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Black Revolutionary War Heroes

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Independence Hall Tea Party, Philadelphia

written and delivered by Amy Reid

July 4th, 2010

It is very humbling to stand here and address you today. Thank you Teri and Don Adams and the Independence Hall Tea Party for this opportunity to stand before such a great group of patriots.

I was asked to come here today to share some facts about American History; and I am going to do just that, but we can't talk about American History without talking about revolution. Because as we know, there would be no American history if there hadn't been a revolution.

Do you realize that every revolution was started by a minority? Think about it.

2009 – Iran – believing that the Iranian presidential elections were rigged, and that their votes weren't counted, millions protested, yet they represented a minority of the citizens in that country.

1989 Tiananmen Square, China – insistent on mourning the death of a leader who espoused the ideas of free speech and freedom of the press, tens of thousands protested in that square, and many died for the sake of freedom, yet they were in the minority.

In the years preceding the American Revolutionary War, only one third of the colonists yearned for independence from the tyrannical rule of England. Once again, only a minority thought that their freedom was worth fighting and possibly dying for.

Now since I am among patriots, I would venture a guess that you probably knew that the founders were in the minority. But did you know that some of the founders WERE minorities?

Black men or African Americans, if you prefer, helped the colonies gain their independence from England and found our great nation.

Now, I have to tell you that at the onset of the war, most blacks were slaves, and they were looking to fight for whichever side would guarantee their freedom. And I don't blame them one bit. Let's face it, the only reason any of us came here today is because we care about our freedom more than anything else.

When the call to arms was sounded, some slaves were forced to serve in the place of their masters. There were a few free, wealthy blacks that were able to afford a substitute. But there were blacks, slave and free, who believed in the vision of a new free nation.

I'll start with someone you've all probably heard of, a sailor by the name of Crispus Attucks.

British soldiers were sent to Boston to quell the growing unrest of the citizens, as there had been some recent protests about unfair taxes. Sound familiar?

The colonists resented the soldiers walking their streets and they resented the two canons aimed at the town hall, and after one of the British soldiers struck a youth, those folks were ready to rumble. As the soldiers and townspeople took to the streets, Attucks led a group of colonists to confront the soldiers. A fight ensued and Attucks was the first colonial to die at the hand of the British in what we know as the Boston Massacre. Attucks, along with the four others colonists killed that day, was considered a martyr and was laid in state for two days before being buried. The funeral was attended by the largest crowd known to have assembled in North America.

Peter Salem – born a slave, he bought his own freedom in 1769. In 1775, 6 years later, he left his family behind so that he could fight at Bunker Hill, Saratoga and Monmouth. Salem was responsible for winning the Battle at Bunker Hill. British Major John Pitcairn ordered the colonists to surrender and Salem responded

with a shot that killed him. There was mass confusion among the Brits, and the Colonists were able to take control of the field. Peter Salem performed so well in battle that 14 officers sent a petition to the Massachusetts legislature asking them to give him commendations.

Wentworth Cheswell – the son of a notable and well-to-do homebuilder, was a respected leader by the age of 21 in his hometown in New Hampshire. In 1768 he became the first black judge, and the first black man elected to public office in America. In April 1776, 8 years later, he signed a document in which he pledged, “at the risk of life and fortune,” to take up arms against the British. Two years later he enlisted.

Cheswell was one of the 30 or so armed men who went out one particular night to warn of the movement of the British army. Had the British gone north instead of west on the night of Paul Revere’s infamous ride, we might have learned about the Midnight Ride of Wentworth Cheswell.

James Armistead – after getting consent from his master, served as an intelligence agent for the Patriot Army. He befriended a young French general Marquis de Lafayette who served under the command of Washington. Lafayette asked the 21-year-old Armistead to become a spy. Armistead successfully infiltrated Benedict Arnold’s camp and eventually the camp of Lord Cornwallis. He pretended to be a spy for the British, but all the while relayed information to Lafayette about the movement of the British troops. His espionage helped the young Patriot Army defeat the British at the Battle of Yorktown. He performed his role so well that Cornwallis didn’t make the connection that it had been Armistead passing the information until he encountered him in Lafayette’s headquarters. Armistead put himself in harm’s way even though he wasn’t promised his freedom. His work and loyalty amazed General Lafayette, and he gave Armistead a letter of commendation. Armistead didn’t get his freedom until two years after his service, and as an expression of admiration for the marquis; Armistead changed his name to James Armistead Lafayette. Thirty-eight years later, during the marquis’ last visit to Virginia, he saw his friend James Armistead Lafayette in the crowd and called him out so that he could greet and embrace his friend once more.

There are others.

Prince Estabrook – a slave, participated in the first battle of the American Revolutionary War, the Battle of Lexington. He was the first to get into the fight and was wounded for the cause of freedom.

Prince Whipple – a slave who served at the Battles of Trenton and Saratoga.

Oliver Cromwell – a free man in the 2nd NJ Regiment, served at the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Monmouth and Yorktown.

These two men, Whipple and Cromwell, served with Washington and can be seen in the front of the boat in the famous picture of Washington crossing the Delaware.

Historical records show that 5,000 blacks fought for American Independence. Even without the certainty of their futures, they understood that the risk of dying for freedom was better than the guarantee of living under oppression.

Now, if you’re wondering why you’ve never heard about these black heroes, it hasn’t been by accident. After the Civil War, the losers, the Democrats, were allowed to re-write the history books. They knew that the best way to isolate blacks was to remove them from history. But we conservatives are getting wiser and we are making some noise.

And as Jefferson said, “A little revolution from time to time is a good thing.”

May God bless our troops and our nation. Thank you.

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