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## **Black Regiment ‘blazed trail’**

The First Rhode Island Regiment is called ‘the Jackie Robinsons of the American military’ by the keynote speaker at an annual observance.

**By Sean Flynn**, Staff writer

PORTSMOUTH — The soldiers of the First Rhode Island Regiment, better known as the “Black Regiment” that fought in the Revolutionary War, were the “Jackie Robinsons of the American military,” according to a historian who spoke during Sunday’s annual commemoration of the Battle of Rhode Island.

On Aug. 29, 1778, the regiment repulsed three attacks by British and Hessian forces and held the army’s right wing. American Gen. John Sullivan praised them, saying they “repelled the British troops and maintained the field.”

“Like Jackie Robinson, they blazed the trail; they led the way,” historian Alan Hoffman told more than 50 people who gathered at the monument in Patriots Park, at the intersection of routes 24 and 114 in Portsmouth.



(Alan R. Hoffman)

“That is just mind-blowing; that puts a whole new perspective on it,” said James Vincent, president of the Providence Branch of the NAACP, who served as master of ceremonies.

Between 1775 and 1783, more than 750 black slaves and freemen served in the regiment, and were part of the final victory over the British army in Yorktown, Va., in 1781, according to the summary history engraved on the monument.

Hoffman said the losses suffered by Rhode Island’s First and Second regiments were so great, they were combined in early 1781 to form the Rhode Island Regiment, also known as Olney’s Battalion after their commander, Jeremiah Olney. It was “a truly integrated unit,” he said.

During the siege of Yorktown, Gen. Lafayette chose 40 men from Olney’s Battalion for the successful final assault on Redoubt No. 10, which led to the surrender of the British.

“Again, the men of the Rhode Island First Regiment blazed the trail,” Hoffman said. “They led the way, although it took 200 years and the Vietnam War to create a truly integrated Army.”

Hoffman, who has practiced law in Boston for more than 40 years, is president of the American Friends of Lafayette and translated the book, “Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825” by Auguste Lavasseur, from the original French into English.

Speakers at the ceremony also addressed a more recent event, the historic speech the Rev. Martin Luther

King Jr. gave on the National Mall on Aug. 28, 1963, during the March on Washington.

Vincent said he led a group of 51 state residents, including 10 from Newport, to the 50th anniversary celebration in Washington, D.C., over the weekend. They left by bus Friday night, spent all day Saturday there, and arrived back Sunday morning. Pauline Perkins Moye of Newport and others on the trip also made it to the Sunday afternoon celebration in Patriots Park.

“I was awestruck by the multitudes who packed the National Mall to celebrate the greatest speech in American history,” Vincent said.

He said featured speakers on the National Mall on Saturday included Attorney General Eric Holder and the Rev. Al Sharpton. He said Holder is a hero to many people today for his efforts to protect voting rights of minorities after the Supreme Court recently gutted a key provision of the act, and his opposition to “stand your ground” laws in many states.

Other speakers on Sunday included Jimmy Winters, president of the Newport County Branch of the NAACP, who welcomed the attendees and led them in singing the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”; Audrain Maria Triplett, a retired Navy commander and chairwoman of the Black Patriots Committee; James A. Seveney, president of the Portsmouth Town Council; and Esmond D. “Doug” Smith, chairman of the Portsmouth 375th Anniversary Steering Committee.

“What a year for celebrations,” Seveney said, noting this also is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Providence Branch of the NAACP.

“We are all proud of our history,” Smith said.



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