



Cato Freedom Project:

Three African American Revolutionary War Patriots in Central New York

by

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with undergraduate research assistants

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Hartwick College



Introduction

My public journey into the world of slave genealogy began in March 1977 with my inclusion in a *New York Times* article about Alex Haley's *Roots*. I was then the 24-year-old grandson of the formerly enslaved African named Richard Parler Jr. of Denmark, South Carolina. As I reflect back, I now realize how fortunate I had been receiving an oral history of my ancestor directly from his daughter who relished in telling stories of the families exploits. Those stories were repeated throughout my childhood years and were supplemented with rare images of my grandparents that had been preserved through the decades. As an undergraduate student at SUNY Oneonta, Dr. Ena Campbell, an anthropologist from the University of the West Indies, guided me in understanding the importance of preserving my family's stories in a documented format.

Unbeknown to me, I had been placed on a path leading to a mentoring experience. While I never had the opportunity to meet Haley, I certainly had multiple occasions to converse with several of his contemporaries. They included James Dent Walker and Debra Newman at the National Archives, Agnes Kane Callum of Baltimore, and Charles L. Blockson at Temple University. They were scholars whose influence encouraged me to explore historiographic genealogy, or the placing of ancestors within historic context. By 1989, I had gained sufficient expertise to establish the Intercultural Resource Center at Gettysburg College that focused upon the reconstruction of African American family histories. It also was the year that the Associated Press re-introduced me to the public. In 1991, the New York Times News Service continued the national publicity about my efforts to introduce genealogical research to students.

From that humble beginning to today the media has shared my journey into the world of enslaved Africans. I am pleased that the journey included my preparation of several publications, or case studies, that have received notice. All the materials that I have accumulated during my research are now a part of the privately owned Matthews Collection and are shared through the Cato Freedom Project at the United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research at Hartwick College. They are used as teaching tools for the undergraduate members of the Harriet Tubman Mentoring Project at Hartwick, which is truly a tribute to those who had mentored me. This booklet contains some of the lessons I have learned, with the hope of inspiring other researchers who are documenting the history of enslaved Africans in America from the Revolutionary War period through the Civil War.

Harry Bradshaw Matthews

Setting the Stage for Research

It has been 447 years since Sir John Hawkins became the first Englishman to transport 301 Africans to the new world in 1562. On the mainland, 20-odd Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 as indentured servants. By the start of the American Revolutionary War, slavery had emerged as an entrenched economic and social institution that left to slave owners the overwhelming control of the black family structure and identity. For the most part, enslaved Africans were simply considered as property void of the legal right to baptism, marriage, and the maintenance of family households. A limited opportunity to reverse that misfortune became apparent with the commencement of the Revolutionary War.

England's representative in the Virginia Colony, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation in 1775 that promised freedom to any slave who fought for the defense of the Virginia colony under British rule. Within a month, 800 black men had joined Dunmore's ranks, resulting in the first mass emancipation of slaves in American history. As a consequence of Dunmore's action, the leaders of the independence movement reluctantly felt the urgency to reverse their position of not arming their slaves. Black men were recruited for enlistment in the Continental Army with the promise of freedom if three years of service was given or enlistment lasted to the end of the war.

The provisional treaty on November 30, 1782 revealed that all enslaved persons who were with the British before the signing of the treaty were considered free. The British agreed to the requirement that a master list be compiled identifying each freed person among its ranks. When the British forces officially departed from New York on November 30, 1783, they turned over to the Americans its Inspection Roll of Negroes consisting of 3,000 men, women, and children, identified by name, their former masters, and ship of departure.

There also were 4,000 former slaves who left with the British from Savannah, as well as 6,000 from Charleston. Other enslaved persons were removed from Southern colonies by their Loyalist masters and transported to the Bahamas, Canada, and Jamaica. Also, St. Augustine in East Florida was a popular site at which the Loyalists had moved their enslaved persons from South Carolina and Georgia. Once the location was ceded to Spain, however, some Loyalists had a change of heart and were granted permission to relocate to their original homesteads.

Historians estimate that 5,000 black men, free and enslaved, served as soldiers for the Continental forces. Unlike the British, no official report was compiled and maintained by the colonists that identified each black patriot and the members of his family.

The legacy of the black patriots rests mainly with inclusion in the Revolutionary War Service Records, Revolutionary War Rolls, and/or listing within the various state adjutant general reports. For most of the men, no tombstones mark their burial sites. Even for those who survived the war, few records remain that personalize their respective stories. Few descendants cite their names. For the fortunate, however, the Congressional Act of 1818 made it possible for patriots in dire need to seek governmental assistance through pension applications. These Revolutionary War Pension Records provide important information about



a very limited number of black patriots, which can be embellished upon by modern-day researchers. Another important source for identifying some of the first black families who gained freedom is the first Federal Census for the United States, which was enumerated in 1790. Newman's study provides support by limiting her data to the names of only black heads of household recorded in the 1790 Census.

Certainly, the chance of tracing slave ancestry back to the Revolutionary War period is slim at best. Nevertheless, it is an important pursuit because each patriot who is recovered through research helps to affirm the rightful place of Africans in American history. Their stories led to lineage that begins even before the American Revolution, or more specifically, before the United States was established as an independent nation.

Through such studies about the black patriots, evidence affirms the vigor enslaved ancestors exhibited in their every attempt to gain freedom through the generations leading to the American Civil War.

Credit Above Image: Painting by Don Troiani, www.historicalimagebank.com

Three Black Revolutionary War Patriots

In a sporadic fashion, usually without advance notice, new recoveries about individual black patriots of the Revolutionary War are increasing do in part to research efforts. Such is the case at the United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research at Hartwick College. The USCTI is a national membership organization, established in 1998, that is managed by its founding president, Harry Bradshaw Matthews, who is Associate Dean and Director of U.S. Pluralism Programs at Hartwick. He established in 2007 the Harriet Tubman Mentoring Project to formalize the association of a select group of Hartwick students with the USCTI. While the signature focus of the USCTI during the past ten years has been with the 200,000 black soldiers and their 7,000 white officers of the Civil War, new and expanded efforts are embracing the African American soldiers and their white officers from the Revolutionary War through World War II.

Matthews and the Tubman Mentors have identified three black patriots who resided in upstate New York following their enlistment with Connecticut Regiments during the Revolutionary War. The soldiers followed the pattern of other New England residents relocating to upstate New York because of the availability of bounty land upon which to establish homesteads. Most surprising to the researchers was learning that one of the soldiers resided in Burlington Township, which is located within 20 miles of the USCTI in Oneonta. Cato Freedom was his name. Other identified patriots were Prince Duplex, who was associated with Tompkins and Tioga counties, while Primus Hill (also known as Ebenezer Hill) resided in Oneida County. Primus should not be confused with the white Ebenezer Hill of Otselic, Chenango County, New York.

While Duplex and Hill were mentioned briefly in David O. White's 1973 text, *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783*, Freedom's personal story had not been written about in any publication prior to the current research. All three of the men, however, share the heroics of battle along with other well-known patriots such as Crispus Attucks, who has been credited in history as the first patriot to die in 1770 at the Boston Massacre. Controversy, however, questions whether Attucks was black, mulatto, or Indian. Nevertheless, Attucks has been immortalized with Peter Salem, who fought at the 1775 Battle of Lexington and Concord, as well as with Salem Poor at the Battle of Bunker Hill. They are included among the approximately 5,000 black men who fought for independence from Great Britain.

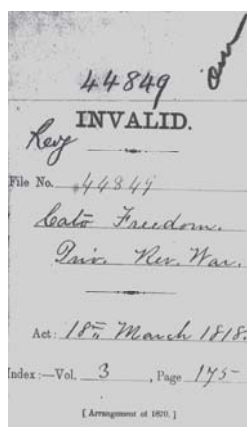
Cato Freedom

Land Indenture—Cato Freedom and his wife Amelia entered into a land deal with James and Hannah Carpenter on February 10, 1816, in which the former paid \$333.33 for a tract of land from the latter, being a part of the Hannah Smith Tract bordering the land of Moses Mathers in the Groghans Patent of Burlington Township. The document, located in the Otsego County Clerk's Office, Deed Book, V302-3, is the earliest known document affirming the residence of the Freedom family in Burlington Township. (Source: Matthews, July 8, 2009) Amelia's name appeared as Parmelia in later documents and on her tombstone.



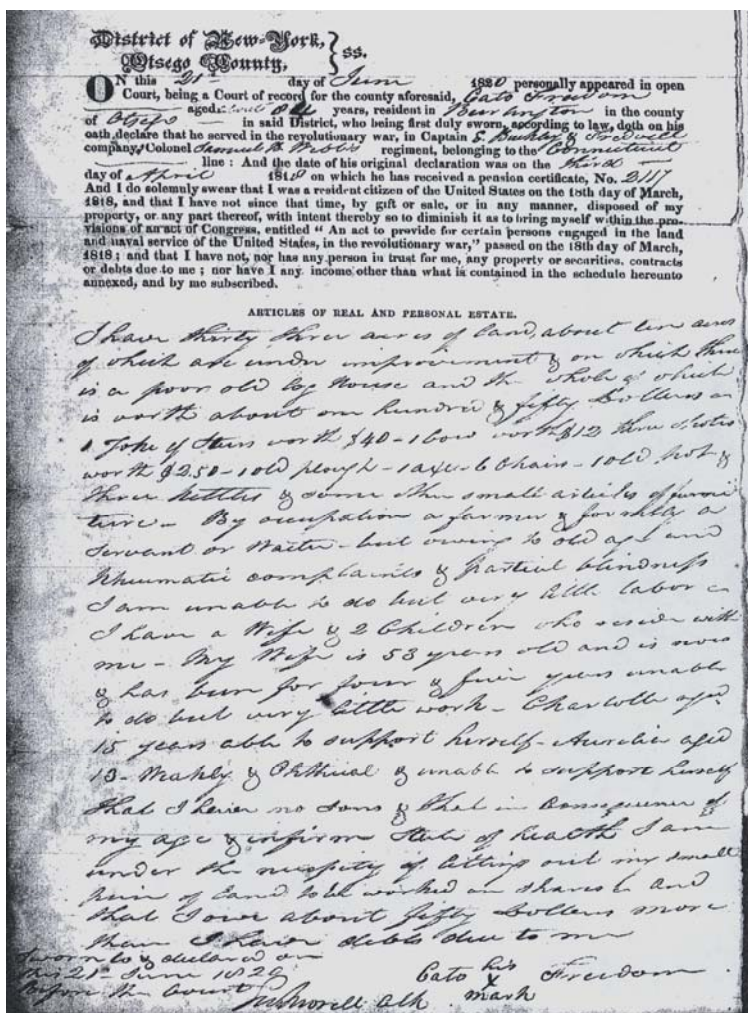
Veteran's Affidavit—Cato Freedom filed an affidavit in Cooperstown, Otsego County, New York in April 1818 attesting that he was a resident of Burlington Township and a former patriot of the Third Regiment of the Connecticut Line during the American Revolution, which was commanded by Colonel Samuel B. Webb and was under the command of General Ebenezer Huntington.

Freedom indicated that he served in a company for three years that was commanded first by Captain Edward Bulkley, then by Captain Sheldon and Captain Douglass; further that his enlistment lasted beyond the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown [October 19, 1781]. Freedom received an honorable discharge for his service through September 2, 1783. He was at the time enlisted in the Fifth Company, Connecticut Regiment, commanded by Colonel H. Swift. The peace treaty between the United States and Great Britain was concluded one day later. It was fortunate that Freedom retained his honorable discharge certificate up to the date of his affidavit, which was validated by James W. Webb, as well as certified by John Russell, Judge of Otsego County Court of Pleas. In Judge Russell's certified statement he referred to the patriot as Cato Freeman, rather than Cato Freedom, as appeared in prior legal papers filed in Cooperstown, New York.



Cato Freedom's Pension Certificate

Pension Certificate—Cato Freedom received a pension certificate on April 3, 1820. He filed the Article of Real and Personal Estate statement as sworn testimony on June 21, 1820. The statement identified his personal possessions, as well as the identities of his family members.



Freedom Family Tombstones

Cato Freedom was 84 years of age when he received a pension certificate attesting to his military service; his pension rate was \$8 per month. His real and personal estate was valued at \$214, with \$50 in debt. He owned 33 acres of land of which ten acres were under improvement. His wife, Parmelia (Amelia) was 53 years of age at the time; his daughter Charlotte was 15 years of age and healthy. His 13-year-old daughter, Aurabia was quite sickly. Henry Sill of Cooperstown provided additional information about Freedom in a letter sent to the Secretary of War in July 1827. He wanted to know if Freedom was still entitled to bounty land for having served in the military. Sill made known that Freedom was a man of color, an African by birth. It is not known if such land was granted to Freedom, but a later document in his pension file indicated that he died on February 13, 1830.

Matthews and two Tubman Mentors, Khadian Thomas '09 and Brittanie Kemp '11, were able to use the information from Freedom's pension file to locate his burial site, with assistance from staff at the Research Library at the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown. The Butternut Valley Cemetery (also known as Brick Schoolhouse Cemetery) was identified as the final resting place for Freedom and his family. Three large-size tombstones, erected side-by-side, revealed that Cato was then identified with the surname of Freeman, with a date of death inscribed as



May 19, 1828 at the age of 96 years. The inscription contradicted the information within Cato's pension file, but there was no doubt that the tombstone honored him. His wife, Parmelia, had a tombstone that identified her as the colored spouse of Cato, with her date of death placed at April 19, 1838 at 73 years of age.

Prince Duplex

Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783, David O. White—Prince Duplex was briefly mentioned in the book, particularly the notice that “the son of Prince Duplex was also associated with the Temple Street Church. Also known as Prince Duplex, he had gone to New Haven after his father moved from Wolcott to Danby, New York.” The quotation was enough to alert me that it would be worth the time and energy to search New York records for the elder Duplex. Fortunately, Private Duplex’s pension file revealed important information.

Pension Affidavit—Prince Duplex affirmed on September 8, 1820 that he had been a resident of Danby, Tioga County,* New York for five years. He served in the Revolutionary War, having enlisted at Hartford County, Connecticut on May 18, 1777 and served in Captain Rice’s Company. He served at the battles of Germantown, Fort Mifflin, and Monmouth. He was discharged at Morristown, New Jersey on May 16, 1780. Duplex first received his pension of \$8 per month on April 27, 1818. His marriage certificate indicated that he married Lement Parker on February 22, 1782 in the Congregational Church in New Haven, Connecticut. *The couple is buried in the Danby Presbyterian Cemetery, Town of Danby, Tompkins County, New York.

This may certify from the Congregational Church records in my hands that Prince Duplex and Lement Parker were married by Alexander Gillet the former pastor of said Church July 25th 1782
 -1777
 November 2, 1817 - at West Thomas New York
 said Church -

Wolcott County of Wolcott November
 3rd 1827. Promosely appeared before me
 Thomas Whom signs of the foregoing certificate
 of record and make oath to the truth of
 the above the said Whom being a credible
 witness and clerk of said Church
 Orrin Church pastor of the said

Primus Hill

Pension File—Primus Hill, also called Ebenezer Hill, served in Captain Benjamin Throop’s Company in Colonel Charles Burrall’s Connecticut Regiment and was discharged in February 1777. He was residing in Augusta, Oneida County, New York when he first received his pension on March 14, 1820. The following year, he was still residing in Augusta with his 70-year-old wife, Tamer, and their three granddaughters, 7-year-old Phebe, 5-year-old Jewell, and 2-year-old Jane.

Dec. 8, 1820
 No. 738

The data furnished herein were obtained from the papers on file in Revolutionary War pension claims, R. 4077, issued to the military service of Primus Hill, as set out:

Primus Hill, also called Ebenezer Hill, a black man, colored, placed out to sea, in the winter of 1770 and 1771, served in a certain Captain's company, and in the month of the year in which he was discharged at Fort Independence in February, 1777, having served one year.

He was allowed pension on 14th March 1820, and was still residing in Augusta, Oneida County, New York, in 1821, he was residing in Augusta, Oneida County, New York, and then passed that his family residing with the granddaughters of his wife, Tamer, and three granddaughters, and three granddaughters, Phebe, Jewell and Jane, aged seven, five and two years respectively, their names and the names of their parents were set down.

There was no further family data.

Filed for
 record
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To be sent if ever called for.
 It was written that to take a record of capture.



Information Sources

Cemetery Records, Research Library, New York State Historical Assn.
Deed Books, Chenango County Clerk's Office.
Wills, Chenango County Surrogate's Court.
Deed Books, Otsego County Clerk's Office.
Prince Duplex and His Family, Tompkins County NYGenWeb.
Benjamin Quarles. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. University of North Carolina Press, 1961.
David O. White. *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783*. Pequot Press, 1973.
Revolutionary War Pension Files, National Archives.

SUMMARY

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