Revolt in Revolution:

Preventing and Promoting Slave Revolt in Revolutionary South Carolina

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Abstract: *"Revolt in Revolution: Preventing and Promoting Slave Revolt in Revolutionary South Carolina"* discusses the uses of African American slaves during the Revolutionary War by both American and British combatants, especially focused on the promised reward of freedom for slaves joining either side of the conflict. The main argument of the paper is that: "Both white combatants sought to maintain control of African American slaves… and continually forced them into subservient military roles, despite the eventual promise of freedom, ultimately circumscribed by the victors." The paper further claims that American promises for emancipation for supportive slaves was only as a reaction to British promises and that the conflict, following the Dunmore and Philipsburg Proclamations (British proclamations insuring post war emancipation for supportive slaves) was deeper than simply maintaining military slave allies in South Carolina. Instead, the conflict became a battle over which white party would define post-war freedom, assuming that slaves were incapable of truly understanding what liberty would mean. Primary sources relied upon include personal correspondence from American plantation owners and members of the Patriot military, statements from British military personnel, legal proceedings and wartime proclamations (including the British Dunmore and Philipsburg Proclamations and reactionary decrees made by American governmental bodies), and newspaper articles, among other documents from the period.

On the eve of the American Revolution, a South Carolina planter, Henry Laurens, wrote a letter to his brother James explaining that pro-British agitators had alerted some of his slaves to the benefits of joining the cause against the "patriots":

> Negro Slaves… have been taught to exclaim, 'down with the Americans & their Estates will be all free plunder.'… I See it my duty to guard against every thing which may happen & to Sound repeated warnings to those who are dearer to me… than my Life.[1]

Laurens was anxious because a free black itinerant preacher had encouraged slaves to use the possibilities that the Revolution provided to gain freedom and property from their owners—by joining the British.[2] This was a terrifying concept for slave owners, like Henry Laurens, whose livelihoods were based entirely on the economic gains made from slave labor. Earlier in the same year, Laurens had informed William Manning, a London lawyer, that as South Carolinians were delving "deeper & deeper into Warlike preparations," they expected "Tories & Negro Slaves to rise in [their] bowels," striking blows from within in concert with one another.[3] The white South Carolina House of Commons noted that "every one that had a Life to lose, were in the most sensible Manner shocked at such Danger daily hanging over their Heads."[4] James Madison, future president of the United States and a Virginia slave owner, thought that the potential for an uprising on the eve of Revolution was the "only part in which [the] Colony [was] vulnerable; and

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[1] Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 17 August 1776, *The Papers of Henry Laurens,* ed. South Carolina Historical Society, 16 vols. (Columbia: Columbia, Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 1968), X, 255-256.

[2] Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 389.

[3] Henry Laurens to William Manning, 27 February 1776, *The Papers of Henry Laurens,* X, 122-123.

[4] James Oglethorp, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Causes of the Disappointment of Success in the Late Expedition Against St. Augustine*, (Charleston, SC: Walker, Evans, & Cogswell Co., 1887), accessed 31 March 2014, https://archive.org/details/reportofcommitte00so.

if we [American patriots] should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that

knows that secret," shooting a deadly arrow through the single greatest weakness the Patriots

faced.[5] This weakness, with the capacity to break down American wartime goals and efforts, was

exposed nowhere more than in South Carolina.

      Charleston, South Carolina was the largest African slave trade hub in the colonies and

was thus particularly sensitive to the dangers of maintaining slavery within their "bowels."

Slaves of African origin made up a majority of South Carolina's population, prior to the war and

the specter of slaves gaining some degree of social status had already begun to take shape within

the city of Charleston.[6] Still, Patriot South Carolinians did not believe that slaves were capable of

acting independently. Instead, they feared that the British would incite them into becoming a

weapon against Patriots.

      Before the war began, white South Carolinians sporadically feared revolts, but the typical

pattern included outside agitators. In the Stono Rebellion of 1739, for example, they blamed the

Spanish in Florida for convincing slaves to rise up *en masse* against their owners to gain

freedom.[7] The Spanish had offered sanctuary to runaway slaves, and had sometimes sponsored

raids against the lower south. The British during the revolution could prove to be an even more

formidable enemy, having a sustained military presence in the colonies. By promising

emancipation after the war, the British might directly disturb not only social and economic

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[5] James Madison to William Bradford, 19 June 1775. *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition*, ed. J. C. A. Stagg (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2010), accessed 23 February 2014, http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/JSMN.html.

[6] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 96.

[7] Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, ed. History E-Book Project, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 308-310, accessed 10 February 2014, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00338.0001.001; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Wood discusses at length correspondence of South Carolina's then governor, William Bull, as well as the proceeds of South Carolina House of Commons in relation to the fear that these runaways, believed to be supported along their journey by slaves throughout the colonial Deep South, held the potential to incite massive rebellion and provide slaves an escape to Spanish territory.

spheres during the war, but the entire future of the colonies. Because the British did not necessarily seek to restructure American society by emancipating slaves, instead simply hoping to reign in American calls for freedom from Britain, slaves were only a strategic resource toward attaining that objective. Additionally, slave freedom would be circumscribed by either victorious party as both white combatants felt slaves were incapable of understanding what liberty would actually mean. Though the British were able to maintain more radical versions of liberty following the conflict, less accountable to dealing with the consequences, the American definition and promise of post-war freedom was primarily reactionary and required a much narrower definition. Though widespread insurrection never came to fruition, the ever-present fear of slave uprisings influenced the actions of American and British military forces in interactions with the slave population in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War. Both white combatants sought to maintain control of African American slaves, as revealed in personal correspondence, legal proceedings and wartime proclamations, and newspaper articles, and continually forced them into subservient military roles, despite the eventual promise of freedom, ultimately circumscribed by the victors.

Philip D. Morgan compares suspicions about slave revolt prior to the Revolutionary War to "static on an old radio," ever present in the background but not always acknowledged or considered important. [8] However, connected to threats of British incitement during the Revolution, this static became unavoidable. Looking at the war itself, historian Sylvia Frey, attributes the fear of slave insurrection to the potential for slaves themselves to take agency in claiming their own freedom, acting without any external persuasion.[9] However, primary evidence counters this conclusion and suggests instead that fear was centered more on white

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[8] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 398; The following sources also discuss pre-war fears of revolt: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 153; and Wood, *Black Majority*.

[9] Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1991).

agitation of rebellion, especially when agitators offered freedom as an incentive to lure in slave support. Additionally, historians including Gary B. Nash, Alan Gilbert, and James Walker attribute the employment of slaves in the war simply to military necessity for both the British and the Americans, when in fact this was only a miniscule part of the reason for slave incorporation.[10] The true root of the entire situation regarding slave use was the question of liberty for the slaves and which white force, the Tories or the Patriots, would be able to define what slave freedom would or would not entail, or if it would exist at all, after the war. The British began this process by attempting to use the few military resources they felt they had in South Carolina to quell Patriot rebellion, baiting South Carolina's majority to support their cause by offering a broad freedom to slaves as payment for military support. American motivations were reactionary, hoping to keep the slaves distracted from taking advantage of wartime chaos to seek the freedom offered by the British by promising their own restricted version of liberty in exchange for military service. The fear of outside agitation of slave uprising experienced by the Americans, and further British exploitation of that fear by offering slaves emancipation as recompense of revolt, serve to explain the American closely circumscribed and reactionary promise of freedom as the true basis for American involvement with slaves during the war.

The fear of and potential for slave revolt was great within South Carolina for a number of reasons. The first of these is based in the origins of South Carolina's slave trade and the expansion of rice culture within the colony. Rice was the ideal staple crop for South Carolina and

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[10] Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); James W. St G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870, (*London: Longman, 1976).

slaves were an essential element in its success. Many believed, like Samuel Eveleigh, a South

Carolina merchant, that rice couldn't "be produced by White people because the Work is too

laborious, the heat very intent, and the Whites cannot work in the wet …as Negroes do,"

claiming biological reasons for slave use.[11] As Eveleigh suggests, South Carolinian planters

focused on biological support for using slave labor, but did not attribute intelligence or higher

understanding of rice agriculture to the slaves. In contrast, historians today claim that familiarity

with rice culture carried over from Africa was true value of slaves to South Carolina's

agriculturally based economy. [12] Despite their vital role as actors in the southern economy,

Eveleigh's statement is evidence of the long standing history of South Carolinians, and white

Americans more generally, to not accredit slaves the ability to think independently of white

guidance. After the first recorded ship carrying African slaves to South Carolina landed in 1696,

rice culture and plantation size grew substantially, as did the need for greater amounts of labor.[13]

On the eve of Revolution, rice had become South Carolina's biggest export and enslaved

Africans its biggest import, leading to the drastic increase in slave population through the 1700s

to the beginning of the war.

Between 1700 and 1770, the estimated slave population in South Carolina had increased

by more than fortyfold to around 82,000 slaves. Slaves composed a majority of South Carolina's

population, as much as sixty percent.[14] The sheer number of slaves was cause for concern even

before conflict arose with England. When surveying Charleston in 1763, George Milligan-

Johnston, a surgeon and British lieutenant serving in the colonies during the period, commented

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[11] Mr. Samuel Eveleigh to Mr. Martyn, 10 September 1735, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, "Samuel Eveleigh's Reasons for Slave Labor," *Sea of Liberty*, accessed 16 March 2014, http://seaofliberty.org/explore/samuel-eveleighs-reasons-slave-labor/1109.
[12] Judith A Carney, "From Hands to Tutors: African Expertise in the South Carolina Rice Economy," *Agricultural History* 67, no. 3 (Summer 1993), 1, accessed 12 February 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744227.
[13] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 3; Tables pg. 39.
[14] Ibid, 96.

on the great population of enslaved Africans, and noted that "in this Climate [the number of slaves] was necessary, but very dangerous… their Number so exceeding the Whites" that uprising was really only hemmed in, according to Milligan- Johnson, by another ethnic group: Native American Indians. Though Milligan-Johnson and his fellow Englishmen believed that it would be "necessary and proper" to "give [the Indians] Corrections," he recognized that their presence was useful:

it [could] never be our Interest to extirpate [the Indians], or force them from their land [as] their land would soon be taken up by runaway *Negroes* from our Settlements, whole Numbers would daily increase, and quickly become more formidable Enemies than *Indians* can ever be, as they speak our Language, and would never be at a Loss for Intelligence.[15]

Though whites slighted slaves' ability for independent action, they ironically relied on it for the cultivation of their estates. The intelligence of slaves was even often utilized within the task system on South Carolina's rice plantations. Unlike cotton or tobacco cultivation, where slaves worked in labor groups supervised by white overseers, rice plantations in South Carolina's Low Country maintained a task based system in which the yield could be measured without direct interaction with white planters.[16] As a result, many of the overseers were black, believed to be physically capable of the task, but not capable of using limited power as an impetus to seek full autonomy. However, with relative freedom, slaves could often meet the required quota and

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[15] George Milligan-Johnson, "Observations of Charleston," (1763), *A South Carolina Chronology, 1497-1992;* 2nd edition, ed. C. Rogers and C. James Taylor, (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994), 43.

[16] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 153.

use the rest of their time for their own purposes. This down time allowed for relationships, and conspiracy, outside of white control, which could be dangerous to slave owners, as it proved to be in the Stono Rebellion of 1739.

In addition to those on backcountry rice plantations in South Carolina, slaves in urban areas, specifically Charleston, also had a relative amount of freedom in comparison to other parts of colonial America. Along with fulfilling domestic roles, many slaves developed other abilities, working as artisans and skilled craftsmen and in some instances were rented out by their owners and eventual began to arrange work for themselves, thereby gaining a "near-independent place" in Charleston's economy. However, by the start of the Revolution, South Carolinians had vehemently complained that black artisans were taking white jobs, and the governing body of the colony passed regulations designed to keep urban slaves in unskilled occupations.[17] Yet, skilled African Americans continued to appear as a threat to white city dwellers, terrified that a taste of freedom would make them hungry for more. In 1770, Charleston's governor, William Bull, wrote in a statement about the colony of South Carolina's laws that "it has been thought dangerous to the public safety to put [Negroes] on a footing of equality in [any] respect with their masters, as it might tempt slaves to make resistance." [18] No example serves to display the reality of the belief in this statement more than the 1775 execution of Thomas Jeremiah, a free, and wealthy, black boat pilot charged with attempts to incite rebellion, as well as promoting alleged plans to set fire to Charleston and being in cahoots with slave runaways.[19] Jeremiah served as an example of what slaves could aspire to be, emancipated and successful, making him

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[17] Ibid, 155.
[18] William Bull, "Governor William Bull's Representation of the Colony, 1770," quoted in *The Colonial South Carolina Scene: Contemporary Views, 1697-1774; Tricentenial Edition,* no. 7, ed. H. Roy Merrens, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), 260.
[19] Harris, J. William, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: a Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 92.

the ideal candidate, according to white society, to actively plot with outside enemies to incite the slave masses that would otherwise remain docile. The evidence against Jeremiah was questionable, especially the great fear that Thomas and others involved in his supposed scheme could have served as support for British forces at the start of wartime tensions, piloting their ships into Charleston Bay.[20] Regardless of their veracity, these charges served to terrify the white Carolinians about the likelihood of slave insurrection incited by the British as a war tactic to attempt the destruction of Patriot resistance from the inside out.

It was an accepted truism among slave owners that slaves did not have the mental capacity to consider or claim agency in rebelling for emancipation unless coupled with outside, *white*, agitators. Americans were complacent about slaves owning or possessing weapons up until the prospect for slaves to join the British arose.[21] Individual planters often found it necessary to arm slaves for economic reasons, yet lived in terror that slaves could use these weapons to upset social hierarchy. One account in Charleston's *South Carolina Gazette* in 1754 notes that some slaves carrying their master's firearms "charged and discharged [them] several times as they went along the streets to the great Terror of many Ladies," and it was recorded that throughout the colony, many slaves had personal weapons as well, though using them outside of white imposed reasons was exceedingly rare.[22] While Thomas Jeremiah's trial went on, rumors arose that the new royal governor of South Carolina, William Campbell, was bringing with him "fourteen thousand stand of arms to distribute to slaves," based on a supposedly intercepted letter from an Englishman published in the *South Carolina Gazette*, though the ship really only

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[20] Ibid, 98.
[21] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 391.
[22] "Account," *South Carolina Gazette*, 17 October 1754, *The South Carolina Gazette, 1732-1775*, ed. Hennig Cohen (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953).

contained Campbell's furniture and personal effects.[23] Fears of slave insurrection rose quickly

when related to British agitation, most of all recalling the potential Spanish connection to the

Stono Rebellion of the recent past.

As a reaction to the Stono Rebellion, a stricter code, the Negro Act of 1740, was put in

place to prevent future revolt. For example, the Act established that a slave found off of their

plantation without the proper note from their owners was to be "punished with whipping on the

bare back."[24] Additionally, the law prohibited black slaves from carrying firearms for any reason

without written permission and declared that "it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this

Province, that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of Negroes and other

slaves, at all times," terrified most of all by the Spanish connection the rebellion exposed.[25] The

near success of the Stono Rebellion escalated colonial fears of outside agitators encouraging

rebellion, which stayed constant through the advent of the Revolution, increasing as a new threat,

the opportunity for slaves to join the British forces, became apparent.

Unlike Stono, the budding Revolution presented a situation in which the outside agitators,

the British, had a sustained military presence within the colonies. In 1778, the British moved the

war south in order to end the stalemate in the North and satisfy mounting pressure for success

from home. They were hampered by the downsizing of their army due to French entry into the

war, and their strategy relied more than ever on attracting Loyalist allies, who were presumed to

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[23] Harris, *Hanging*, 88.
[24] "A Transcription of the Negro Act of 1740," *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina. Vol. 7, Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves, and Rivers,* ed. David J. McCord, (Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 397.
[25] Ibid, 397.

be numerous, as well as the support of others, including slaves and Indians.[26] In the Northern

portion of the war, the British had begun to a limited extent to use slaves as support, but not to

the extent they would in the South.

British use of slaves as soldiers began in Virginia with promises of freedom for slaves

after the war as a reward for joining the military. In November 1775, John Murray, better known

as Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation that not only threatened that all colonists raising arms

against the Crown would be seen as traitors, but also declared "all indentured Servants, Negroes,

or others… free that are able and willing to bear Arms" should join "His MAJESTY'S Troops as

soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty… till

such Time as Peace may be again restored to this at present most unhappy Country, or demanded

of them for their former salutary Purposes."[27] The Proclamation, though only in effect in

Virginia, had wide effects on all of the colonies. Though the Proclamation only offered freedom

to those volunteer slaves whose masters were patriot, emancipation of the entire slave population

could easily follow.

Lord Dunmore's Proclamation did in fact serve as the blueprint for a later, more all-

encompassing, proclamation made by General Henry Clinton in 1779. Prior to Dunmore's

declaration, the majority of South Carolina's white population classified themselves as Loyalist,

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[26] Jim Piecuch, *Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775-1782* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 125; Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775-1780,* (New York, London: New York, The Macmillan Company; London, Macmillan & Co., ltd, 1901); Walter Edgar, "The South in the American Revolution," FORA.tv video, 56:29, (lecture, The Society of the Cincinnati: Washington, D.C, October 26, 2012), accessed 12 April 2014, http://fora.tv/2012/10/26/South_Carolina_and_the_South_in_the_American_Revolution;. The latter two resources were used in addition as general reference throughout this paper as to overarching themes and events within the war and are referred to in their entirety.

[27] "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation (1775)," *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007), accessed 4 February 2014, http://search.credoreference.com/ content/entry/abcslavery/lord_dunmore_s_proclamation_1775/0.

but upon hearing of his plan to incite slaves against colonists, most changed their tune, declaring

their independence from the Crown.[28] Clinton was said to have identified America's hypocritical

anger over the Proclamation:

> He had said… privately, that, since [the Americans] were so anxious for liberty—
> for more freedom than was consistent with the free institutions of the mother-
> country and the charter of the Colony— that since they were so eager to abolish a
> fanciful slavery in a dependence on Great Britain, he would try how they liked an
> abolition of real slavery by setting free their Negroes.[29]

Despite their double standard in regard to "slavery," Americans, Patriot or even Loyalist,

regarded Dunmore's Proclamation as an offensive attack on their personal property, turning them

against the British. Because of this, the British had to look for outside support aside from the

many Loyalists turned away from the political position toward neutrality or even siding with the

Americans.

As the former Loyalists feared, a similar proclamation to Dunmore's, which was to

employ and later emancipate slaves, was soon made to take effect in every colony, including

South Carolina. This decree, entitled the Phillipsburg Proclamation, was made by General Henry

Clinton, Commander-in-Chief of Britain's military forces in North America, in late June, 1779.

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[28] Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists*, 37.
[29] George L. Craik and Charles Macfarlane, *The Pictorial History of England being a History of the People, as Well as a History of the Kingdom*, Vol. 1 (London: C Knight, 1847) 224-225, accessed 26 April 2014, https://archive.org/details/pictorialhistor06macfgoog.

It called for all enslaved persons to join his forces and "promise[d] every NEGROE who shall desert the Rebel Standard full security," even if they were not serving as soldiers. [30] Though the Proclamation was a step toward full emancipation, the total freedom of all slaves in the colonies had to be suppressed by the British. Overhearing a conversation between two slaves whose white owners were then fleeing Virginia, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, a politically neutral Lutheran preacher, wrote that "They secretly wished that the British army might win, for then all Negro slaves (would) earn their freedom," a dangerous idea that could influence all parties involved, British or American.[31]

The British, however, did not enter the war seeking to completely restructure American society and overturn the successful slave economy of the colonies, but instead were forced to appeal to any support they had in order to suppress white colonial uprising. A promise of full emancipation would have led to lost support from Loyalist slave owners that had not yet abandoned the British cause and were vital to British success. The Proclamation was carefully worded so that only those slaves belonging to Patriot supporters who had run away and volunteered to serve in the British forces would receive freedom at war's end, excluding "volunteers" from Loyalist plantations (whether they volunteered of their own accord or were volunteered by their masters) and those that were taken from their Patriot-owned plantations as

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[30] "Philipsburg Proclamation Henry Clinton (1779)," quoted in George Livermore, *An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers* (New York: New York, A. M. Kelley, 1970), 136; Livermore's *An Historical Research* is a collection of documents (and commentary) originally published in 1863 in order to support the use of African American soldiers in the Civil Wars, as well as affirming war aims toward emancipation.

[31] Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, eds. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, 3 vols., (Philadelphia, PA: Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States and the Muhlenberg Press, 1942), III, 78.

contraband. Contraband slaves were considered spoils of war and property of those who captured them, on both the British and American sides of the conflict. [32]

In late 1778 and into 1779, the British began making gains in the lower South, significantly capturing Savannah, Georgia, then continuing northward, gaining black support as they went. The British reached South Carolina by 1780 and took Charleston, of key importance to their strategic military goals, after a six week siege. A brutal war of attrition followed and interactions with slaves continued to play a major role in the conflict. The majority of the slave population, unique to the Southern theater, allowed the British, to a greater extent, to cripple the American forces by inciting internal rebellion. However, though they believed that creating black military units would be advantageous, many Tories were hesitant to employ slaves, including Parliament member and philosopher, Edmund Burke, who condemned "severe strictures on the endeavors in two of the southern colonies to excite an insurrection of the negro-slaves against their masters."[33] According to the Parliamentary record, Burke argued "in strong colours" that "the nature of an insurrection of Negroes [held]… horrible consequences that might ensue from constituting 100,000 fierce, barbarian slaves, to be both the judges and executioners of their masters." Burke went on to list possible consequences, even asking how the British would deal with governing former slaves, emancipated after serving against the Americans, should they win the war. These former slaves, he argued, would "[make] them- selves masters of the houses, goods, wives, and daughters of their murdered lords… adding confusion to confusion, and destruction to destruction," echoing the fears of Americans like Henry Laurens.[34] Because of this

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[32] Frey, *Water,* 121-122.
[33] Edmund Burke, ""Mr. Burke's Motion Relative to the Military Employment of Indians in the Civil War with America, February 6, 1778"," in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in the House of Commons, and in Westminster-Hall*, Vol. 1 (London: London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), 393, accessed 5 April 2014, https://archive.org/details/speechesrightho00burkgoog.
[34] Ibid, 399.

universal fear that affected both white powers, the British were forced to deal carefully in promising slaves freedom.

Though General Clinton attempted to reign in all out emancipation, many slaves presumed themselves free and fled their plantations, or even from supporting the British. Such an opportunity for upward mobility that Clinton's Proclamation suggested had the potential to become a way for ill feeling toward their oppressors to take an extreme, even violent, form both outside of and within British ranks.[35] Though this ultimately did not occur, many African-Americans serving in the military deserted the British army during the Revolution and fled to freedom. In his memoirs, Boston King, a slave who joined the British army during the war, explained his experiences in the military and the difficulty of truly attaining the freedom promised by Clinton's Proclamation. While serving under one Captain Grey, King was asked to be Grey's "servant," even after the war or in the case that Grey disserted. When King showed displeasure at Grey's potential desertion, Grey told King "'if you [King] do not behave, I will put you in irons, and I will give you a dozen stripes every morning.'" This is when King decided that his "case was desperate and that [he] had nothing to trust to, but to wait the first opportunity to making [his] escape."[36] Though serving in the military *promised* freedom, ideas of upholding the institution of slavery and the societal structure of white supremacy still permeated the British forces, causing numerous slaves to attempt escape, and often succeed. The problem was so extreme that the army, in order to prevent future runaways and to please Loyalist supporters who supplied slaves, attempted to register all black deserters in order to return them to their plantations if held by Loyalists.[37] Additionally, as it was unprofitable to employ the entire

[35] Frey, *Water*, 119.
[36] Boston King, "The Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher," *The Methodist Magazine,* 1798, 105, accessed 10 February 2014, http://antislavery.eserver.org/narratives/boston_king/.
[37] Frey, *Water*, 119.

number of slaves that flocked to the British lines, mostly women and children, who had volunteered, Clinton was forced to consider "some scheme for placing those [slaves] we have on abandoned plantations on which they may subsist," which was countered by the fear that many slaves, remaining "idle" together could cause uprising from within the ranks of the British force.[38] Throughout the war, the British had the increasingly difficult task of crippling the American South Carolina slave economy, while maintaining food production for their own purposes, so many slaves were denied the freedom promised them and returned to plantations to attempt this balance.

Though Americans feared their slaves rising against them if incited, the British were fearful of slaves rebelling against their control as well. The British brought in the slaves deemed most capable of organizing an uprising due to physical attributes (rather than intellect) and gave them manual labor and non-combat positions, keeping weapons out of their hands and otherwise serving as a distraction from mutiny. Additionally, though more out of what they deemed "military necessity" than by design, British units focused their efforts on maintaining the health of the most essential units of skilled white soldiers while African American units were more poorly fed and overworked.[39] This made them more susceptible to disease, particularly small pox, which was rampant in South Carolina at the time, and weakened them in terms of attempting a physical uprising. The British were less concerned with the intellect required to stage a revolt than they were with the potential of being physically overtaken by slaves.[40]

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[38] Henry Clinton to Charles Cornwallis, 20 May 1780, quoted in Frey, W*ater*, 119.
[39] Frey, *Water,* 127.
[40] Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 384.

The American Patriots were substantially more terrified of slave revolt during their war against Britain, and for good reason. After all, they could not promise the same full freedom at the end of the war as the British because the economy of many of the colonies, particularly those of Georgia and South Carolina, relied on slave labor. Subtle attempts to prevent slave recoil are first evident in the press on the eve of war. As the threat of war with the British grew larger, stories related to slave revolt were often used to demonize the British for inciting rebellions. This pattern emerged as early as 1776. The Declaration of Independence itself chastised King George III for having "excited domestic insurrections among us."[41] Still accounts that referred directly to slave agency were rarely put in print, focused instead on the roles of American enemies inciting rebellion.[42] Though the majority of African Americans could not read, there were a few exceptions, like Thomas Jeremiah, who had the potential to spread the word of British promises for freedom and inspire more insubordination. James Madison wrote to a friend in 1774, warning that talk of even slave revolt attempts "should be concealed as well as suppressed" in the press.[43] Another newspaper printed part of a letter regarding a South Carolina uprising, but "[thought] it prudent to suppress the account," while still informing the readers that the uprising had been successfully quelled and had "reduced [the slaves] to their former submission."[44] Still, keeping stories of revolt unpublished in American papers did little to keep slaves from supporting the British when the opportunity for emancipation was presented.

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[41] "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives and Records Administration, Accessed 2 February 2014, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html; Sidney Kaplan, "The "Domestic Insurrections" of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 3 (1976): 243-255, accessed February 2, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717252.

[42] Bradley, *Patricia, Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution*, (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 132.

[43] James Madison to William Bradford, 26 November 1774, *The Papers of James Madison Digital Edition,* accessed 12 April 2014.

[44] *Pennsylvania Packet,* 25 December 1775, quoted in Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution*, 132.

The Americans were locked in a paradoxical battle from the start of the Revolutionary war, fighting for the self-evident truth that "all men [were] created equal [and]… endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights…[of] Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," while promoting slavery, the very antithesis of the ideals for which they allegedly were fighting.[45] The British called attention to this hypocrisy, including the famous statement by Tory lawyer, Thomas Day, noting that "If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it [was] an American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves."[46] The American Patriots were hesitant to employ slaves, having nothing to offer greater than the freedom that the British offered. Americans hoped to avoid promising emancipation to any potential black soldiers, fearing none would be willing to return to servile roles following the war. George Washington voiced his concern, arguing that offering freedom in return for service would "render slavery more irksome to those who remain in it," and could lead to calls universal emancipation.[47]

Still, others argued that employing slaves would be a necessity, including General Nathaniel Greene, who claimed in a letter to George Washington that "to fill up the regiments with whites [was] impracticable, and to get reinforcement from the northwards precarious."[48] Eventually, the state of American military forces and the need for soldiers in South Carolina became so desperate that in 1779, the Continental Congress passed a resolution that had been strongly advocated for by John Laurens, Henry Laurens' son. The resolution called for "the

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[45] "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription."
[46] Thomas Day, ""Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes, Written in the Year 1776 by Thomas Day, Esq."," *The Monthly Review Or Literary Journal* 71, Art. 46 (1785), 154, accessed 15 April 2014, https://archive.org/details/fragmentoforigin00dayt.
[47] George Washington to Henry Laurens, March 1779, in Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 131.
[48] Nathaniel Greene to George Washington, 24 January 1782, quoted in Livermore, *An Historical Research*, 148.

states of South Carolina and Georgia… to take measures immediately for raising three thousand able bodied negroes," a very limited number in comparison to the entire African American slave population, and especially in the colonies that maintained black majorities. The slaves employed were not to be paid and were required to return their arms after the conflict, but would in fact gain their emancipation, with the owners compensated for loss of their property.[49]

John Laurens also served on a board that concluded the hesitancy of South Carolina to form a proper, white militia. He noted that "the great proportion of citizens [found it] necessary to remain at home and prevent insurrections among the Negroes."[50] However, Laurens contended, prevention of insurrection was not needed because slaves would not assume the agency to take advantage of American distraction, and seek freedom, apart from British agitation. Writing to his plantation owning father, John Laurens stated that:

the minds of this unhappy species [are] much debased by a Servitude from which they can hope for no Relief but Death – and that every motive to action but Fear, must be so nearly extinguished in them… their Self-Love… so totally annihilated as not frequently to induce ardent wishes for change. [51]

John Laurens, despite his father's status as one of the most prominent South Carolina slave owners, was an ardent supporter of the use of slaves as soldiers and further on in the same letter

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[49] Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83.
[50] "Congressional Session 29 March 1779," in Livermore, *An Historical Research*, 133-134.
[51] John Laurens to Henry Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 12, 391.

even suggested that their "Habits of Subordination" would make them ideal for military service. Young Laurens also expressed even more radical views there, suggesting that offering emancipation to slaves that agreed to serve in the military would be appropriate, as they would not become overwhelmed or rash enough to attempt turning against their former masters. Asking his father's opinion, John Laurens posed the question:

> When can [emancipation] be better done, than when their enfranchisement may be made conducive to the public good, and be modified, as not to overpower their weak minds?[52]

The query illustrated the prevailing understanding that black slaves were intellectually inferior to whites, unable to even understand what freedom would mean, and that the freedom the American military offered could be modified to suit their desires.

John Laurens and many others were "tempted to believe that this trampled people (slaves)… [Were] capable of aspiring to rights of men by noble exertions, if some friend to mankind would point the Road," but thought that slaves would never have had the mental capacity to aspire to or claim freedom without outside, *white-based,* provocation or support to guide them.[53] However, the "friend to mankind" that would guide slaves into freedom was infinitely important to the contenders for the title. This group would maintain the ability to lead

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[52] John Laurens to Henry Laurens, February 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens, in the Years 1777-8, Now First Printed from Original Letters Addressed to His Father, Henry Laurens, President of Congress, with a Memoir*, ed. William Gilmore Simms (New York: Bradford Club, 1867) 117.
[53] Ibid., 117.

the slaves against their enemies and, most importantly, to shape "freedom" to their own purposes. Because of this, the American rebels' primary goal in utilizing slaves was to counter the British attempts to incite and to define the freedom slaves that joined them would receive after the war. This was the basis for Henry Lauren's fundamental aversion to his son's plan, noting that those slaves that received emancipation would really gain little more than a different version of white control, a tightly circumscribed freedom under the guise of true liberty. The Patriots most deeply feared what the British might do with the ability to control free black men and women, using a broadly defined freedom as a bribe to persuade slaves to act out against former masters.

Along with the need for manpower, another relevant reason slaves were eventually employed by the Americans was that it allowed them to keep the strongest and most determined slaves from fighting for the British and further inciting their fellow slaves. This echoed British employment of the strongest slaves, most able to overtake those who were in control, in non-combat positions. In a resolution made by the Continental Congress in 1779, because there was a "great danger from the endeavors of the enemy to excite (slaves), either to revolt or to desert," it was:

> suggested by the delegates of the said State (South Carolina) … that a force might be raised in the said State from among the negroes which would not only be formidable to the enemy from their numbers and the discipline of which they would very readily admit,

but would also lessen the danger from revolts and desertions by detaching the most

vigorous and enterprising from among the negroes. [54]

To further keep slaves in their place within the strict social hierarchy and to counter British

recruitment tactics, American forces offered some white recruits nearing the end of the war "the

bounty of 'one sound Negro' between the ages of ten and forty," for each year of service

performed.[55]The most important element of this offer to note was that it did not specify *which*

African Americans would be provided to white soldiers following the war, implying that either

former Loyalist or Patriot owned slaves could be returned to servitude.

In the end, according to estimates made by historians, South Carolina lost near a quarter

of the slaves they held before the Revolution, which left a majority of the slave population where

they had been before the war.[56] Though a number took advantage of distracted white masters to

run away to freedom individually, or allied with British or American militaries, most stayed put.

At the end of the war, many American plantation owners marveled at this, including the

prominent slave owner and Charleston resident, Charles Pinckney. During a debate in the United

States House of Representatives in 1820, Pinckney stated that:

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[54] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789,* ed. Worthington C. Ford et al. *(*Washington, D.C., 1904-1937*), 13:386*, accessed 15 April 2014, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwjc.html.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 666; Nash's *The Forgotten Fifth* and Walker's *The Black Loyalists* indicate that one fifth of the entire colonial pre-war slave population was used on behalf of the British and another fifth by the Americans; this would have left three-fifths of the thirteen colonies entire slave population.

It is a most remarkable fact, that notwithstanding, in the course of the Revolution, the

Southern States were continually overrun by the British, and that every negro in them had

an opportunity of leaving their owners, few did; proving thereby not only a most

remarkable attachment to their owners, but the mildness of the treatment, from whence

their affection sprang.[57]

Pinckney held that slaves stayed put out of loyalty, and because they were not mistreated by their

owners, providing them no logical reason to leave. Pinckney was not the only American to

believe slaves stayed put to reflect their affection for their white owners. In a lengthy letter to his

son, Henry Laurens wrote "My Negroes there [in South Carolina,] all to a man, are strongly

attached to me… hitherto not one of them has attempted to desert." [58] American slave owners

held up a misconception that attributed lack of slave uprising to personal loyalty, even affection,

toward their masters, when in fact, reasons slaves had for staying put that were substantially

more complex.

One practical reason why slaves did not rise up was limited mobility Leaving after a

successful rebellion, or even getting one off of the ground, was made increasing difficult by the

poverty experienced by the enslaved, and the rest of the population, as agriculture was

diminished with farmers and planters distracted by the war. [59] Slaves remaining on plantations

were left with little food or other supplies, especially on plantations that had been plundered by

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[57] Charles Pinckney, *Argument from Sixteenth Congress, First Session*, in Livermore, *An Historical Research,* 155.
[58] Henry Laurens, *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery: Being a Letter from Henry Laurens, Second President of the Continental Congress, to His Son, Colonel John Laurens; Dated Charleston, S. C., August 14th, 1776. Now Published from the Original, (*New York: G. P. Putnam, 1861, Accessed13 March 2014, https://archive.org/details/southcarolinapro00laur.
[59] Frey, *Water*, 117.

British soldiers, and found it more beneficial to stay in one place to take advantage of what the British *did* leave behind. In writing a letter to his master, Henry Laurens, literate slave Samuel Massey explained what the Revolution was like at the South Carolina plantation Laurens owned, Mepkin, to which he belonged. Though he made note of several slaves that were taken by the British and several from another nearby plantation, Smalls, that volunteered to support the British, he states that slaves were willing to stay put when crops were thriving: "Those at mepkin are all for staying at Home as Both your feild and thaer oan are in a flurishing way."[60] Though Massey went on to list the numerous things that the British plundered, including personal effects of both Henry and John Laurens, horses, and other belongings, the British did not take away slaves' ability to use plantation fields to their advantage. This reason for staying on their plantations starkly contrasts with white beliefs, providing a more logical and though less idealized explanation of unthinking loyalty to their masters. Given the knowledge of growing rice and other crops, as well as the relative freedom many slaves held in South Carolina planting positions, many were motivated to stay and continue to grow crops, a much desired commodity for both American and British militaries. This allowed slaves a means to become self-sustaining. Virtually free from white control during the war, slaves had no need to revolt, or to join either military, hoping that things would stay the same way following the conflict. With the only seemingly guaranteed roads to legal freedom likely to end in tragedy or death, running away, joining military forces, or staging an uprising seemed unnecessary due to the lack of either British or American oppression on the majority of slaves in South Carolina throughout the war. It was not for lack of intelligence or desire to revolt for freedom that kept slaves from uprising during the war, but instead logistical circumstances and self-preservation tactics.

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[60] Samuel Massy to Henry Laurens, 12 June 1780, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 15, 305-306.

Another reason slaves stayed put was highlighted in Henry Laurens' response to his son's letter about his desire to employ slaves in the American military. The elder Laurens chastised John, emphasizing how there was no guarantee that freed blacks would accept military roles:

> You will not be of your own opinion after a little reflection— 'tis evident… that you have not digested a Plan—admitting… you have a right to remove a Man from one state of Slavery into another—of if you please into a state of servitude which will be esteemed by him infinitely worse than Slavery… upon what ground of justice will you insist upon their inlisting for Soldiers as the condition of their infranchisement?[61]

Henry Laurens here indicated that often, serving in the military could simply become a different, and perhaps even more brutal, form of slavery, as was also indicated in the writing of Boston King. Surprisingly, Henry Laurens, despite his ownership of large numbers of slaves, believed that freedom should be bestowed on African Americans without any form of exchange, arguing that if his son planned to employ slaves, he should "set them at full liberty—and then approach them in the Language of a recruiting Officer to any other free Men" to verify that they truly wish to support the Patriot cause and to uphold the honorable gentlemanly integrity American ideology held dear.[62] Though Henry Laurens argued that ultimately few slaves would then join the military, he is one of very few white men of the era, American or British, to acknowledge slaves in terms of their potential thoughts and aspirations toward military service and ultimately toward freedom, as opposed to simply physical terms.

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[61] Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 6 February 1778, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, XV, 412.
[62] Ibid., 412.

Today, many Americans shudder to think of the dark shadow that slavery casts on America's national history, avoiding it whenever possible. Especially in referring back to a time when adored American heroes like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, and British villains, like Lord Cornwallis, were written into the legacy of the American Revolution, it is easy to ignore Morgan's "radio static," ever present in the historical background, but obscured by misunderstanding of those in power creating the records. Hidden from the limelight, the struggle for slaves toward freedom is largely overshadowed by the inflated tales of epic battles for Patriot liberty from the hated Redcoats and America's heroic triumph over enslavement. As is evident on closer inspection, though perhaps on a lower frequency, the fear slave freedom was even more deeply embedded than the emphatic fear that "the British were coming!" It was this terror that made the war in South Carolina so unique, a battle of two white giants with their own agendas using a hopeful black slave population as a weapon against their enemy, promising freedom in their own terms, but often times going back on their word. The greatest tragedy was the widely held convention of the British and Americans that slaves lacked the capacity to aspire to freedom on their own or to attempt to assume the agency required to pursue it. For the British, slaves were simply an ignorant resource to be utilized and controlled as a weapon to put down the American insurrection. The British dangled a confined liberty before slaves, without acknowledging the value of slave humanity beyond their use against the Patriots. Perhaps even worse, for the Americans the fear of slave rebellion was more directly a fear of British intervention, their political maneuvering being the only factor considered that would make revolt ultimately likely. It was due to this that Americans decided to employ slaves as a means to maintain control over them, even if they had to grant partial

"freedom" to counter the British. In their confrontation, both the British and the American forces built safeguards against revolt to prevent each other from gaining the advantage, all the while keeping slaves from attaining any form of upward mobility and further excluding them from the benefits of liberty and equality for decades following.

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