

The First Rhode Island Regiment: The Jackie Robinsons of the American Military
and Lafayette

In his landmark work “Colored Patriots of the American Revolution,” Boston (1855), William C. Nell, this country’s first African-American historian recounts a speech given in 1842 before an Anti-Slavery Society by a now aged veteran of the Revolution, identified only as Dr. Harris, who had served in the Rhode Island Campaign in 1778: “There was a black regiment . . . Yes, a regiment of negroes fighting for our liberty and independence – not a white man among them, but the officers – stationed in [a] dangerous and responsible position. Had they been unfaithful, or given way before the enemy, all would have been lost. Three times in succession they were attacked, with most desperate valor and fury by well-disciplined and veteran troops, and three times did they successfully repel the assault and preserve our army from capture. They fought through the war. They were brave, hardy troops. They helped to gain our liberty and independence.”

We are gathered here today to pay a tribute of respect and gratitude to the men of the First Rhode Island Regiment near the spot where these enslaved persons of color, African and Native American, fought valiantly to preserve the American Army during its withdrawal from Aquidneck Island on August 29, 1778, 235 years ago.

These heroic men, I submit, are the Jackie Robinsons of the American military. Like Jackie Robinson, they blazed the trail; they led the way. Others followed. And, having grown up in Brooklyn and seen the Brooklyn Dodgers play at Ebbets Field when I was a boy, I know Jackie Robinson.

The First Rhode Island Regiment, the Black Regiment, was created because of military necessity. Simply put, the State of Rhode Island could not otherwise supply its quota of troops to the Continental Army. It also came into being because blacks wanted to volunteer and were

willing to risk their lives in return for freedom. So it was that the Rhode Island legislature, in February 1778, voted that any slave volunteering for the new regiment would be declared “absolutely free” after his service and would be entitled to the wages and bounties of regular soldiers.

The first test of the Black Regiment came only 6 months later in the engagement that Dr. Harris described. During the evacuation of Aquidneck Island, the Black Regiment was assigned to what turned out to be one of the hottest sectors of the American right wing and was the target of three charges, by principally Hessian forces. As Sidney Kaplan wrote in “The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770-1780,” published in 1973, “Here the Germans ‘experienced a more obstinate resistance than they had expected,’ noted an observer. ‘They found large bodies of troops behind the work and at its sides, chiefly wild looking men in their shirt sleeves, and among them many negroes.’ ‘It was in repelling these furious onsets,’ wrote a Rhode Island historian in 1860, ‘that the newly raised black regiment, under Col. Greene, distinguished itself by deeds of desperate valor.’ The day after the battle, the Hessian colonel ‘applied to exchange his command and go to New York, because he dared not lead his regiment again to battle, lest his men shoot him for having caused them so much loss.’ General Sullivan announced that ‘by the best Information the Commander-in-Chief thinks that the [Black] Regiment will be intituled [*sic*] to a proper share of the Honours of the day.’”

The men of the First Rhode Island Regiment had enlisted for the duration of the war; that was a condition of their freedom. And they proved their valor and courage on more than one occasion. “In the attack made upon the American lines, near Croton river [in New York State], on the 13th of May, 1781,” wrote William C. Nell, “Colonel Greene [Christopher Greene, a cousin of General Nathanael Greene], the commander of the regiment, was cut down and

mortally wounded: but the sabres of the enemy only reached him through the bodies of his faithful guard of blacks, who hovered over him to protect him, *and every one of whom was killed.*”

General Lafayette had commanded troops in the invasion force during the Rhode Island Campaign. He was mortified to have missed the Battle of Rhode Island on August 29 as he was just returning from Boston where he had tried unsuccessfully to have the French Fleet return to Rhode Island and support General Sullivan’s forces. Lafayette did return in time to lead the rear guard of the Army off the island to Tiverton.

During the month of September, Lafayette was in charge of the defense of the mainland, and the men of the First Rhode Island Regiment served as part of his division in Bristol and Warren.

By the time of the siege of Yorktown the losses suffered by the First and Second Rhode Island Regiments were so great that the two regiments had been combined to form the Rhode Island Regiment, also known as Olney’s Battalion after their Commander Jeremiah Olney. At Yorktown, due to their reputation for bravery, General Lafayette handpicked 40 men from Olney’s Battalion for the final assault on Redoubt #10. So during the siege of Yorktown and the successful storming of Redoubt #10 in October 1781, which led to the Surrender of the British Army a few days later, these men served nobly in a truly integrated regiment. Again, the men of the First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail. They led the way, although it took 200 years and the Vietnam War to create a truly integrated Army.

It is probable that his experience with the men of the First Rhode Island Regiment and with an enslaved African-American spy, James Armistead, who reported to him from Lord

Cornwalis' camp during the Virginia Campaign and the siege of Yorktown, influenced Lafayette to become a sincere and committed abolitionist.

After the peace treaty that ended the American Revolution was signed in Paris, Lafayette wrote his paternal friend Washington a letter dated February 5, 1783:

“Now, my dear General, that you are going to enjoy some ease and quiet, permit me to propose a plan to you which might become greatly beneficial to the Black Part of Mankind. Let us unite in purchasing a small estate where we may try the experiment to free the Negroes, and use them only as tenants – such an example as yours might render it a general practice, and if we succeed in America, I will cheerfully devote a part of my time to render the method fascionable in the West Indies. If it be a wild scheme, I had rather be mad that way, than to be thought wise on the other tack.”

Washington replied in an April 5, 1783 letter from Headquarters in Newburgh, New York:

“The scheme, my dear Marquis, which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of the Country from that state of Bondage in which, they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, till I have the pleasure of seeing you.”

Although Lafayette visited America in 1784 and spent over a week at Mount Vernon with Washington and his family, Washington never joined him in that “so laudable a work.”

However, Lafayette was true to his word. He purchased a plantation in French Cayenne on the Northern coast of South America in 1785 and established a program of gradual emancipation for the enslaved workers.

After Lafayette wrote Washington on February 6, 1786 to inform him about his purchase of the Cayenne plantation “in order to make that experiment” of freeing the negroes, Washington responded by letter dated May 10, 1786:

“The benevolence of your heart my dear Marquis is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an Estate in the Colony of Cayenne with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country, but I despair of seeing it ...”

Many historians attribute Washington’s decision in his last will and testament to free his slaves upon his and Martha Washington’s death to the influence of Lafayette.

In a letter to a Boston abolitionist in 1845, the great British abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, Lafayette’s long-time friend, quoted Lafayette as follows: “I would never have drawn my sword in the cause of America if I would have conceived that thereby I was founding a land of slavery.” This statement became a rallying cry for Northern abolitionists in the 1840’s and 1850’s. William C. Nell quoted Lafayette’s anti-slavery lament and described the Cayenne project in the Appendix to his 1855 book. He also gave Lafayette this tribute: “Lafayette was consistent, having bravely and disinterestedly acted in vindicating America’s rights, he did not incur the reproach of hypocrisy by turning and trampling on the rights of others.”

Lafayette returned to America in 1824 and stayed for 13 months visiting all 24 states. When he arrived in New Orleans in 1825, he was greeted by the corps of men of color who had fought for America under Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. In his remarks which were reported in the local newspapers, Lafayette acknowledged the courage and sacrifice of the First Rhode Island Regiment before praising the Freedmen who served during the War of 1812.

“Gentlemen, I have often during the War of Independence, seen African blood shed with honor in our ranks for the cause of the United States,” he said. Then he continued: “I have learnt with the liveliest interest, how you answered to the appeal of General Jackson; what a glorious use you made of your arms for the defense of Louisiana. I cherish the sentiments of gratitude for your services, and of admiration for your valor. Accept those also of my personal friendship, and of the pleasure I shall always experience in meeting with you again.”

The First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail; the men of the colored corps of Freedmen who fought with Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814-1815 followed it.

As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, we continue to learn about the Black soldiers who fought for the Union, particularly the Massachusetts 54th Regiment whose courage was dramatized in the movie “Glory.” Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts said of them:

“I know not where, in all of human history, to any given 1000 men in arms there has been committed a work at once so proud so precious, so full of worth and glory.”

The First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail; the Massachusetts 54th followed it.

In 1877 Henry Ossian Flipper became the first black graduate of West Point, the US Military Academy. A former slave born in 1856, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant. He became the first non-white officer to lead a regiment of the so-called “Buffalo soldiers” – black

regiments of calvary and later infantry who fought in the Indian Wars out West and later in the Spanish American War (1898), the Phillipine-American War (1899-1903) and the Mexican Expedition (1916).

The First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail and the Buffalo soldiers and Lieutenant Flipper followed it.

Segregated black regiments served in World War I and World War II, most notably the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. The commander of the Tuskegee Airmen was Benjamin Davis, Jr., an African-American officer who later became the first black US Air Force General. His father Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. had been the first black US Army Brigadier General.

The First Rhode Island First Regiment blazed the trail; General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the Tuskegee Airmen and General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. followed it.

Despite President Truman's post-World War II executive order integrating the US Armed Forces, the first war in which we had a truly integrated military since the Rhode Island Regiment of 1781 was, not Korea, but Vietnam.

The men of the First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail; the American armed forces in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan followed it.

President George H.W. Bush appointed General Colin Powell Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the second highest military position in the country in 1989. And he served ably in that capacity until 1993.

The First Rhode Island Regiment blazed the trail and General Powell followed it.

Finally, and you know where I'm going with this, in 2008 Barack Obama was elected President and when he took that oath of office on January 20, 2009, he became the Commander in Chief of the American military. The Commander in Chief, the highest rank in the land.

The men of the First Rhode Island Regiment, the Jackie Robinsons of the American military, blazed the trail; and President, and Commander in Chief, Barack Obama followed it.

God bless the United States of America and God bless the men of the First Rhode Island Regiment whose memory we are celebrating here today.