed posse was called out to restore normalcy. One rebel was executed and two others died while escaping. Two more were deported. These episodes were minor and order was quickly maintained, but the unsettled atmosphere was heightened. When the British during the War of 1812 called on slaves to escape and join their forces, they knew they were subjecting the slave holders of the Northern Neck and Essex County to a not-too-subtle form of propaganda.

The Colonial Marines

As the British controlled the Chesapeake Bay, escaped slaves saw them as refuge. On March 10, 1814,

² *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser*, December 11, 1800, “Letter from ‘A Private Citizen’ to James Monroe.” Reprinted in the *Encyclopedia of Virginia*.

the first former slaves reached *HMS Victorious* and soon others followed. On April 1, Admiral Alexander Cochrane assumed command of the Chesapeake fleet, and he wasted no time in declaring his position concerning slavery. In a proclamation issued the next day, he established the British navy's official stand:



Sir Alexander Inglis Cochrane, Admiral Commander of the Chesapeake fleet.
(www.wikipedia.org/wiki)

WHEREAS it has been represented to me, that many persons now resident in the UNITED STATES, have expressed a desire to withdraw therefrom, with a view of entering into His Majesty's Service, or of being received as free settlers into some of His Majesty's colonies. This is therefore

to Give Notice, That all those who may be disposed to emigrate from the UNITED STATES will, with their families, be received on board of His Majesty's ships or vessels of war, or at the military posts that may be established, upon or near the coast [of] the UNITED STATES, when they will have their choice of either entering into His Majesty's Sea or Land Forces, or of being sent as FREE Settlers to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies, where they will meet with all due encouragement.

Cochrane never used the word slave, but his meaning was clear. The British were frustrated by the irony that a nation that had fought a war for liberty still accepted the enslavement of many of its residents.³ The British needed soldiers and what better supply could be found than escaped able-bodied slaves eager to strike a blow for freedom against their former masters.

The same day Cochrane issued his proclamation, his rear-admiral, George Cockburn, had written him a letter. In it, Cockburn suggested to his superior that it would be best not to offer runaway slaves any hope of being set free as settlers somewhere in a British land for fear they would all prefer that to joining the army. He said that the army would be most willing to put arms in their hands. He does, however, express some

³ There is even further irony found in a British navy that indulged in its own form of brutality. It routinely brutalized both its own sailors and the citizens of conquered towns, yet it was shocked by slavery; but that is another matter.

doubts about the bravery and industry of American blacks. This latter is an opinion he was soon to modify. Naturally, this letter did not arrive with Cochrane in time to influence his proclamation, but it does illustrate racism – accompanied by a racial slur – that was soon reversed.

Cockburn had already established a headquarters on Tangier Island, which he used as a staging area for the British fleet in the Chesapeake Bay. There he trained former slaves who had escaped on British ships that sailed, with blinking lights, near the mainland shores at night to signal refuge to runaways. Perhaps 700 ex-slave men made it to the island, many with their families (the numbers are difficult to determine). Organized as Colonial Marines, the men were quickly given military training, provided unique uniforms, and inserted into battle. Their red jackets were provided in hope that the colorful attire would entice others to escape and join the British army. Their first military engagement was at Pungoteague on the Eastern Shore on May 28, 1814, where the first black man fell in action.

By early June, Captain Robert Barrie, who aboard *HMS Dragon* was charged with British operations along the shores of the bay, had seen enough of their capabilities in action to become their advocate. On June 1 he wrote to Cockburn, “I was highly pleased with the conduct of the Colonial Marines, under Ensign Hammond, every Individual of which Evinced the greatest eagerness, to come to Action with their former Master's.” Two weeks later he renewed his compliment: “You will be happy to hear that the Colonial Corps conducted themselves With the utmost Order, Forbearance and Regularity, and they were uniformly Volunteers for the Station where they might expect to meet their former Masters.”



Colonial Marine Uniform. The red jacket would have been worn during battle.
(www.wikipedia.org/wiki)



Sir Robert Barrie, Captain of the HMS Dragon, was highly complimentary of the Colonial Marines (the Colonial Corps) under his command.
(www.wikipedia.org/wiki).

ed themselves With the utmost Order, Forbearance and Regularity, and they were uniformly Volunteers for the Station where they might expect to meet their former Masters.”

Barrie's commander was soon convinced. At the end of June, Cockburn wrote to Admiral Cochrane, and argued that he did not want recruits from the West Indies as he was most happy with his Colonial Marines. In fact, he preferred them over the marines in his army: “They are stronger men and more trust worthy for we are sure they will not desert whereas I am sorry to say we have many instances of our marines walking over to the enemy.” He also later commended them for their zeal and bravery in battle.

The Colonial Marines Come to Virginia

Following the British retreat from Baltimore in late summer 1814, Colonial Marines made up part of the attack force for Captain Barrie's fleet, which was raiding along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributary rivers. They came ashore in the Northern Neck and succeeded in freeing numerous slaves.⁴ Then in December they came to Tappahannock. Barrie sailed his fleet up the Rappahannock and anchored just off the town.⁵

When the British landed on December 2 they brought Colonial Marines with them. The British stayed three days, ransacked the town, and burned several buildings. The out-numbered Essex militia watched the occupation from a nearby hill, unable to stop the destruction. Not long after the British sailed down river – where they harassed the people at Bowler's Wharf – a larger troop of American militia arrived under the command of Brigadier General John H. Cooke. In his report to the Virginia governor, Cooke observed that the British had landed about 500 men: “Of the number landed here, there were three companies of about 50 each of Negroes in uniform, and apparently well trained, commanded by white officers. They were said to be Virginia and Maryland Negroes, trained at Tangier Islands.” In a second letter a few days later, Cooke noted that as the British sailed down river, they left a tender and barges off Jones Point: “I conjecture the loitering of the tender, is to take off slaves, which seems to be the chief object of the expedition.” In this, Cooke probably underestimated the British wish to seek retribution on Tappahannock and the Richie family, but that is another story.

As the ships sailed past Bowlers, Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Richie, commander of the Essex militia, ordered Captain Joseph Janney to Bowlers. Among the charges given Janney and his company was

⁴ The story of the raids in the Northern Neck is ably told by Stuart Butler in “Slave Flight in the Northern Neck during the War of 1812,” *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, December, 2007.

⁵ The full story of the British excursion into Essex County will be told in the next issue of the *Bulletin*.

to “prevent the Negroes from seizing the boats on the river and going off to the enemy.”

This order was given with some justification. Captain Barrie in his after-action report to Admiral Cockburn did not specifically comment on the Colonial Marines in the action in Tappahannock, but he did report that his forces had landed on the other side of the river and raided as far inland as Farnham Church. Barrie's raiding party included the “new raised Colonial Corps,” whose charge was to release slaves. They succeeded in freeing “about twenty Negroes, several of whom he found in the woods handcuffed round the trees.”

The War Ends

Three weeks after the fleet left Essex County, the war officially ended. The two sides agreed to the Treaty of Ghent on December 24. The treaty called for the

return to the original owners all “territories, places, and possessions.” Slaves were to be included. When, however, news of this agreement reached the British fleet remaining in the Chesapeake Bay, the officers could not consider the escaped slaves – particularly those who had served in the army – as property. Some two thousand former slaves sailed into the Atlantic with the departing British ships. The British relocated them in Canada and the Caribbean, and a few years later paid the United States over a million dollars in restitution.

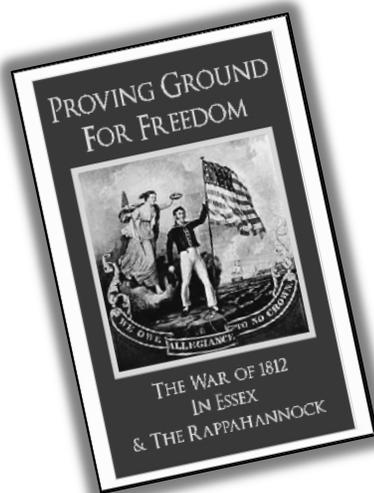
It is noteworthy that the treaty called for the end to slavery as “irreconcilable with the principles of humanity and Justice.” Neither country, as we know, was able to fulfill this promise immediately, but it was a positive aspiration.

About the Author

Bob Armour is a valued contributor to the ECMHS Bulletin, having previously written on John Smith's coming to Essex County for an earlier issue. He is Professor Emeritus of English from Virginia Commonwealth University, and a Fulbright Professor in Egypt and Visiting Professor in Northern Ireland. He has just completed his last year as Adjunct Professor at Tennessee Technological University; he has decided that fifty years as faculty and administrator is enough. He will now devote more time to his grandchildren and to finishing his study of C.S. Lewis as an academic. He and his wife Leandra have summered on the water near Dunnsville since 1969.

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**RESTORED CIVIL WAR CANNON NOW
ON VIEW IN THE ESSEX GALLERY**



This artillery piece was first placed in front of the courthouse in Tappahannock for the dedication of the Confederate Memorial on Prince Street in 1909. It looks new again thanks to a team of Museum and Historical Society members who spearheaded a community fundraising campaign and oversaw the expert restoration.

The authentic 3-inch Ordnance Rifle, which was the work-horse of both sides, was manufactured at the Phoenix Iron Works in Pennsylvania in 1864 and shows evidence of being used extensively during the war. A model 1841 gun carriage supports the 816 pound barrel. On permanent loan to the Museum and Historical Society from the county, the cannon will be preserved indoors from now on for future generations.

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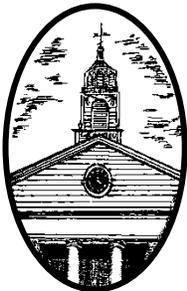
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