

“In Justice and the Public Good”: John Laurens and the Fight for the Continental Black Battalion

by

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Abstract

In January 1778, John Laurens, an aide-de-camp to General George Washington, sent a letter to his father, Henry Laurens, the then sitting President of the Continental Congress, outlining a plan that had vast society-altering potential had it been carried out. This letter argued that the Continental Army would benefit from enslaved men being allowed to fight in the American Revolution in exchange for their freedom. Laurens, although he was the scion of one of the wealthiest slave-owning families in South Carolina, would seem like an unlikely formulator of such a plan, but this thesis will discuss a series of conditions that allowed for the young officer to conceive of such a plan. These conditions include the complex mix of personal networks, traditional viewpoints and debates, and an education that exposed him to Enlightenment views on slavery. Exploring these conditions yields a far more complicated story than has been told. This thesis will argue that the external factors within John Laurens' life, influenced by the strong bonds within personal networks, introduced him to ideas not typically found within the Carolina Lowcountry.

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Introduction

On 14 January 1778, at Washington's Valley Forge Headquarters, an idealistic twenty-four year old officer, John Laurens, wrote an impassioned letter to his father that would shift the trajectory of his military career.¹ He was the scion of the vitally important South Carolinian rice-planting and slave-owning Laurens family and the heir apparent of the then sitting President of the Continental Congress, Henry Laurens.² Laurens penned this letter while he served as an Aide-de-Camp to General Washington, following the disastrous Philadelphia Campaign, in which the Continental Forces lost Philadelphia to the British, and as soldiers suffered increasingly low morale while camped at Valley Forge.³ Like many in the Continental Army's upper echelons, Laurens had anxieties stemming from the ever-present issue of manpower shortages. However, in this letter, he was trying to convince his father that the Continental Army could be augmented "from an untried Source" – enslaved men.⁴ Therefore, Laurens requested that his father would "cede [me] a number of your able bodied men Slaves, instead of leaving me

¹During the Continental Army's encampment at Valley Forge, 1777-1778, George Washington and his staff held headquarters at the Isaac Pitts House. "Washington's Headquarters," Valley Forge: National Historical Park Pennsylvania, *National Parks Service*, accessed 20 September 2021.

https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/washingtons_headquarters.htm

²From the colony of South Carolina, Henry Laurens served as the sitting President of the Continental Congress from 1 November 1777 to 9 December 1778 during the Second Continental Congress. "Presidents of the Continental Congresses and Confederation Congress, 1774-1789," *History, Art & Archives United States House of Representatives*, <https://history.house.gov/People/Continental-Congress/Presidents/>

³In George Washington to New Hampshire Legislature, 29 December 1777, The Gilder Lehrman Collection #: GLC03706, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, accessed March 27, 2021.

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc03706>, the commander in chief explained the poor state of the army at this juncture in the war. This letter was set in the crucial winter of 1778, when the Continental Army suffered mightily from a lack of men, morale, and food. For Laurens' appointment see "General Orders, 6 September 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0158>. [Original Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol.11, 19 August 1777-25 October 1777, ed. Philander D. Chase and Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp.157-158.]

⁴John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens, 1777-1778*, ed. David R. Chesnut, C. James Taylor, Peggy Clark, and David Fisher, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 12: 305.

a fortune.”⁵ For this plan to succeed in its early stages, Laurens believed that he could draw the manpower from his father’s many plantations, assuming that other enslavers would follow suit.

The “untried Source” letter is noteworthy for multiple reasons because it illustrates how pragmatic Laurens could be when he was not acting rashly or recklessly, characteristics his peers frequently attributed to him.⁶ Tactically, Laurens argued that a “twofold good” would come from this plan: that enslaved men could enhance the American cause while also uplifting those “unjustly deprived of the Rights of Mankind.”⁷ Laurens further argued that enslaved men had the “essential qualification[s]” of being good soldiers due to their condition of being enslaved.⁸ Laurens asserted that due to their “servile” nature, these men would benefit and possibly thrive under military service. His belief was that these qualifications would ultimately allow these troops to survive within the “harsh” realities of life with the Continental Army.

By creating a two-fold argument, Laurens was trying to convince his father that his plan would be mutually beneficial, for those enslaved and the Continental Army, in the fight against the “tyrannical” British. He further asserted that if his ideas were to be accepted, then he would “have a Corps of such men trained, uniformly clad, equip’d and ready in every respect to act at the opening of the next Campaign.”⁹ Though this appears to be an improbable assertion, training troops so quickly, it allows for an understanding of just how serious the young man was in promoting his plan. This letter cemented the plans ultimately aimed at creating a Continental

⁵John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 305.

⁶Historians and his contemporaries have often categorized Laurens as being extremely rash and reckless. In most circumstances, this led to trouble on the battlefield, and was arguably the characteristic that led to his untimely death. See, for example, “From George Washington to William Gordon, 8 March 1785,” *Founders Online*, National Achieves, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-02-02-0280>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series*, vol. 2, 18 July 1784-18 May 1785, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992, pp. 411-414.], in which Washington told William Gordon that “he had not a fault that I could ever discover, unless intrepidity bordering upon rashness, could come under that denomination.”

⁷John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 305.

⁸Ibid., 12: 305.

⁹Ibid., 12: 305.

Army Black battalion.¹⁰ After January 1778, when Laurens presented his plans to his father, the question of how to form this unit weighed heavily on the mind of young Laurens, moving him to call on his powerful friends and relations to support the cause of creating a regiment of enslaved men. Laurens' persistence did not bear fruit, but his efforts, grounded in the belief that enslaved men were capable of fighting for American freedom, was significant because most people believed that enslaved men should not be armed and trained as soldiers. Although faced with opposition at almost every turn, Laurens nonetheless persisted until his untimely death. Within this thesis, I argue that Laurens was influenced by the strong bonds he established within his own family, and in Washington's "military family," and that his European education exposed him to ideas not typically found in the Carolina Lowcountry. These factors ultimately allowed him to argue the utility of a battalion of Black men.

John Laurens' rank as the heir to one of the wealthiest slave-owning families in South Carolina made his position unique; however, the idea of arming enslaved men was debated in Anglo-American discourse since the 1630s.¹¹ Within the Anglo-American colonies, the question on whether to arm enslaved men had traditionally been decided through harsh slave codes, the focus of Chapter 1. This chapter is there to explore the world in which Laurens lived and grew up, surrounded by slavery. I wish to illustrate the intense debates concerning this issue in the earliest parts of the war in order to set the stage for Laurens' plans in 1778. This material will serve to illustrate how Laurens differed from those around him concerning freedom and slavery.

¹⁰In this paper, I refer to John Laurens' plan as the Continental Black battalion because in a letter written to his father, that is one of the many names given to the plan by Laurens. Throughout the letters, Laurens and his father use the terms battalion and regiment interchangeably. In John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens 12*: 391, he referred to the plan as "our Continental Regiment." The next day, in John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 3 February 1778, *The Papers of Henry Laurens 12*: 398, Laurens told his father that he had found a possible "Coadjutor in raising the famous black Battalion."

¹¹See Chapter 1 of this thesis for an explanation of the traditions of arming enslaved men. Colonial legislatures debated heavily on whether enslaved men should be allowed to participate in militia service.

These traditions influenced how John Laurens developed his plan to form a battalion of Black soldiers within the Continental Army. Possibly influenced by this long tradition of debate and by his own antislavery sentiments, Laurens saw an opportunity not only to solve the pressing need for recruits but also to alleviate the widespread fear that enslaved peoples with no alternative would take up arms with the British side.

Like many in the eighteenth century, Laurens was greatly influenced by his network, which included many people of influence.¹² The focus of Chapter 2 is how Laurens' early influences, mainly his education abroad and the people he met there, shaped and introduced him to antislavery rhetoric that would not have been as readily available in South Carolina.¹³ Chapter 3 follows John Laurens from January 1778 through the pivotal correspondence with his father and Washington's inner circle concerning the Black battalion. I argue that John Laurens' education and relationships were critical to his interest in forming the plan to create a Black battalion that would fight alongside the Continental Army. In reconstructing the influences on Laurens' eventual plan, I draw upon letters, legislation, print media, memoirs, and military records to recreate a sense of Laurens' inner circle.¹⁴

¹²Throughout Laurens' short life, he kept the company and correspondence of important people within European and American circles. This network included Alexander Garden, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Marquis de Lafayette, to name a few.

¹³This chapter focuses on 1754 to 1777 and introduces Laurens' earliest influences before he joined Washington's staff.

¹⁴During the eighteenth century, the transatlantic word was a flurry of correspondence, often referred to as the 'Republic of Letters.' The group of people who wrote to one another often would constitute a network, and these were common in the intellectual communities fostered by the expansion of the British Empire and the Enlightenment. Many used both private and public letters to pass knowledge around the world. Studies that emphasize networks of correspondence and transmission of ideas in the eighteenth century include Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Lindsay O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); See also "Mapping the Republic of Letters," Stanford University, <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>

This thesis presents the somewhat forgotten colonial figure of Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens and his plan to create a Black battalion within the Continental Army. Although a significant member of Washington's military family, Laurens is often relegated to the sidelines, but he is mentioned in a few works and only briefly in each.¹⁵ This thesis explores the conditions that allowed Laurens to formulate his plan on a broader scale than previously attempted by others in the American colonies. These conditions include the complex mix of personal networks, traditional viewpoints and debates, and his European education, which introduced him to antislavery rhetoric. In addition, Laurens due to his status was heavily influenced by his transatlantic connections. Much of what we know about John Laurens comes from what survived of his personal and professional correspondence. This thesis will draw on Laurens' correspondence to piece together the evolution of his antislavery thought. Throughout his short life, Laurens steadily corresponded with men of the day, debating and sharing his fears and hopes of what was to come.

John Laurens' plan to solve the Continental Army's desperate need for manpower with Black soldiers—who would receive their freedom in return—was greatly influenced by his understanding of the world. Through his education, Laurens was introduced to the greater transatlantic conversations surrounding the ideas of freedom and bondage. In order to understand who Laurens was and why it matters, one must understand the historiographical debates that have shaped our understanding of this period. The story of John Laurens and his fight to create the Continental Army's Black battalion cannot be told without understanding the many

¹⁵Most books detailing Black and enslaved soldiers mention Laurens briefly. However, two books are solely dedicated to his life and contributions to the American Revolution and have been a great help in this study. See Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2000). And Sara Bertha Townsend, *An American Soldier: The Life of John Laurens* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards & Broughton Company, 1958).

influences that shaped his worldview. Laurens was a complex figure who took the unexpected route with every twist and turn, especially when he deemed it necessary.

After considerable debate, historians have concluded that Anglo-American colonists lived in a highly complicated world that was significantly transformed by changing cultural norms.¹⁶ Between the Seven Years War, more commonly referred to as the French and Indian War, and the American Revolution, colonists heatedly debated their relationship with Britain. One conversation in particular stood out: the question of what freedom meant. This question affected not only white colonists but their enslaved counterparts. The Revolutionary War brought these questions concerning freedom to the forefront of everyday debate. The institution of slavery, war, personal networks, and abolitionist thought have influenced historians and the study of history. Those living during the Revolution, the “Revolutionary Generation,” interacted with and were influenced by the institution of slavery.¹⁷ In this scholarship, there are several questions about how slavery affected the American cause during the American Revolution. One central question scholars ask is what the place of enslaved men during this period was, especially their place as soldiers. Philip D. Morgan argues that “the role of slaves in the Revolutionary War in

¹⁶The literature on African Americans, free and enslaved, in the revolutionary period is vast but see especially—Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: Atria, 2017); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: The Madison House, 1990); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016); and Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007).

¹⁷Ira Berlin’s foundational work examines the early years of American slavery. See Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 217-325.

North America is well known, but the tendency to treat the thirteen mainland colonies in isolation has obscured the significance of the war for arming slaves.”¹⁸

The use of enslaved men as soldiers did not happen in a vacuum during the American Revolution, and studies have emphasized this movement in its greater context.¹⁹ Typically, the British used enslaved men as soldiers on the Caribbean islands they held, where “warfare was perennial, slaves composed a high proportion, and mortality rates were catastrophic among regular soldiers from Europe.”²⁰ In the case of America, the practice of arming enslaved men was adopted only within certain colonies, but it was under stringent parameters and legislation.²¹ In the historiography, there has been a shift to study the policy towards arming Black troops in the American Revolution by both Patriots and Loyalists.²² Historians such as Sylvia Frey, Alan Gilbert, Judith L. Van Buskirk, and Robert A. Geake, to name a few examine how both warring sides during the Revolution approached arming enslaved men. These historians mention John Laurens and his hopes for a Black battalion. However, they do not consider the influences that

¹⁸Christopher Leslie Brown and Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy. “Arming Slaves in the American Revolution” in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times and the Modern Age*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 180.; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961) and Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in the Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), are some of the best studies on the subject.

¹⁹ Brown and O’Shaughnessy, “Arming Slaves in the American Revolution,” 181.

²⁰ See also J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Great Caribbean, 1620-1914*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).

²¹The practice of arming enslaved men was done during the earlier phases of slavery in the American colonies. Typically this practice was before the implementation of slave codes. However, there were examples in which slave codes allowed enslaved men to participate in militia service under certain circumstances. The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the significant traditions of arming enslaved men within the American colonies and the implications that had on Laurens.

²²For works that study Black Americans in the Revolution, see Judith L. Van Buskirk’s *Standing in their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Frey, *Water from the Rock*; John U. Rees, *‘They Were Good Soldiers’ African-Americans Serving in the Continental Army, 1775-1783* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019), and Pete Maslowski, “National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 73, no. 1 (Jan 1972): 1-17.

led Laurens to his plans for the battalion. Gregory Massey has written a comprehensive biographical work on the life of John Laurens and an article concerning – Henry and John, father and son—relationship with antislavery thought.²³ My work differs in that I place more emphasis on his network and education, which introduced Laurens to antislavery thought.

The other central question that historians ask about slavery is who “deserved” freedom. During the period leading up to the Revolutionary War, colonists became increasingly upset when they equated their position within the British colonial system to that of slaves. Some viewed themselves as “enslaved” by the British, but they enslaved people themselves. This argument caused the British, in debates, to point out this hypocrisy, even further upsetting the American colonists. These debates led some colonists to begin questioning the institution of slavery, especially as calls for freedom and liberty became more frequent. Many historians have examined these changes in thought during this period, most notably the complicated relationship that George Washington had with the institution. For Washington, Philip D. Morgan argues that, “there were no dramatic epiphanies, but rather a gradual and always contested thought process.”²⁴ During the Revolutionary period, Washington’s understanding of slavery was impacted by his exposure to John Laurens, the Marquis de Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton, and their thoughts on the institution.²⁵ François Furstenberg explores how many of the founders considered slavery to be compatible with ideals of liberty through “Sam’s Doctrine.”²⁶ “Sam’s

²³Gregory D. Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John and Henry Laurens,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 63, no.3 (Aug 1997): 495-530.

²⁴Philip D. Morgan, “To Get Quit of Negroes: George Washington and Slavery.” *Journal of American Studies* 39, no.3 (2005): 406.

²⁵Morgan, “To Get Quit of Negroes,” 426.

²⁶François Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Discourse,” *Journal of American History* 89, no.4 (2003): 1295-1330; and Furstenberg “Atlantic Slavery, Atlantic Freedom: George Washington, Slavery and Transatlantic Abolitionist Networks,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no.2 (2011): 247-86.

Doctrine,” aptly named after Samuel Adams, referred to his quote that “nations were as free as they deserved to be.”²⁷ This idea posited that in order to gain freedom, you had to earn it, and in this case, for enslaved men through warfare. Historians have long studied the relationship between Americans, the institution of slavery, and abolition. Yet they have rarely shown the complexity of these issues. Liberty and freedom have been ingrained in American thought, but only in recent decades have historians examined how the existence of slavery complicated the notion of freedom. By studying the debates over slavery and abolition, historians can show how these ideas influenced the nation. The careful works of Philip D. Morgan and François Furstenberg help to shape this complicated narrative on Americans, slavery, and abolition.

An essential facet of Anglo-American life that greatly influenced the war itself and slavery was the transatlantic world. As a result, the popular focus of this period is categorized by examining the Atlantic seaboard rather than exploring the larger world and networks that colonists faced. Another influence on this work is the “new military history.” Although constantly changing, the field of military history has debated the merits of changing to incorporate social and cultural aspects into the study of war and the military. This thesis considers how social and cultural forces can influence war.

At its heart, this is a study of the equally important influences that led John Laurens on his quest to form a Continental Black battalion. It is told through the often idealistic lens and worldview that shaped this often forgotten figure in American history. Due to Laurens’ eventual failure and early death, this story is often told in passing or not at all. Many do not consider that a Black regiment, the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, had succeeded and that John Laurens was fully aware and saw this regiment in action. John Laurens was influenced by his transatlantic

²⁷Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery,” 1295.

education, traditional norms, and his heavily important personal network. These influences, including the questions being raised about the international slave trade and slavery in Europe and America, shaped his interpretations and understanding of the cruel institution of slavery. By focusing on how those involved in his network of contact and communication influenced John Laurens, I present a story that is far more complex than has been shown previously. The close bonds forged by John Laurens are evident in the correspondence on the Black battalion, which shows the obvious excitement this plan brought him. However, this work will not shy away from the often obvious hypocrisy that can be found within Laurens' life. Laurens advocated for the utility of a Black battalion, as well as the eventual freedom for those soldiers, while still reaping the benefits from enslaved men.

John Laurens he did not survive the War for American Independence. Thus, we can only interpret his intentions and expectations for the new republic through the correspondence he kept concerning his thoughts on the institution of slavery and plans to form a Black battalion. Although this is a study of the influences on John Laurens, it tells the far more powerful story of an idealistic man who, in his quest to for "justice and the Public Good," abandoned much of what was expected of him, whether that be as the eldest son, husband, and father.²⁸

²⁸John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 391.

Chapter 1 - “Our Greatest Weakness May Be Converted into Our Greatest Strength”: The Historical Precedence for a Black Battalion

In early January 1778, John Laurens was completing a job vitally important job to the war effort: returning correspondence for General George Washington. On one particular day, however, the letter that he sent on behalf of Washington piqued his interest. In this letter, Laurens wrote to Nicholas Cooke, the governor of Rhode Island, and informed him of a plan that had been sent to Washington by General James Mitchell Varnum, which promised a solution to filling Rhode Island’s quotas for troops.¹ Laurens expressed on Washington’s behalf that the general had “ nothing to say in addition to what I wrote on the 29th of last month on this important subject.”² Here Laurens referred to a circular that had been sent to the states, which expressed a need for troops, and asserted that the British would “strain every nerve to send from home and abroad... all the Troops it shall be in her Power to raise or procure.”³ This letter is also fairly well-known because Washington suggested that it was “essential to inoculate the recruits or Levies as fast as they are raised.”⁴ This circular letter set a definitive tone as to the American

¹“From George Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 2 January 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0095>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, *26 December 1777–28 February 1778*, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 114.]

²“From George Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 2 January 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0095>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, *26 December 1777–28 February 1778*, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 114.]

³“A Circular Letter referred to a letter that was meant to be widely distributed. In this case, Washington wanted the letter to be passed among the states. “Circular to the States, 29 December 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0037>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, *26 December 1777–28 February 1778*, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, pp. 36–39.]

⁴“Circular to the States, 29 December 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0037>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, *26 December 1777–28 February 1778*, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, pp. 36–39.]; see Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

army's need for troops. The letter to Cooke indicated the desperate need for manpower and gave the choice to Cooke on the request by Varnum. In his letter, General James Varnum tried to make do with the small battalion sizes within his state and proposed that to help the Continental Army, Rhode Island could raise "a Battalion of Negroes," possibly with the support of the Commander-in-Chief.⁵ Washington left the decision to Nicholas Cooke, who replied in February that the measure had been introduced and passed by the state legislature. Nevertheless, the Rhode Island General Assembly adopted the measure in part because of "the peculiarly difficult Circumstances of this State which rendered it in a manner impossible to recruit our Battalions in any other way."⁶ Cooke explained that the state would be able to enlist at least three hundred enslaved men and that those persons would be granted their freedom and the enslaved owners be compensated.

Through this correspondence, Laurens learned that Rhode Island had passed a piece of legislation that deeply resonated with him. This letter exchange between Varnum, Cooke, and Washington served as a catalyst for Laurens to pursue the Continental Black battalion. Within twelve days of reading Varnum's letter, Laurens sent his father the "untried Source" letter, which led him to pursue his long-held ideas on freeing slaves through the avenue of the Continental Army. From this moment, Laurens became obsessed with the idea and how to bring his plan to fruition. His need to make things better, not only for the American cause but also for those in

⁵"To George Washington from Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum, 2 January 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0104>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, 26 December 1777–28 February 1778, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 125.]

⁶"To George Washington from Nicholas Cooke, 23 February 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0550>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, 26 December 1777–28 February 1778, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 646.]

bondage, began to overshadow most of his other concerns. Laurens' plan was distinctive because it placed enslaved men in combat roles, which was atypical in early America, and was intended to lead to a path toward freedom for those who served. In order to understand the significance of the decision of Rhode Island's Assembly and Laurens' plan, it is crucial to examine the tradition – or lack thereof— of arming enslaved men in the American colonies.

During the colonial period, a distinct change occurred in the place of slavery within society. By the time John Laurens was born in 1754, his home state of South Carolina had undergone a transformation from being a “society with slaves,” as historian Ira Berlin has argued to, a “slave society.”⁷ In effect, slavery became the dominant form of labor, which meant that slavery shaped every relationship within the society. This change happened in South Carolina by 1720, when rice became the dominant crop.⁸ The switch to a plantation economy based on slavery ushered in a change to enslavers' interactions with enslaved people. This new kind of society was built on the introduction of harsh slave laws, which codified this new system. The Carolina Lowcountry followed the precedence set by Virginia, where the slave code was codified earlier in the eighteenth century.⁹ South Carolina's shift to a “slave society” happened before Laurens' birth, so it would have been very apparent in his interactions with the family's enslaved people. These societal changes led to a lack of independence, often attributed to the “society with slaves.”¹⁰

Some colonists argued over the ramifications of living in a “slave society,” and how that would affect them spiritually. One of the many issues that contemporaries discussed was who

⁷Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁸*Ibid.*, 143.

⁹Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 112, 113.

¹⁰Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 150.

would posit the blame for bringing the institution to the colonies. Did the responsibility lie solely with the British, or were American colonists at fault for continuing the cruel practice? The debates surrounding slavery had implications for social norms during and after the Revolution. The use of enslaved Africans as labor was espoused by English colonists because “their imperial competitors in the Atlantic—the Portuguese and Spanish—had been doing so profitably for more than a century.”¹¹ The first example of an English “slave society” was on the island of Barbados and then it was brought north into the American colonies.¹² Although practiced throughout the colonial era, slavery became a topic of debate during the revolutionary era. The disputes over slavery included new questions about how enslaved people would participate in American society, if at all.

American colonial military leaders argued whether enslaved men should serve in the military, and if so, should an all-black Continental unit be formed? Hesitancy to form a black battalion was tied to three important influences: slave codes/laws, the “traditional” role for enslaved men in a military capacity, and finally, the debates with which John Laurens ultimately contended with. These influences had lasting ramifications for the interaction between the army and free Black and enslaved men. Slave laws and the traditional role of enslaved men are pivotal in our understanding of the struggles faced by Laurens when raising a Continental Black battalion during the war for American independence. The struggle to convince white colonists that enslaved men were capable of fighting can be used to examine the diverse colonial attitudes regulating the slave trade and enslaved people. This chapter examines how slave laws,

¹¹Edward B. Rugemer, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 11.

¹²Rugemer, *Slave Law*, 11- 34.

traditional roles, and debates influenced and shaped John Laurens' quest to form a Black battalion in the American Revolution.

Following its introduction in the British colonies in America, slavery shaped the political landscape and transformed the accepted ideas of wealth and labor. Slavery brought an intercolonial trade network that connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas while influencing the governing laws.¹³ With slavery's introduction, governing bodies began to establish laws, which codified power imbalances. These laws were used as the most effective way to "other" those who differed from white English colonists.¹⁴ The European powers of France, Spain, Britain, and Portugal enacted various slave laws and codes, which opened questions concerning the "moral, economic, political, and social" bearing of the institution itself.¹⁵ Slave codes' severity varied from colony to colony, but all were harsh, creating a society built on a racial hierarchy. In addition, slave codes had major implications on the prospects of enslaved men serving in a military capacity.

Slave Laws and Codes

The switch to slave societies meant changes in the daily lives of all who lived in them. For many enslaved people, this new societal system meant a loss of identity and the somewhat limited autonomy that they had in a "society with slaves."¹⁶ With the change to "slave societies," the idea of using enslaved men as soldiers was lost almost entirely.¹⁷ The earliest example of a

¹³Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2014), 85.

¹⁴For more on the idea of "othering" and the law, see Susan J. Stabile, "Othering and the Law," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 12, no.2 (Winter 2016): 381- 410.

¹⁵Alan Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), xi.

¹⁶Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 150.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

slave code that was enacted to limit or ban enslaved and free Black men from participating in militia service came in the late 1630s.¹⁸ These laws and their precedents, in turn, reflected a hesitancy towards arming enslaved men during the colonial period. One of the first examples of this type of slave law came in Virginia in January 1639, when Act X was enacted. The Virginia Assembly asserted that “ALL persons except negroes” were “to be provided with arms and ammunition or be fined at the pleasure of the Governor and Council.”¹⁹ This law gave two distinct messages: not only were enslaved and free Black men excluded from serving with the militia, but great emphasis was put on the importance of military service to the colony, sharpening legal distinctions between white and black men. By stating “all persons” will be “provided with arms and ammunition,” the colony took upon itself the expense of raising the militia while dictating whom they wanted as participants in what had already become a slave society.²⁰ Fascinatingly when the Virginia General Assembly passed Act X of 1639, the colony was in the midst of three wars fought against the Powhatan Confederacy, better identified as the Anglo-Powhatan Wars (1610-1646).²¹ One might think that Virginia colonists would have wanted to add to the ranks of their militia during an active period of war rather than limit them.

For colonists, militia service was a traditional duty of males in society, as understood in the English tradition.²² Militia service was a badge of belonging to one’s community. Therefore,

¹⁸See Chapter 1 in Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents: A Time of Slavery* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1977), I: ix.

¹⁹William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being A Collection of all the Laws of Virginia From the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619*, 13 vols. (New York R.W. &G. Bartow, 1823), I: 226.

²⁰In 1624-25: Jamestown had over 1,000 firearms listed within the colony. See “History of Armour and Weapons Relevant to Jamestown,” Historic Jamestowne, National Park Service, revised November 1995, accessed September 16, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/history-of-armour-and-weapons-relevant-to-jamestown.htm> See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, for the staggering cost of artillery during the “Military Revolution.” See Index for Costs.

²¹William L. Shea, “Virginia at War, 1644-1646,” *Military Affairs* 41, No.3 (Oct 1977):142-147. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1987169>

²²Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare, 1675-1815* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 40.

by excluding people of color, whether free or enslaved, colonists viewed them as “others” and not as part of their community. A white man’s militia service and sacrifice was viewed as being tied to his citizenship and subjecthood. Henry Laurens, John’s father, served in the militia as a Lieutenant Colonel during campaigns against the Cherokees and during the Seven Years’ War.²³ The fact that militia service was tied to masculinity and citizenship adds a complexity to John Laurens’ plans for a Black battalion because this would constitute a way for enslaved men to earn their right to emancipation and to become a part of the community in a way they had not been previously allowed to do. In that militia service denoted one’s manhood, if enslaved or Black men were allowed to fight, it would confirm their rights to citizenship. John Laurens addressed that notion to some extent in connection with the Black battalion. In 1778, he wrote to his father that his enslaved soldiers would be rescued “from a State of perpetual humiliation.”²⁴ Although citizenship was not examined by the young Laurens, he broached the idea that those soldiers would be regaining their manhood through their military service, though he did not put it in those terms or appear to fully think out the implications.

Following Virginia’s exclusion of the enslaved from serving with their militias in the slave code, several other colonies authorized very similar laws. For many, the aversion to arming enslaved men stemmed from the ever-present fear of slave revolt and rebellion and the meaning ascribed to military service – subjecthood. Prior to the Seven Years’ War, increasing tensions throughout the Euro-Colonial World culminated in slave revolts. Gloucester Country, VA (1663), New York City (1712 and 1741), and in South Carolina – with the Stono Rebellion of 1739 –, all saw plots and uprisings that perpetuated fears.²⁵ For example, following the 1712

²³David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens with a Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant-Colonel John Laurens* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1915), 96

²⁴John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 12: 392.

²⁵“Slave Revolts Prior to 1741,” accessed September 30, 2021

New York slave rebellion, in which nine were killed and six others were wounded, many of the slave codes became harsher, focusing on keeping enslaved men from having access to any weapons.²⁶ In September 1774, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John – the future President— of an attempt at rebellion: “there has been in Town a conspiracy of the Negroes. At present it is kept pretty private and was discovered by one who endeavored to diswaid them from it.”²⁷ She further asserted that she wished “most sincerely there was not a Slave in the province.”²⁸ This fear of rebellion led some colonies to continue to limit the service of enslaved men, but some other colonies took a different course.

Traditions of Allowing Enslaved Men to Fight

Traditionally, in extraordinary circumstances, the European powers of Britain and Spain had used enslaved men as soldiers.²⁹ Early studies have shown if they feared their enemies enough, colonies might look to enslaved people to fight for them. Even though this was the case in certain circumstances, the British North American colonies tended to reject the idea of enslaved people having a military role. Nevertheless, the Caribbean and Spanish colonists permitted enslaved people to participate in a military capacity. The Spanish in Florida, in particular, had set up an all-Black military fort named Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose to better protect the settlement of St. Augustine.³⁰ Fort Mose worried South Carolinians, especially

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/negroplot/slaverevolts.html>.

²⁶Ferenc M. Szasz, “The New York Slave Revolt of 1741: A Re-Examination,” *New York History* 48, no.3 (July 1967), 218.

²⁷“Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0107>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 161–162.]

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Brown and O’Shaughnessy. “Arming Slaves in the American Revolution,” 180.

³⁰Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 74.

after the 1739 Stono Rebellion, when some of the enslaved people involved successfully made it to the community there.³¹ Typically, the British used enslaved men only when exceptional dangers threatened the colony. British use of enslaved men as soldiers extended widely across their colonial holdings.³²

Certainly, there was a tradition in the Anglo-American colonies that allowed enslaved and free Black men to fight in certain circumstances. These cases are important in the story of John Laurens and the fight for the Continental Black battalion. Specifically, South Carolina did arm enslaved men, but they did so out of expediency and with no belief in equal opportunity. Due to South Carolina using enslaved men out of expediency, Laurens' idea of giving enslaved men their freedom in exchange for military service was at odds with the views of many of his contemporaries, especially in South Carolina.

Before Laurens' birth, an earlier generation of South Carolinians had enlisted enslaved men in the militias prior to the shift to the "slave society." At this time, South Carolina was still in the "sawbuck equality" phase, or in the period pre-slave society. The term "sawbuck equality" came from the practice in which masters would work alongside their enslaved people.³³ In this period, there was no fixed economy, and rice had not become the dominant cash crop that it would become later in the period, so the colony made money from the Indian slave trade and the production of other goods sold primarily to Barbados.³⁴ Labor was a shared endeavor because

³¹Ibid., 73.

³²Christopher Leslie Brown and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy. "Arming Slaves in the American Revolution" in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times and the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 180. In the Caribbean Colonies, some colonists viewed Black soldiers as having certain immunities to tropical diseases, and thus favored using Black men as soldiers. This is due to the high death rates for Europeans as they were not exposed to many of these diseases. However strange as this idea may seem, it serves to illustrate that British colonists turned to Black soldiers in extenuating circumstances.

³³Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 66.

³⁴Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of The English Empire in The American South, 1670-1717*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

the diverse economic pursuits practiced during the early years of settlement did not comport with the highly regimented labor patterns of a “slave society.”³⁵ Enslaved men fought during the many Indian Wars, in particular, the Tuscarora, fought in North Carolina (1711-1715), and the Yamasee War, fought in South Carolina (1715-1717).³⁶ Due to the emergency conditions, the colony of South Carolina enrolled “a considerable Number of active, able, Negro Slaves,” into the militia.³⁷

In December 1703, the General Assembly of the Province of South Carolina passed a series of Acts that granted freedom to enslaved people who “assisted against our enemies.”³⁸ Acts XXII, XXIV, and XXV asserted under very specific circumstances that enslaved people were given the opportunity for colony-sponsored emancipation. Act XXIII specified that enslaved men were to be used only “in case of actual invasions” and it followed that “if any slave shall, in actual invasion, kill or take one or more of our enemies,” then “for his reward, at the charge of the publick, have and enjoy his freedom.”³⁹ These parameters emphasized killing the enemy as the condition under which the the local populace would provide an enslaved man his freedom. This document further set the payment to the “master or owner of such slave . . . at such rates and prices as three freeholders of the neighborhood” agreed was fair.⁴⁰ This form of freedom introduced compensation for the enslaved owner, thus making it another form of monetary exchange. Lastly, the act stipulated that the governor had to nominate those who were

³⁵Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 66.

³⁶Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade*.

³⁷Thomas Nairne, *Letter from South Carolina*, in Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade*, 167.

³⁸David J. McCord, *The Statutes At Large of South Carolina; Edited, Under Authority of the Legislature, Volume Seventh, Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves, and Rivers*. (Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1840), 7: 33.

³⁹McCord, *Statutes At Large of South Carolina*, 33.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

to be granted their freedom.⁴¹ It is important to note that this road to freedom happened very rarely. Even with this legislation, Black men were not fully incorporated into the militias.⁴² Act XXIV, pertaining to enslaved men who were either wounded or so “disabled for service to his master or owner” to be “sett free at the charge of the publick,” thereby ensuring that owners would not be harmed financially by allowing their human property to fight for the good of the public.⁴³ This act viewed an enslaved person as a no longer viable member of the labor force once disabled. Although Act XXIV gave the “master or owner” compensation when an enslaved man became disabled, there was no provision for what would become of that enslaved man. Act XXV, the last in this set of laws, made it lawful for “any master or owner of any slave, in actual invasion, to arme and equip any slave or with any armes and ammunition as any other persons by the Act of militia are appointed to appear at muster or alarms.”⁴⁴ These Acts were a direct response to South Carolina’s perceived fears. These were compounded with threats of Indian Wars and fears of a Spanish invasion. Colonists used enslaved men because they feared no other options when it came to colonial threats. The legislature of South Carolina was specific in that it denoted that only “trusty slaves” should be given this opportunity. These acts were not meant to be altruistic; they were meant to protect the colony.

The colony continued to pass these acts during times of Indian warfare, but by 1720 South Carolinians no longer armed enslaved men. This is because the economy shifted to rice cultivation, which ushered in the slave society that John Laurens grew up under. Although South Carolina and other colonies allowed enslaved men to participate with the militias, the shift towards plantation agriculture ultimately ended this practice out of fears of insurrection.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 66.

⁴³McCord, *The Statutes At Large of South Carolina*, 33.

⁴⁴Ibid.

However, the history of arming enslaved men during the “pre-economy” phase was something that John Laurens was likely aware of because his father had served with the South Carolina militia.

The Revolutionary Period and the Debate of Arming Enslaved Men

Following the outbreak of the war for American Independence in April 1775, military leaders had to make decisions and answer questions on how to wage war.⁴⁵ The use of Black troops was influenced by several factors, especially socially and economically.⁴⁶ On both sides of the ocean, debates raged over whether a policy should be enacted that allowed enslaved and free Black men to bear arms and take up ranks with the armies and militias. These questions became pertinent as white manpower began to wane. Although enslaved men were used as soldiers in expedient cases, the war for American independence promised an opportunity to bring this idea to a far wider stage. Arming enslaved men had previously been the decision of individual colonies rather than a collective matter determined by a ‘national’ army and its leaders.

During the American War for Independence, British military leaders and lawmakers worried about enslaved troops. Previously, the use of enslaved men in a military capacity had been “aimed at preserving the institution of slavery.”⁴⁷ This was not the moment, as British lawmakers saw the matter, to overturn the racial hierarchy found within the slave societies of the American colonies. While lawmakers were debating the merits of arming enslaved men in

⁴⁵The Revolution began famously at Lexington and Concord.

⁴⁶Pete Maslowski “National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 73, no 1. (January 1972):1.

⁴⁷Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance In A Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991),73.

Parliament, the British officers in the field were eager to act in the colonies. In June 1775, General Thomas Gage, the British commander-in-chief, wrote to the Secretary-at-War, Lord Barrington that “Things are now come to that Crisis, that we must avail ourselves of every resource, even to raise the Negroes in our cause.”⁴⁸ Even earlier, in April, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, took steps against the patriots by threatening to free their slaves, and in November 1775 issued the famous “Dunmore’s proclamation,” which effectively freed enslaved men who belonged to Patriots and were willing to serve the British military:

I do hereby farther declare all *indentured servants, Negroes*, or others (appertaining to rebels) *free*, that are willing to bear arms, they *joining his Majesty’s troops*, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this colony to a proper sense of their duty, to his Majesty’s crown and dignity.⁴⁹

Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation affected only enslaved people owned by American Patriots—“the rebels.” It was aimed at hurting those Patriots, and he did not plan on wholesale freedom for all enslaved people in the colony of Virginia. Dunmore’s plan was limited in its vision and ended up offending both Loyalists and Patriots. Woody Holton argues that Dunmore’s proclamation “would have carried much significance if black Virginians had remained passive during the Revolutionary crisis. But slaves were not passive.”⁵⁰ Following the proclamation, the enslaved people who flocked to Dunmore signed up to join the “Royal Ethiopian Regiment,” which drew about 800 men to its ranks.⁵¹ The “Ethiopian Regiment,” was the military unit that contained the

⁴⁸Maslowski, “National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution,” 4.

⁴⁹Dunmore’s Proclamation, A 1775. V55, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/finding-freedom/pages/eve-lord-dunmore-s-proclamation>

⁵⁰Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 137.

⁵¹Dunmore’s Proclamation.

enslaved men who left their Patriot masters. The proclamation further illustrated the importance of the American army considering enslaved men to aid in the American cause.

Following the British threat to arm enslaved men, American military leaders faced the tricky decision of how to respond. General Washington and his Council of War set a preliminary policy regarding the enlistment of Black troops.⁵² The Council of War were generals who advised the commander-in-chief after taking charge of the Continental Army during the Siege of Boston and after the Battle of Bunker Hill.⁵³ On 8 October 1775, in Cambridge, Washington's Council of War "agreed unanimously to reject all Slaves, & by a great Majority to reject Negroes altogether."⁵⁴ This unifying decision answered the question of whether it would be "adviseable to re-inlist any Negroes in the new Army—or whether there be a Distinction between such as are Slaves & those who are free?"⁵⁵ This decision had important implications. First, the Council of War's decision was in agreement with the thinking of the Massachusetts Committee on Safety, which on 20 May 1775 had decided "that no Slaves be admitted into this Army upon any consideration whatsoever."⁵⁶ Secondly, this came on the heels of Black men fighting valiantly at both Lexington and Concord, as well as the Battle of Bunker Hill. Most likely, this decision was to respect the feeling of the locals rather than on the merits of those men who had already fought.

⁵²Maslowski "National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution," 3. Maslowski asserts that this policy would have "reflected the sentiment of the majority of white colonists in 1775."

⁵³Washington took over as the commander on 15 June 1775. The American Revolution: A timeline of George Washington's military and political career during the American Revolution, 1774-1783" *Library of Congress*, accessed 2 September 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/timeline/the-american-revolution/>

⁵⁴"Council of War, 8 October 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0115>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, *16 September 1775–31 December 1775*, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987, pp. 123–128.]

⁵⁵"Council of War, 8 October 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0115>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, *16 September 1775–31 December 1775*, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987, pp. 123–128.]

⁵⁶Chapter 1 of Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, 13 vols. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1977), I: 47.

Officially, the Council of War's policy went into effect on 12 November 1775.

Washington's General Orders clearly stated: "Neither Negroes, Boys unable to bare Arms, nor old men unfit to endure the fatigues of the campaign, are to be inlisted."⁵⁷ It is important to note that this statement lumped enslaved men with those seen as "unfit" to fight with the Continental Army. This "othered" enslaved men and can be examined similarly to slave laws, because it limited a man capable of fighting. This decision is an example of how American colonists understood the role that militia service had on citizenship. The idea of achieving citizenship through militia service would have had long term implications on the slave societies of the American colonies. Would enslaved men who fought in the War for American independence be automatically granted citizenship based on their service? This is one of the many questions that John Laurens would have to contend with once he set his plans in motion. There is another complicated layer to this order, in that Black soldiers had proven themselves capable of serving in combat roles before this order took effect. By 31 December 1776, Washington wrote to Congress informing them that "free Negroes who have served in the Army, are very much dissatisfied at being discarded."⁵⁸ In order to stop those men who already served the American cause from taking arms with the British, he revoked his earlier order. Significantly, however, he was only concerned with free Black soldiers, who were in a different position from their enslaved counterparts. There was some push back, especially from southern members of the Continental Congress surrounding the enlistment of enslaved men, especially Edward Rutledge

⁵⁷"General Orders, 12 November 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0326>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, *16 September 1775–31 December 1775*, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987, pp. 353–355.]

⁵⁸"The American Revolution: A timeline of George Washington's military and political career during the American Revolution, 1774-1783" *Library of Congress*, accessed 2 September 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/timeline/the-american-revolution/>

of South Carolina, who had “moved in Congress that Washington should discharge all blacks” for a military role.⁵⁹ Clearly, due to the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the lack of manpower, drastic measures were needed to be taken to ensure an American victory by reexamining the use of enslaved and free Black men as troops. In order to understand this period and the following quest by John Laurens, it is important to examine the Black regiment that succeeded during the Revolutionary War.

Success

A clear case of the successful use of Black soldiers came from the colony of Rhode Island, which legislated into existence the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, a Continental Army unit composed of enslaved Black and Indigenous men and free Black Americans. This unit did not begin its life in the Continental Army as a Black unit, but the gradual pressures of the growing manpower shortages led Rhode Island to open it up to Black men and Indigenous Americans. In January 1778, Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum informed George Washington of plans to create “a Battalion of Negroes,” that would count toward the state’s requisition for the Continental Army.⁶⁰ According to Varnum, “it is imagined that a battalion of Negroes may be

⁵⁹Maslowski “ National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution,”3.

⁶⁰To George Washington from Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum, 2 January 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0104>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, 26 December 1777–28 February 1778, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 125.]

This request comes following that of 1775, to which Washington opposed allowing the enlistment or recruitment of enslaved men or free blacks; in 1776, he reversed himself on both accounts.

easily raised there.”⁶¹ As previously stated, John Laurens was the aide-de-camp who interacted and corresponded on behalf of Washington for this letter.⁶²

The ground-breaking decision came in February 1778, when the General Assembly of Rhode Island passed a law allowing for a slave regiment.⁶³ This was the most progressive decision made in regard to arming enslaved men up to this point for the American side, although the British were already doing so. The act passed by the General Assembly on 14 February proclaimed not only that Black and Indigenous enslaved persons would be allowed to serve but that they would receive the same emoluments as their white counterparts:

every able-bodied Negro, Mulatto, or Indian Male Slave, in this state, may enlist into either of the said two Battalions to serve during the Continuance of the Present War with Great Britain: That every Slave, so enlisting, shall be entitled to, and receive, all the Bounties, Wages, and Encouragements, allowed by the Continental Congress, to any Soldier enlisting into their Service.⁶⁴

The impact of this legislation on Laurens’ thinking was immense, especially because the act made it so explicit that these soldiers of color were to be granted their freedom as soon as they passed muster, cannot go unexamined:

⁶¹Robert A. Geake with Lorén M. Spears, *From Slaves to Soldiers: The 1st Rhode Island Regiment in the American Revolution* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2016), 21.

⁶²“From George Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 2 January 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0095>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, 26 December 1777–28 February 1778, ed. Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 114.]

⁶³Lorenzo J. Greene, "Some Observations on the Black Regiment of Rhode Island in the American Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 2 (1952): 142-172. doi:10.2307/2715341.

⁶⁴ Excerpt of “Act creating the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, also known as the “Black Regiment,” 1778. *RI State Archives*. <https://sos.ri.gov/assets/downloads/documents/Black-Regiment.pdf>

It is Voted and Resolved, that every Slave, so enlisting, shall, upon his passing Muster before Col. Christopher Green, be immediately discharged from the Service of his Master or Mistress; and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been encumbered with any Kind of Servitude or Slavery. And in Case such Slave shall, by Sickness or otherwise, be rendered to maintain himself, he shall not be chargeable to his Master or Mistress but shall be supported at the Expense of the State.⁶⁵

The wording of this document was unambiguous. Rhode Island pushed for the freedom of its enslaved men, who became soldiers and ensured that the owners would not feel encumbered by any of the usual responsibilities that owners of chattel property typically had after slaves were manumitted; here the law pointedly absolved former owners from any obligation to support indigent freedmen. Shortly after this time, John Laurens wrote to his father, arguing that the rest of the Continental forces should follow Rhode Island's lead. John Laurens experienced battle with the 1st Rhode Island regiment, which further demonstrated to him that formerly enslaved men were just as capable in battle as their white counterparts.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Excerpt of "Act creating the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, also known as the "Black Regiment," 1778. *RI State Archives*. <https://sos.ri.gov/assets/downloads/documents/Black-Regiment.pdf>

⁶⁶The third chapter of this thesis explores John Laurens' interaction with the Rhode Island Regiment.

Debate

During this period, through the use of broadsides, contemporaries debated the policy of arming Black troops.⁶⁷ One such document that has caused debate since its publication is a passionate broadside, authored under the pseudonym “Antibiastes,” which directly addressed questions about using enslaved men as soldiers.⁶⁸ Published in August 1777 in Philadelphia, this broadside has been attributed to John Laurens because of similarities found in his correspondence from the same period.⁶⁹ The author of the broadside was well versed in military affairs and the traditions of arming enslaved men; at the time of its publication, Laurens had just begun serving as an extra aide-de-camp for General George Washington.

The broadside “Observations on the Slaves and the Indented Servants, Inlisted in the Army, and in the Navy of the United States” argued that slaves and indentured servants who fought in the Continental Army, Navy, and state militias during the Revolution had earned their right to be granted freedom. “Antibiastes” pointed out the hypocrisy of expecting enslaved men to fight for the independence of a new nation that would, in all probability, deny them their most basic freedom: personal liberty. The tract argued that it was preposterous for enslaved persons to “share in the dangers and glory of the efforts made by us, the freeborn members of the United States, to enjoy, undisturbed, the common rights of human nature,” only to “remain Slaves!”⁷⁰

⁶⁷For works that study Black Americans in the Revolution, see Judith L. Van Buskirk’s *Standing in their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); John U. Rees, *‘They Were Good Soldiers’ African-Americans Serving in the Continental Army, 1775-1783* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019); and Pete Maslowski, “National Policy Toward the Use of Black Troops in the Revolution” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 73, no. 1 (Jan 1972).

⁶⁸Edwin Wolf, II, *Negro History: 1553-1903* (Philadelphia: Library Co of Philadelphia, 1807), 48.

⁶⁹See Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 364-67.

⁷⁰Antibiastes, “Observations on the Slaves and the Indented Servants, Inlisted in the Army, and in the Navy of the United States” (Philadelphia: Printed by Styner and Cist, 1777).

“Antibiastes” called on readers to examine this hypocrisy of allowing enslaved men to fight for the freedom of others while not gaining liberty themselves. The Continental Congress could remedy the situation, according to the author, by creating a regiment of slaves and granting them freedom in exchange for their military service. If “Antibiastes” was John Laurens, as I believe, then he was already arguing for a Black battalion before the Rhode Island decision.

“Antibiastes” alluded to other nations that armed their enslaved populations during “extraordinary emergencies,” including France, Spain, and Britain. The author explained that those men who fought “were remarkably faithful and none of them deserted,” thus strengthening his case for recruiting enslaved soldiers into the Continental Army.⁷¹ Clearly, “Antibiastes” was trying to showcase the successes of using enslaved men within other conflicts by European nations and how this could help the American effort against the British. Although directly addressing how to fix a manpower shortage, this broadside focused on the institution of slavery and its hypocrisy. Referring to American colonists as “accomplices of the Britons,” he explained the way in which he and his fellow revolutionaries “have received great emoluments from their profligacy, their insidiousness and savage cruelty, since they first undertook the slave trade.”⁷² The appearance of being “accomplices of the Britons” seemed to be in direct conversation with those who claimed that the blame for the international slave trade should be placed on the British, and that Americans were complicit in its continuation. If this is Laurens’ writing, he went against what his father argued in 1776 regarding slavery and the slave trade.⁷³ This broadside is an example the extent to which people had begun questioning slavery during this period.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid. This argument is one that was purported by both Henry Laurens and Thomas Jefferson.

⁷³Chapter two will explore this further.

Many documents can shed light on the significant debate on whether armies should use enslaved men as soldiers in this conflict. This is an issue that plagued both the American and British armies at the time, although their responses were different. As the American Revolution began, there was a fever in the air to fight against the “tyrannical” British. By understanding the intense debates surrounding the institution of slavery, the scene can be set for how this influenced those within the Laurens network. John Laurens was critically aware of the precedents that had been set regarding the subject of arming enslaved men. The traditional role of slave codes influenced how contemporary actors interacted with this issue in a time of dire threat. American colonists had an ever-present fear about not only the British themselves but also the potential for their sworn enemies to recruit unfree laborers into their ranks. With this background we can understand the deeply rooted limitations that John Laurens faced when he penned his “untried Source” letter.

Chapter 2 - “Our Spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind”:

Familial Debate and a European Education

In 1776, John Laurens’ indirectly inspired his dear friend Thomas Day, a British lawyer and abolitionist, to write his thoughts on slavery. The piece entitled “Fragment of an Original Letter, on the Slavery of the Negroes” was written “at the request of an American gentleman” and was not published until after the conclusion of the American Revolution.¹ Day asserted that the gentleman in question was someone he had seen in the company of John Laurens, although he did not name the person.² The gentleman was someone from the southern colonies and participated in the institution of slavery, as pointed out by the author.³ Day was somewhat surprised that his opinion was “of any consequence” to the southerner because he believed the man in question could decide for himself if “his own humanity and good sense will be sufficient to decide, if he attends, for a moment, to their dictates.”⁴ Day asserted that slavery was nonsensical, that if given one moment of thought, this person should understand how badly those enslaved had been wronged. In this letter, Day asked a series of poignant questions concerning slavery, in particular, “what are the rights you claim them? Have you a right to torture them when they are guilty of no faults?”⁵ Thomas Day asked what gave those involved in the institution of slavery the right to enslave others. Later in the letter, Day scoffed at the excuses used by enslavers to make themselves feel better.⁶ John Laurens used this same reasoning throughout his correspondence and the two shared similar thoughts on the issue, as can be seen

¹Thomas Day, “Fragment of an Original Letter, on the Slavery of the Negroes,” *Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (London: John Stockdale, 1784), iii.

²Day, “Fragment of an Original Letter,” 11.

³*Ibid.*, 14.

⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

⁵*Ibid.*, 26.

⁶*Ibid.*, 27.

in 1776, 1778, and 1779. For example, in 1779, John Laurens wrote to John Rutledge and used a similar argument; he asserted that “those very blacks which have hitherto been regarded as our greatest weakness may be converted into our greatest strength.”⁷ This quotation is similar to an argument Day made that “your slaves, the instant they shall become the strongest, will have a right to the services of yourself and every other gentleman of the Southern colonies.”⁸ Both were drawing on strength rather than weakness; Laurens’ idea was more positive than Thomas Day’s. Although Laurens did not address his thoughts on Day’s work in letter form, we do know they spoke often on ideas surrounding slavery. At this moment, he had just started forming his ideas on abolition and freedom for those enslaved, and this document clearly illustrated the importance of his network. During his time in Europe, John Laurens’ network was pivotal in forming the Continental Black Battalion.

John Laurens’ early life, until his return to the American Colonies, was critical for two reasons: first, it shaped his fervor for American independence; and second, it introduced him to debates not readily found in conservative South Carolina. Education, family, and correspondence instilled a worldview that shaped Laurens’ understanding of both slavery and freedom. These influences stood on a solid tapestry of antislavery thought and the debate during the Revolutionary period. Between 1759 and 1777, Laurens was introduced to antislavery rhetoric as a result of his education abroad and his colonial networks. Thus, Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens’ life was intertwined with the complex institution of slavery, whether through his observation of local practices in South Carolina or his witnessing of debates over slavery in

⁷John Laurens to John Rutledge, May 1779, in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 140.

⁸Day, “Fragment of an Original Letter,” 14.

London. Not surprisingly, this influenced how Laurens interacted with the institution during his time with the Continental Army.

John Laurens, affectionately known to his family as Jack, was born into a world of luxury in Charleston, in October 1754, to Henry and Eleanor Ball Laurens.⁹ The forebears of the Laurens family had come to the British colonies as immigrants escaping religious persecution, as French Huguenots from Rochelle. The family left in 1685, when Louis XIV repealed the Edict of Nantes, which had been issued by Henry IV granting tolerance to Protestants.¹⁰ John's father, Henry Laurens, had made his significant wealth through his merchant partnership, Austin & Laurens, founded in 1748, which profited from the Atlantic slave trade.¹¹ The account ledgers of Austin & Laurens show how much wealth the partnership made through human bondage.¹² The wealth accumulated from this business allowed Henry Laurens to become one of the most influential political members of elite Charleston society and one of the wealthiest men in the American colonies.¹³

Due to his prosperity, Henry Laurens was able to invest heavily in the purchase of plantation properties. These land purchases allowed him to qualify to run for the Commons

⁹The Laurenses had twelve children, although only four reached maturity: John, Martha, Henry, and Mary Eleanor. Massey, *John Laurens and The American Revolution*, 9.

¹⁰Jean Laurens left France and first settled in New York, but eventually left and brought his family to settle permanently in Charleston, South Carolina in 1715. Massey. *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 9. David Ramsay, *Memoirs of The Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay, Who Died in Charleston, S.C. June 10, 1811, In the 52d Year of Her Age. With An Appendix, Containing Extracts from Her Diary, Letters, and Other Private Papers. and Also From Letters Written to Her, By Her Father, Henry Laurens, 1771-1776* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1827).11.

¹¹Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 11. Austin & Laurens eventually expanded to include George Appleby in 1759.

¹²Austin & Laurens, Account Book. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University: p.12. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/pdfs/2030713.pdf> The account found on page 12 is for the sale of "139 new Negro Slaves," and lists those in society who purchased the enslaved person and the "terms of payment." Henry Laurens bought one male slave for 203.10 pounds.

¹³J. William Harris, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2. See Harris' work to understand the significance of Henry Laurens' power in Charleston's circles.

House of Assembly in South Carolina in 1757 and be elected.¹⁴ With Henry Laurens' continued success, the family bought the plantations at Ansonborough and Mepkin; John and his surviving siblings spent most of their younger years at Mepkin.¹⁵ The family primarily resided at Mepkin Plantation, which also housed fifty of the Laurens' enslaved peoples.¹⁶ Although we have little evidence of John Laurens' interaction with enslaved peoples during his early life, we know that he was exposed to the institution itself. Circumstances changed for Henry Laurens in 1762, when Austin, Laurens, & Appleby ended their merchant partnership.¹⁷ This allowed Henry more time to focus on his children's education and on the many properties he owned.¹⁸ Education factored greatly into John Laurens' eventual road toward his position within Washington's inner circle.

Henry Laurens had initially planned to send his children abroad for an education, per the custom of the day. Sending their sons to the metropole – London – for an education was a true mark of gentility and elite status within the Southern colonies because those colonies had not established colleges, as New England had.¹⁹ Education for colonial elites was a transatlantic network that connected the “mother country” and other European nations with the colonies. In October 1768, Henry Laurens raised doubts about the colony's educational system to Matthew Robinson, stating that John would be sent to London while touting his progress under his current tutors: “He is now fourteen Year old, well advanced considering what poor opportunities this

¹⁴Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 10. The qualification for the House of Assembly was land ownership.

¹⁵Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 11.

¹⁶“Henry Laurens,” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/chpi/learn/historyculture/henry-laurens.htm>.

¹⁷Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 14.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Julie M. Flavell, “The ‘School for Modesty and Humility’: Colonial American Youth in London and Their Parents, 1755-1775,” *The Historical Journal*, Cambridge University Press Vol 42, no. 2 (June 1999): 377–403.

place has afforded in the Classics, French, Mathematicks, & drawing.”²⁰ Laurens felt pressure to provide his children with a good education, especially because he judged the state of education in South Carolina to be poor: “we are perhaps the worst off at present for Schools of any province in America.”²¹ In the mind of Henry Laurens, education would allow for his children to succeed, and that would mean sending them abroad to better schools in Europe. One of the young Laurens’ most significant early mentors was the famed Scottish botanist and physician Alexander Garden, but Henry still wanted a European education for his son.²² Garden, who eventually became the Commissary of the Anglican Church in South Carolina, is known for being conservative on slavery. Garden helped instill the idea that slavery was “morally defensible” if owners treated their human property well.²³ This is important because it shows how open Laurens was to questioning key aspects of his early socialization.

The plan to continue John’s education was placed on hold when, in April 1770, Eleanor Laurens, whose husband described her as “a tender watchful Mother,” died, leaving John especially, in mourning.²⁴ Henry Laurens was grief-stricken by his wife’s death and was unable to partake in business, stopping correspondence for several months.²⁵ Following her death, John took a vested interest in his siblings’ learning, and, writing to James Grant, Henry praised John’s attempts at being a kind of mentor: John “act[s] the part of a kind and able friend & Brother to a Sister of 11 Years old who is now advancing fast in French and is as much a Mistress of English

²⁰Henry Laurens to Matthew Robinson, 19 October 1768, *The Papers of Henry Laurens 1768-1769*, ed. David R. Chesnut and C. James Taylor, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1978), 6:139. During this period, Henry Laurens’ account books show that he paid for several tutors to teach the children.

²¹Henry Laurens to James Grant, 24 November 1770, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. David R. Chesnut, George C. Rogers Jr., and Peggy Clark, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1979), 7: 405.

²²Massey. *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 18, 20.

²³See Fred E. Witzig, *Sanctifying Slavery & Politics in South Carolina: The Life of The Reverend Alexander Garden 1685-1756* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018).

²⁴Henry Laurens to Matthew Robinson, 1 June 1770, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 7: 300.

²⁵Wallace, *Life of Henry Laurens*, 180.

Grammar as any Girl of her age through his assistance.”²⁶ Thus, John helped keep the family going through the painful time following his mother’s death and supported his four younger siblings. In her memoirs, Martha –John’s sister— recalled that “ being older he had taken great delight in forwarding her education, and particularly, informing her mind to be superior to the common accidents of life, and the groundless fears of some of her sex.”²⁷

A year after Eleanor Laurens’ death, Henry decided that it was time to bring his three male children to the Continent for their schooling. In July 1771, the long journey began for England, with the family arriving on 9 October, after several stops.²⁸ This greatly changed the young man’s life because it introduced him to the antislavery societies of Europe in a network outside South Carolina. When he first arrived in London, John Laurens was placed at a school run by the Reverend Richard Clarke, a former pastor of St. Philip’s Church in Charleston.²⁹ Henry Laurens became increasingly upset with Clarke’s school when his young son Harry “came home, with a horrible Burn, in his Cheek by candle.”³⁰ He pressed John about the school, to which he replied that “Mr. Clarke does not keep a proper Discipline, that he is not strict enough with them, that such as will voluntarily attend, may improve, but those duller Genius must remain Slack or go backward.”³¹ This clearly did not fit with the elder Laurens’ thoughts on how his children should be educated. Henry also thought the school was far too close to the London’s

²⁶Henry Laurens to James Grant, 24 November 1770, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 7: 407.

²⁷Martha Laurens Ramsay’s Memoir was written from a manuscript found after her death; until then, it had not been seen by anyone but herself. She told her family about the manuscript three days before her death. Ramsay, *Memoirs of The Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 16.

²⁸Henry, John, and Jemmy made the long arduous journey across the ocean. They stopped in New York before reaching England; Massey. *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 24, 25.

²⁹John’s younger brother, Henry Jr., had been sent ahead to the school. In October, John and his other brother James joined. Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 464.

³⁰Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 1 January 1772, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. David R. Chesnutt, C. James Taylor, and Peggy Clark, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 8:147.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 8: 147.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8: 148.

debauchery because it was in the midst of one of London's "seedy" neighborhoods. Henry Laurens told his brother that he spoke to his son as a friend and that "I know his Love of Truth and Charitable Disposition, forbids every Thing like malicious whisper, or idle Tale Telling."³² This is important in the story of the Black battalion because if what Henry says is true, then it can be believed that John Laurens had the most noble of intentions in his plans.

On 6 February 1772, Henry Laurens wrote to his brother, James, that he was determined to find "a proper place for fixing Jacky to his Studies. I have received a good deal of information of Universities and Seminaries of Learning, but have not come to a final Conclusion yet."³³ Several people with whom Henry Laurens spoke advised him that Geneva was a good place to send his eldest son for his education.³⁴ In May 1772, Henry Laurens wrote to Alexander Garden, John's former tutor, that the eldest children would head to "Geneve," for the "prosecution" of his "original and favorite plan," placing John in a university there.³⁵ Although Henry favored the Geneva plan, he said he would make no decisions until "Jack has been some days at Geneve, and express'd his own Satisfaction."³⁶ After arriving in Geneva in June, the family decided that John and his brother would stay in Geneva to continue their education.³⁷ While there, the young Laurens brothers studied the intellectual highlights of the day under a great many tutors, although those tutors remain unknown. From his letters, it is clear that John Laurens lived in the home of Jean-Antoine Chais, a friend of his father.³⁸ While in Geneva, John Laurens anxiously wrote to his father about his choice of career.

³²Ibid., 8: 147, 148.

³³Ibid., 8:173.

³⁴Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 13 May 1772, Ibid., 8: 306.

³⁵Henry Laurens to Alexander Garden, 24 May 1772, Ibid., 8:325.

³⁶Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 9 June 1772, Ibid., 8: 363.

³⁷Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 28.

³⁸*The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 8: xv, 378. The Chais family were also of French Huguenot decent.

Although John's career choice weighed heavily on his mind, the greater conversations of the Enlightenment took hold, particularly those about morality. Early social reform movements on morality began to move throughout Europe and America in the 1770s. Key concerns were the institution of slavery, abolition, and the Atlantic slave trade.³⁹ The Laurens family, especially John and Henry, were involved in this conversation. Before leaving for Geneva in December 1771, the father and son saw the play *Oroonoko*, which Henry deemed "foolish."⁴⁰ This play, adapted from a work published in 1688, had become popular in the Enlightenment ferment and debate surrounding slavery. *Oroonoko* told the story of an African prince, sold into slavery, who eventually led a revolt of enslaved people in Surinam.⁴¹ This fact may be why Henry Laurens saw this play as "foolish." Many elite enslavers were terrified of rebellious enslaved persons, particularly in South Carolina following the Stono Rebellion of 1739. During this time, Henry Laurens took up residence in London with his youngest son, James, while John and his brother, Harry, studied in Geneva, where they stayed until 1774.⁴²

At this juncture in his education, John Laurens began to consider his future career choice. Ultimately, as protest led to war against Great Britain back home, Laurens became a soldier, but he had intended to study and practice law. In the eighteenth century, law was a popular profession among the elite, especially in the colony of South Carolina.⁴³ Law was not John Laurens' first choice of career, but in a letter written to his father, John asserted that "I have

³⁹Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 32.

⁴⁰Henry Laurens to William Cowles, 30 December 1771, *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 8: 142-143.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 8: 143.; The author of *Oroonoko* was Aphra Behn (1640-1689), and the work is also known as the *Royal Slave*. Behn was one of the first women in the Restoration era to make her living from writing.; For a similar idea see Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Spark's work is the real story of two respectable young men who had gotten trapped in slavery. This work illustrates that those enslaved were noble, much like that of *Oroonoko*.

⁴²Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 185-199.

⁴³Massey. *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 35.

weighed the matter very seriously and considering that my Dear Papa and the majority of our judicious friends give a preference my studying Law,” then that is what he would choose.

Laurens said that he preferred studying “Physick,” but due to familial pressures, he conceded to what his father wanted.⁴⁴ The family ultimately decided that in order for him to study law, John would have to go to London in 1778, although his plans changed due to the war. Following John’s declarations of what course of study he preferred, Henry Laurens set to work and eventually succeeding in getting him admitted to the prestigious Middle Temple at the Inns of Court.⁴⁵ Henry Laurens wrote to Richard Grubb, an associate of his, requesting the “favor that you Enter his Name in the proper manner at the Temple & to take out the usual Certificate of such Entry.”⁴⁶ John Laurens eventually entered the Middle Temple, but until then, he continued his studies in Geneva.⁴⁷ By 1774, he had forged a friendship with fellow South Carolinian Francis Kinloch, a fellow student in Geneva, but other changes were at work for the young Laurens.⁴⁸

In this period, John Laurens dealt with pressures from family and friends and the changing of British and American relations. This was when Parliament passed the Coercive or Intolerable Acts, which angered many American colonists. This event ushered in serious changes to Anglo-American relations, as there was a ratcheting up of the tension between the metropole and its colonies. This tension allowed the Laurens family to become important players in the

⁴⁴Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 1 September 1772, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 8: 447.

⁴⁵J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, “Southern Members of the Inns of Court,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 10, no.4 (October 1933): 273-286, <https://jstor.org/stable/23514971> The Inns of Court (The Inner Temple, The Middle Temple, Grey’s Inn, and Lincoln’s Inn) served as a “Judicial University.” John Laurens entered in 1772 at the Middle Temple.

⁴⁶Henry Laurens to Richard Grubb, 1 September 1772, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 8:447.

⁴⁷Massey. *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 37. In preparation for his study of law, his father sent him William Blackstone’s *Law Tracts and Commentaries on the Law of England*.

⁴⁸Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 41.

coming Revolution, especially after 1774, when Henry signed his name to “The Petition to the House of Lords against the Boston Port Bill.”⁴⁹ The Bill effectively opposed the Coercive Acts, which were a punishment for the Boston Tea Party, and it was signed by many prominent Americans. Among the signatories were Benjamin Franklin, the statesman, and Thomas Pinckney, another South Carolinian. With a sense of urgency, Henry Laurens decided it was time to return to the colonies, setting sail for Charleston in November 1774.⁵⁰ With his return to the colonies set, Henry wrote to his eldest son in June, saying that he had come to “perceive it necessary [for John] to return to England and therefore advise you to hold your Self in readiness.”⁵¹ With that, John Laurens left the comforts in Geneva for the bustling city of London, setting his life on a collision for what was to come. On 23 August 1774, Laurens wrote to his friend Francis Kinloch to inform him of his arrival in London.⁵² As tensions continued to rise, John began attending Parliamentary debates concerning the growing crisis and wrote back to South Carolina, keeping friends informed of what was happening.⁵³ The letters that John Laurens wrote were published by the *South Carolina Gazette* because his father deemed it important to share with the colony.⁵⁴

In December 1774, Laurens sent three letters that focused on the proceedings of Parliament, but the letter he sent on 3 December stands out because he referred to King George

⁴⁹“The Petition to the House of Lords against the Boston Port Bill, [26 March 1774]: résumé,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-21-02-0068>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 21, *January 1, 1774, through March 22, 1775*, ed. William B. Willcox. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 155–158.]

⁵⁰Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 197.

⁵¹Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 21 June 1774, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. David R. Chesnutt, George C. Rogers, Peggy J. Clark, and C. James Taylor, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1981), 9: 475.

⁵²Laurens, John, 1754-1782. “Letter from John Laurens to Francis Kinloch” Lowcountry Digital Library, The Charleston Museum Archives, 1774-08-23.

⁵³Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 48.

⁵⁴Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 48

III's support of the Parliamentary acts passed on the American colonies. His 5 December letter detailed the proceedings at the House of Lords, in which nine lords dissented in protest against the King's previous speech. This letter is noteworthy because it gave readers a flavor of the gossip in London: "we are taught to believe there will be, what can ensue but the most dreadful Curse of Humanity, Civil War."⁵⁵ These letters marked the moment when Laurens realized that war was coming. Once John Laurens had returned to London, there was a direct course toward the ardent, if sometimes somewhat naïve, attitude toward gradual abolition and the eventual plans for a Continental Black battalion. However, his return to London also marked changes to his personal life, including his marriage to Martha Manning, the daughter of William Manning, a dear friend and business associate of Henry Laurens.⁵⁶

By 1774, Laurens started to form strong bonds with other young men who shared his idealistic worldview. His ability to form strong bonds would help during his quest to develop a Continental Black battalion, and his role within Washington's inner circle. While Laurens was still in Europe, his friendships with Francis Kinloch, John Bicknell, and Thomas Day strengthened his firm but often romantic ideals. Thus, John Laurens was intellectually stimulated when he began a friendship with John Bicknell, a lawyer, and Thomas Day, a would-be lawyer, both known for their commentaries on abolition.⁵⁷ The two, Bicknell and Day, published the antislavery poem *The Dying Negro* in 1773, in which they envisioned the harsh realities faced by those thrust within the institution.⁵⁸ *The Dying Negro* tells the story of an enslaved African

⁵⁵John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 5 December 1774, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 9: 650.

⁵⁶Martha Manning was the daughter of William Manning, a close associate of the Laurens family. Very little is known about John and Martha's relationship, but they were married in 1776, when the bride was five months pregnant. With his return to America, John would never see his wife or meet his daughter. John wrote to his father informing him of the marriage on 26 October 1776.

⁵⁷Gregory D. Massey, "The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John Laurens and Henry Laurens," *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no.3 (Aug 1997).

⁵⁸Massey, "The Limits to Antislavery Thought," 502.

prince, who, unable to gain his freedom, commits suicide.⁵⁹ The advertisement found in the front of the document asserted that this poem was “occasioned by the fact which had recently happened at the time of its first publication in 1773” when a Black man had “agreed to marry a white woman, his fellow-servant.”⁶⁰ The Black man shot himself rather than being forcibly transported through the Middle Passage to be sold into American slavery. The poem ended with the line, “O lead me to that spot, that sacred shore, Where souls are free, and men oppress no more!”⁶¹ This line might have appealed to Americans reading the poem at the time, as tensions with Britain became increasingly oppressive, and yet most did not see their own treatment of the enslaved as oppressive. We do not have a record of Laurens’ reaction to this work. Yet the idea that a “noble slave” could feel so despondent when faced with living in bondage that he would rather commit suicide than be enslaved might well have inspired Laurens to consider enslaved people’s feelings. It also raised the question to how far one should go in an attempt to gain freedom. Would fighting for one’s freedom suffice?⁶²

This poem marked an important shift in antislavery literature because it came in the period following the significant Somerset Case.⁶³ At this point, abolitionist thought and antislavery rhetoric were beginning to appear in the London newspapers.⁶⁴ The Laurens family was involved in circles of antislavery thought; Martha Laurens, his sister, was certainly aware of Phillis Wheatley’s poetry, and John might have been as well.⁶⁵ With the people that John

⁵⁹John Bicknell and Thomas Day, “The Dying Negro, A Poem,” (London: W.Flexney, 1775).

⁶⁰Bicknell and Day, “The Dying Negro,”

⁶¹Ibid., 24.

⁶²François Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Discourse,” *Journal of American History* 89 (March 2003),1295-1330.

⁶³William R. Cotter “The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery in England,” *History* 79, no.255 (February 1996): 31-56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24421930>

⁶⁴Brycchan Carey, “Slavery and Abolition in the English Newspapers,” <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/brycchan-carey-slavery-abolition-english-newspapers>

⁶⁵Joanna Bowen Gillespie, *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay 1759-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001),173.

Laurens interacted, it is easy to assert that he was privy if not involved in these early stages of British abolition. During this period, he met the abolitionist Granville Sharp, so Laurens was familiar with this early movement happening in London.⁶⁶ Laurens began to use similar phrases as those used by the Reverend John Wesley, particularly following the “untried Source” letter.⁶⁷ Although we are missing reactions from Laurens to this poem and early antislavery tracts, it is still essential to examine them.

By 1775, there was a fervent shift in John Laurens’ rhetoric; he began to describe himself as an American rather than as a British subject.⁶⁸ By February, he had come to the same conclusion as other Americans, that a war was necessary. In a letter to his father, John likened the treatment of the British subjects in the American colonies to that of enslaved people, “for undoubtedly,” he said, “if a British Parliament may prescribe to us the Mode and Quantity of our Taxes, we are but Slaves.”⁶⁹ This comment was an early instance of the hypocrisy with which some Americans assessed their treatment by the British. This is slightly dramatic from a modern perspective because the idea of “Taxation without Representation” cannot be equated with the treatment of enslaved people. Many within the elite in American society began to turn away from their loyalty to the crown. As J. Williams Harris argued, Henry Laurens was “a reluctant rebel” who became involved in the American cause to secure the “prospect of Securing freedom & happiness for future Generations’ of Americans.”⁷⁰ John Laurens was the opposite of his father and wanted desperately to be back in America, asking his father, “What have I to do here in the

⁶⁶Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80.

⁶⁷Gillespie, *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 152.

⁶⁸Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 48.

⁶⁹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 18 February 1775, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. David R. Chesnutt, George C. Rogers Jr., C. James Taylor, Peggy J. Clark, David Fisher, and Jean W. Mustain, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 10: 75.

⁷⁰Harris, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah*, 3.

present Circumstances of my Country? What have I not to do at home?”⁷¹ John decided that he wanted to lend whatever service he might to his home—the soon to be United States, but, more importantly, the colony of South Carolina. In 1776, John Laurens was introduced to Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* when his father decided to send it to him, Henry disagreed with the radical message, perhaps seeing its egalitarian tendencies as excessive and asserted that “nothing less than repeated & continued persecution by Great Britain can make the People in this Country subscribe” to Paine.⁷² To his father, John replied that he had read Paine’s work “more than once,” and it appeared that he enjoyed it more than his father.⁷³

The year 1776 turned out to be a truly pivotal year for the young Laurens; not only was it the year in which the American colonists asserted their independence from the “tyrannical” British, but it also marked his impassioned commitment to antislavery sentiments. So, as tensions rose, Laurens began to question the very institution from which family had made their wealth. Laurens debated the hypocrisy of holding humans in bondage while fighting for liberty in a letter written to his friend and fellow southerner Francis Kinloch. In this letter, Laurens asserted that slavery was not the way forward for Americans: “I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a *good Grace*, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our Slaves.”⁷⁴ Laurens began to believe in some way that freeing those who were enslaved was integral to the process of gaining freedom and autonomy from the British. He took this idea still further, asserting:

⁷¹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 20 August 1775, *The Papers of Henry Laurens Volume 10*: 335.

⁷²Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 22 February 1776, in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 58.

⁷³Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 58.

⁷⁴John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, 12 April 1776, Thomas Addis Emmet Collection (New York Public Library) in Massey, “The Limits of Antislavery Thought,” 504.

How can we whose Jealousy has been alarm'd more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the Reality, reconcile to our spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject Slavery of our negroes.... If as some pretend, but I am persuaded more thro' interest, than from Conviction, the Culture of the Ground with us can-not be carried on without African Slaves, Let us fly it as a hateful Country, and say ubi Libertas i[bi] Patria [where Liberty is there is my Country].⁷⁵

This letter shows the start of the strong rhetoric that Laurens later used in support of the Black battalion. Fascinatingly, Kinloch predicted Laurens' increasing radicalization on the issue. "I heartily agree with you," Kinloch told Laurens, "but at the same time can not flatter myself that our country man will ever adopt such generous principles," although he said this after tentatively admiring Laurens' stance on the issue of slavery.⁷⁶ This letter shows that Laurens' thinking had grown since he had written to his father in early 1776. He had come to a better understanding of the complex relationships that many had with slavery. This letter is among the earliest of Laurens' writings that reveal his stance about the institution of slavery. It was written when he was in the midst of learning from those at the forefront of the abolitionist movement. Due to John Laurens' vantage point in London regarding the Revolution, he saw that White and Black liberty was equally important against a "tyrannical" system.

In August 1776, John received a letter from his father that opened the dramatic dialogue between father and son on their misgivings on slavery and commenced the concrete debate

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Francis Kinloch to John Laurens, 28 April 1776, Miscellaneous Manuscripts (New York Public Library) in Massey, "The Limits of Antislavery Thought," 504.

between the two. These first letters fostered an environment that bolstered John's confidence to approach his father regarding the Black battalion. Henry Laurens was always a strong influence within his son's life, and this was especially so when John formulated a plan for a Continental Black battalion. Henry Laurens was ambivalent at best about the institution of slavery.⁷⁷

Throughout the Revolutionary period, there was a definite shift within Henry Laurens' views on slavery. Like many in this period he grappled with how to reconcile slavery with his religious convictions.⁷⁸ In the 1760s, Laurens "began to decline offers to sell big shiploads of African slaves" and he often privately cited his "concerns about the cruelties of the trade."⁷⁹ It was often in private correspondence where Laurens became more outspoken about his misgivings concerning the institution. To others, this appeared hypocritical because he had already made his money from participation in the trade. Although Henry Laurens had written on his thoughts on the trade and the institution of slavery, he appeared to fear that free Blacks would aid the British if given the chance. The case of Thomas Jeremiah, a harbor pilot in Charleston complicates the picture of Henry Laurens further. Jeremiah was free, Black, and had achieved financial stability, which might have caused some resentment on Henry's part. When in 1775 Jeremiah was accused of aiding the British, Laurens staunchly believed that Jeremiah was guilty.⁸⁰ In August 1775, Jeremiah was hanged for his "crimes" even through the royal governor, Lord William Campbell, attempted to intervene.⁸¹ Jeremiah's case and his death was hotly debated in London and was cited as "an example of the many cruelties inflicted on innocent men by the American rebels."⁸² This case illustrated the complexity in Laurens' thoughts on slavery and people of color. While

⁷⁷Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 14.

⁷⁸Harris, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah*, 41.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 146.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 152,

⁸²*Ibid.*

he may have begun to question slavery as an institution, he was highly distrustful of a free black man who aspired wealth and equality.

Since Henry Laurens served as his son's advisor, they had an open but often tense conversations concerning the institution of slavery. Gradually, Henry Laurens' private correspondence showed changes in his views about slavery. In August 1776, Henry Laurens made a startling claim to his son: "You know, my dear son, I abhor slavery."⁸³ This claim, although somewhat shocking in itself, would have resonated with his son, who had already begun to foster these ideas with his peers. Laurens also contended that "I found the Christian religion and slavery growing under the same authority and cultivation."⁸⁴ This connection between religion and slavery became an important portion of the debates later in the nineteenth century.

Henry, despite his professed dislike of slavey, was unwilling to take any blame for it: "I was born in a country where slavery had been established by British kings and parliaments, as well as by the laws of that country ages before my existence. I nevertheless disliked it."⁸⁵ Like many in his generation, the elder Laurens blamed the British for an institution he claimed to hate but participated in and profited from. This letter, in effect, explained away his role as a prominent slaveowner by placing the blame on the British as they were the ones that allowed for this system to continue in "their" colonies.⁸⁶ This was an opinion shared by many in this era, but

⁸³ Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, in Henry Laurens, *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery: Being a Letter from Henry Laurens, Second President of the Continental Congress, to his Sone, Colonel John Laurens; Dated Charleston, S.C., August 14th, 1776* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1861), 20.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.; and Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundation of British Abolitionism*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 142. The argument that the British were at fault for slavery was famously advanced by Thomas Jefferson.; For more on Jefferson's attitude toward slavery see Fawn Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), (91-93, 422-424; and Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009),112.

⁸⁶This is an idea is purported both by Thomas Jefferson and Henry Laurens. Examine Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence.

most did not follow through and try to remove the institution when they could have done so. Gary Nash has argued that the Revolutionary period was an ideal window for change regarding the institution of slavery. Americans could have used this as an opportunity to eliminate this form of labor. Due to this idea, John and Henry Laurens' arguments came at this opportune moment.⁸⁷

Laurens further claimed that “these negroes were first enslaved by the English; acts of parliament have established the slave trade in favour of the homes-residing English, and almost totally prohibited the Americans from reaping any share of it.”⁸⁸ This assertion that Americans have not “reaped” any benefits was inaccurate, because we know Laurens himself benefited from the institution. Henry Laurens and his merchant firm were proof of the benefits reaped by the slave trade. Laurens participated in the sale of over 8,000 Africans and owned over 200 enslaved persons.⁸⁹ From those figures alone, Henry Laurens had profited well from the sale of human beings, yet he defended himself by claiming that “not less than twenty thousand pounds sterling would all my negroes produce if sold at public auction to-morrow.”⁹⁰ Laurens also charged that the British used “men-of-war to steal those negroes from the Americans to whom they had sold them.”⁹¹ This was a reference to the British naval ships on patrol off the South Carolina coast that welcomed Black men to serve alongside the British cause. To Laurens, Britain’s enticement of Black people to their cause made them tyrants and thieves.

⁸⁷Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African- Americans and the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). and Nash *Race and Revolution* (Lanham: A Madison House Book, 1990).

⁸⁸Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, in Henry Laurens, *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery*, 19.

⁸⁹“Henry Laurens,” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/chpi/learn/historyculture/henry-laurens.htm>.

⁹⁰Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, in Henry Laurens, *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery*, 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Laurens described his role in slavery as a passive one: “I am not the man who enslaved them; they are indebted to Englishmen for that favour.”⁹² Henry Laurens shifted the blame of slavery to be entirely on the British. In reality, Laurens was trying to justify his participation in the trade itself. Laurens’ notion that owning slaves did not make him culpable for slavery’s existence allowed him a free conscience from the hypocrisy of the institution itself. Nevertheless, he was still directly involved in the trade. Like Thomas Jefferson, Henry Laurens argued that the slave trade had been imposed upon American colonists.⁹³ The crown was used as a scapegoat. This scapegoat allowed Americans to shed some of their guilt for keeping people in bondage. By removing themselves from the equation, Americans could make this issue a part of the tyranny imposed upon them by the British. This understanding of slavery figured prominently in Revolutionary discourse, but, in reality it was more on who would maintain power over the subordinate groups of North America.

Much of this letter detailed Laurens’s thoughts on the future of slavery, his involvement, and his thoughts on his slaves. Henry said that he might consider manumitting those he enslaved: “I am devising a means for manumitting many of them, and for cutting off the entail of slavery. Great powers oppose me-- the laws and customs of my country, my own and the avarice of my countrymen.”⁹⁴ Although he had expressed thoughts on freeing those he had enslaved, he never actually followed through. He told his son that “my negroes there, all to a man, are strongly attached to me,” and he added that “not one of them has attempted to desert.”⁹⁵ Laurens also insisted that slavery was far worse under the British than their American counterparts.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Parkinson, *Common Cause*.

⁹⁴Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 14 August 1776, in Henry Laurens, *A South Carolina Protest Against Slavery*, 20-21.

⁹⁵Ibid.

Henry Laurens again shifted his involvement in slavery onto a different entity. First, he expressed the love of his slaves, then his thoughts of freeing them, and then quickly shifted the focus toward a sense of duty towards his children. Henry said he was reluctant to free his slaves because he felt some responsibility to transfer property and status onto the next generation. “What will my children say,” he asked, “if I deprive them of so much estate?”⁹⁶ It appears that Laurens was coming up with excuses so that he did not have to answer the tough questions surrounding slavery. Not long after, in January 1778, John Laurens asked his father to “cede [me] a number of your able bodied men Slaves, instead of leaving me a fortune,” in the “untried Source” letter.⁹⁷ For the younger Laurens, it seemed that his portion of the estate did not matter as much as the new nation’s potential freedom from Britain. Thus, Henry Laurens’ argument concerning his estate was almost a moot point after John’s 1778 letter. This is a fascinating dichotomy surrounding the question of a legacy and one’s duty to their issue. Henry Laurens had twelve children, although only four reached maturity: John, Martha, Henry, and Mary Eleanor.

The “I abhor slavery” letter highlighted a truly complicated picture of Henry Laurens’ relationship with the institution of slavery. This is crucial because it was sent in 1776, while Laurens was still abroad studying. This letter also called into question the influence of Henry Laurens regarding his son’s ideas about slavery and a Black battalion. The negative tone toward slavery found within this letter illustrated a debate between father and son regarding the institution itself. That is not to say that John Laurens did not develop his ideas on his own, but that he was in conversation, at least with his father, on subjects surrounding slavery. We may never know, but it is clear that he did influence his son’s thoughts by allowing him to question

⁹⁶Ibid.

See also Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), for information on Henry Laurens’ wealth.

⁹⁷John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12:305.

the broader societal issues. John Laurens' response to his father gave a glimpse into his thought process. He first noted that ideas at odds with the perpetuation of slavery might diminish his father's social standing in South Carolina: "the equitable Conduct which you have resolved upon the respect to your Negroes, will undoubtedly meet with great Opposition from interested Men."⁹⁸ Yet, Laurens' letter to Kinloch did not register any worry about how others would react to their thoughts on this controversial topic.

In a letter on 26 October 1776, John confirmed to his father that "I have often conversed upon the subject and I scarcely ever met with a Native of the Southern provinces or the W. Indies, who did not obstinately recur to the most absurd Arguments in support of Slavery."⁹⁹ Although not all of Laurens' correspondence or even his personal commentary on the subject is extant, this response is concrete evidence that he had been involved in open conversations on the topic while in Europe. His commentary on the ever-present uses of excuses is quite learned. Laurens scoffed at those who justified slavery because they wanted to maintain their wealth and asked, "Without Slaves how is it possible for us to be rich?" while he minimized the "danger" that these critics believed inherited in "advancing such Men too suddenly to the Rights of Freemen."¹⁰⁰ This line is very reminiscent of Thomas Day's 'Fragment of an Original Letter, on the Slavery of the Negroes,' in which he also scoffed at the almost pathetic justifications the slaveholders used to continue the practice. In this letter Laurens did not explain how to counteract and overcome these excuses. However, he identified the problem to be solved: "we sunk the African and their descendants below the standard of Humanity."¹⁰¹ Laurens clearly

⁹⁸John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 26 October 1776, in "John Laurens to His Father, Hon. Henry Laurens, 1774-1776," *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 5 No.4 (Oct 1904) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27575078>, 204

⁹⁹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 26 October 1776, in "John Laurens to His Father," 25

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 26.

understood the intrinsic inhumanity surrounding the institution of slavery, and this became a steppingstone in his understanding of abolition and slavery. It is harder to discern if Henry Laurens saw the humanity of those he enslaved as his son John did.

Laurens was pleased that his father spoke of the issues he had already discussed with his extensive network. He pointed to an ongoing conversation and viewed the process as a long one, given the entrenchment of slavery: “by what shades and Degrees they are to be brought to the happy state which you propose for them, is not be determined in a moment.”¹⁰² His correspondence clearly shows this was an issue that plagued him until at least 1778 when he set forth a plan. The young Laurens pointed to debate and education when speaking of this subject: “whatever I can collect from Books, and the Conversation of sensible Men shall be carefully attended to and consider’d.”¹⁰³ Henry’s plan for his son to rely on education was present within this line, which illustrates that he had given significant thought to this subject. One thing missing from John Laurens’ replay was a critique on who was to blame for the institution of slavery. Most of his father’s letter placed significant blame on the British, but we have no such words from John. There is no mention of any of this in his letter. Both men wanted the cycle of enslavement to end, yet neither had any concrete plans to make it happen. It is also significant that the correspondence remained private between the two. No proper plans were made until 1778 when John Laurens used the present issues plaguing the Continental Army to bring his tentative plans to the forefront within his network.

The younger Laurens forwarded the letter he had received from his father to his uncle James Laurens. However, there was no further analysis of the matter. Following this exchange,

¹⁰²Ibid., 25.

¹⁰³Ibid., 26.

John Laurens received word from his father that he was free to return to his “native soil.”¹⁰⁴ This correspondence in 1776 prompts a question; were the Laurens’ views were altruistic in nature? From this moment, John Laurens was thrust into the ever-changing world of military politics and pressures.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 26.

Chapter 3 - “Completing our Continental Regiment”: The Desperation for Independence

On 6 August 1777, John Laurens received a letter from George Washington’s headquarters— Philadelphia’s City Tavern—that brought him great joy. It put him in a position to make a substantial impact on the course of the Revolution. The commander of the Continental Army offered the young man a position as an “Extra Aid” on his staff, asking whether Laurens would consider “the honour to be a member of my Family.”¹ This invitation from Washington brought the young man into the fold of the American military elite. If Laurens accepted a place in his military family, Washington said it would “make me very happy, by your Company and assistance in that Line as an Extra Aid and I shall be glad to receive you in that capacity whenever it is convenient to you.” Washington understood what an asset young Laurens would be; not only did he speak French, but he possessed an excellent education by the day’s standards.² More importantly, he had spent time in London and had been able to watch as the Revolution began to unfold; he was also the son of a member of the Continental Congress, making him even more of an asset.

By 20 July, John Laurens had arrived in Philadelphia with his father and two enslaved men, Shrewsbury and George.³ Washington had undoubtedly been aware that Laurens wished to join the cause because he had been told as much by John Rutledge, the governor of South Carolina. In a letter to Washington, Rutledge had explained that Laurens wished “to render his

¹“From George Washington to John Laurens, 5 August 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0527>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 10, *11 June 1777–18 August 1777*, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 509–510.]

²Sara Bertha Townsend, *An American Soldier: The Life of John Laurens* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards & Broughton Company, 1958), 9.

³Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*: 71.

best Services to America, in a military Capacity and with that View, has lately returned, from a foreign, to his native Country.”⁴ Rutledge sent this letter to be delivered by John Laurens to Washington’s headquarters. After arriving in Philadelphia, Laurens first approached the general through a letter sent on 4 August. Laurens’ letter is now missing, but Washington’s reply suggests some of what Laurens likely said. Washington offered his “sincere thanks” for the “polite expressions contained in your Letter respecting myself.”⁵

By January 1777, John Laurens found himself at a pivotal moment within his short life: his return to the American Colonies. By this moment, Laurens saw himself as loyal to the American cause, and this newfound dedication brought him to the forefront of the very battle for freedom that he had debated in the coffeehouses of London. By returning to America, Laurens became an actor in the hard-fought struggle for liberty, as well as a crucial member of General Washington’s staff and the Continental Army. Laurens had made up his mind to offer his service to the American cause, but this came at a price: “the abandonment” of his wife and their new daughter, who was born in his absence and whom he never got to meet.⁶ The return trip to America was long and arduous, but after six years abroad, he returned home and was reunited with those he had left. John Laurens decided that he would best serve his country through

⁴“To George Washington from John Rutledge, 6 June 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0628>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 9, *28 March 1777–10 June 1777*, ed. Philander D. Chase. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999, pp. 629–630.]

⁵“From George Washington to John Laurens, 5 August 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0527>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 10, *11 June 1777–18 August 1777*, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 509–510.]

⁶John Laurens and Martha Manning Laurens’ daughter, Francis Eleanor, was born while her father was on the voyage back to America. The birth was difficult, and it was not known if the child would survive, although she did. See Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 71.

military service. Alongside his father, he soon set out north. By early August, Laurens had joined General Washington at his staff near Germantown.⁷

Henry Laurens was proud of his son's achievement, but he was also anxious. In a letter to John Lewis Gervais, a good friend who was a member of South Carolina's Committee of Safety, Henry Laurens expressed his concern over John's decision to serve in the army. He asserted that his "heart was too full at parting" from his son to "enquire into particulars" on his son's joining Washington.⁸ Laurens said that he believed John's "Talents and his diligence would have enabled him to have been much more extensively and essentially useful to his Country in a different line."⁹ It is not hard to argue that Henry Laurens believed his son was capable of doing far more than just soldiering, and due to his education could have offered more help, perhaps in a political role, to the American cause. Laurens also took issue that his son would be "the builder of a new family" when he should have focused on his own.¹⁰ The father was likely worried not only because he had been reunited with John for only a short time, but also because he had lost one of his younger sons, James, in an accident not that long before.¹¹ With his eldest son's decision to join the Continental forces, there was no guarantee that he would survive the war and "from this persuasion," he confided to Gervais, "you will know I am not perfectly happy under this event."¹² Henry Laurens was clearly worried and made a similar argument when he wrote to John Rutledge a few days after having sent the letter to Gervais. He

⁷Henry Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 5 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. David R. Chesnutt, George C. Rogers Jr., C. James Taylor, Peggy J. Clark, David Fisher, and Jean W. Mustain, 16 vols. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 11: 428.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 4 October 1775, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 10: 451-454. This letter presents the accident which left James, or Jemmy, dead in his brother's care. Jemmy fell when he tried "jumping across from a footing with the Iron Rails, to my window." This letter illustrated the heartbreak felt by John after this tragedy.

¹²Henry Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 5 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 11: 428.

hinted to Rutledge that some other career would have suited his son better: “I wish he had made a choice for his outset in Life in a Sphere in which he might have been more extensively useful to his country.”¹³ Laurens’ worries were understandable since warfare was dangerous, as would become increasingly apparent due to his son’s recklessness. On the other hand, as Henry wrote to William Manning, John’s father-in-law, his son might ease the burden of the beloved General Washington and find happiness through that service. John’s position gave him the opportunity to “be useful to that good and great Man” and to be “as happy as circumstances in that course of Life will admit of.”¹⁴ As these letters show, the bond between father and son was strong and continued to be important in the story of the Black battalion, because John Laurens gave weight to his father’s opinions when making decisions.

Early in his service on Washington’s staff, John Laurens sent his father a letter detailing his experiences and practical needs: “I have no Prospect yet of Horses or Servant.”¹⁵ The horse was relatively easy to explain because he needed it to perform his duties with the general and other aides. Due to his lavish lifestyle, an underfunded war camp could not afford him the comforts he was used to, which is why he mentioned a servant. However, within a few days, he sent word that “I must be obliged to use your Horses and Servant farther on.”¹⁶ The servant John Laurens spoke of was the enslaved man named Shrewsberry. This letter was one of the first instances in which John Laurens mentioned the typical role enslaved men had in military service: as servants or as pioneers in support roles.¹⁷ Throughout his time with the army, Laurens mentioned “Berry” in a handful of letters. In particular, he mentioned on 21 August an incident

¹³Henry Laurens to John Rutledge, 12 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11: 447.

¹⁴Henry Laurens to William Manning, 16 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11: 459.

¹⁵John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 13 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 11: 453.

¹⁶John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 21 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 11: 466.

¹⁷Frey, *Water From the Rock*, 96, 122,148.

that involved Berry: “Shrewsberry says his Hat was violently taken from him by some Soldiers as he was carrying his horses to Water.”¹⁸ Laurens angrily asked his father to have his uncle send another hat for Shrewsberry and hoped that “he will take better Care of it.”¹⁹ Laurens neglected to consider that Shrewsberry was assaulted for his hat, which is inconsistent with his worry about enslaved people’s treatment. In many of the letters that mention Shrewsberry, Laurens was requesting clothing and other materials for him. Gregory Massey argues that “just as John championed the rights of blacks, yet assured his father that Shrewsberry did not need winter clothing, he also saw no hypocrisy in advocating social leveling.”²⁰ Laurens appears to not consider Shrewsberry in his requests for enslaved soldiers. Despite the fact that the need for able-bodied men, Shrewsberry was not offered the chance to enlist for his freedom.

The young officer’s life changed somewhat dramatically when, on 6 September 1777, Washington’s General orders officially appointed him as an “Extra-Aide-du Camp to the Commander in Chief,” and he was to “be regarded in the same light” as the other aides.²¹ As an extra aide to the general, Laurens found himself inspecting the army with the general and itching for something to happen militarily.²² The excitement he had been hoping for came when Laurens participated in the Battle of Brandywine, fought on 11 September 1777, from which the Americans retreated in fear of being surrounded and failed to prevent the British from seizing and occupying Philadelphia. From this moment on, Laurens became known for his reckless and rash behavior in battle. He was often in the thick of the fighting and was wounded at almost

¹⁸John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 21 August 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 11: 466.

¹⁹Ibid..

²⁰Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 101.

²¹“General Orders, 6 September 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0158>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 11, *19 August 1777–25 October 1777*, ed. Philander D. Chase and Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 157–158.]

²²Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 74.

every battle in which he fought. Fascinatingly, the Marquis de Lafayette put it this way to Henry Laurens: “it was not his fault that he was not killed or wounded he did everything that was necessary to procure one or t’other.”²³ Within weeks, the young soldier faced battle yet again at Germantown, an engagement with the British during the Philadelphia campaign, resulting in a British victory. This time, Laurens found himself wounded “by a Musket Ball, which went through the fleshy Part of his right Shoulder,” again due to his reckless nature.²⁴ After he heard the news of events at Germantown, Henry Laurens sent a letter to his son in which he expressed pride: “No Man can doubt your bravery.”²⁵ The elder Laurens admitted that he had initially feared the loss of his eldest son, but how when he received word of John’s survival, he had shed a “Tear,” and the news “brought such a fit of trembling upon my whole.”²⁶ Henry Laurens’ fears may have been because the Americans experienced significant losses at Germantown, much like Brandywine, which set a gloomy tone in these letters.

Although Henry Laurens praised his son in the letter he sent to him; he told a far different story to his South Carolinian friend John Lewis Gervais. He wrote of his disappointment at how John had shirked family responsibilities. “I still feel a resentment against him,” Henry wrote, for the “Robberies he has committed, he has taken a husband and Father from his young family, a Guardian from his Brother and Sister, and a Son and friend from a dependent Father.”²⁷ This

²³Henry Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 8 October 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11: 545

²⁴Anonymous Letter, 30 October 1777, *South-Carolina and American General Gazette*, in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 76. ; An anonymous letter written to George Clinton, the Governor of New York, detailed the young officer’s experience at the battle: “Our Friend Laurens behaved in a very Spirited manner during the Engagement and has established his Reputation for intrepidity. He received a wound by musket ball which went through the fleshy part of his right shoulder, but had not touched the bone; this he received in the beginning of the action, but it did not in the least abate his ardour.” See Anonymous to George Clinton, October 5, 1777, in *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795, 1801-1804, 3 vols.* (New York and Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., State Printers, 1900), II: 372-373.

²⁵Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 8 October 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11: 549.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 548.

²⁷Henry Laurens to John Lewis Gervais, 8 October 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11: 547.

rebuke from Henry Laurens showcases the dynamic between father and son during this period, possibly due to him not having as much control over his son's life. John Laurens got married and joined the army without consulting his father, which may have slightly strained their relationship. That Henry Laurens used such a strong word, "Robberies," highlights the sense that the father suspected his son had a different set of values, and it shows that the familial network could be adversely affected by John's decisions. During this period, John Laurens' wife Martha wrote to both John and Henry, about gaining passage to America, but she did not receive their support.²⁸ In the only surviving letter that has been found, between John and his wife, he told Martha—whom he called his "dear girl" – that she could not come to America because it was too dangerous: "I can never consent my dearest love, that you should expose yourself to all the dangers which now attend a Sea Voyage in a common Vessel and without guardianship."²⁹ From this letter, it appears that John Laurens cared for his wife, in some respects, but his focus shifted to concentrate on the American cause rather than on his family. Henry Laurens' harsh rebuke and resentment may be a product of his thoughts on fatherhood and being a good husband, as he was viewed himself as having strength in those roles.³⁰ In a letter dated 10 October, Henry Laurens did not present these thoughts but reminded his son to "take care of your self. I mean a little more care of your self."³¹

Following the battle, on 6 October, Laurens' position again changed when he was appointed as a full "Aid-de Camp" to the commander in chief and was to be "respected and

²⁸Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 78.

²⁹John Laurens to Martha Manning Laurens, 9 November 1777, London Public Record Office, HCA 32/392 in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 79.

³⁰South Carolina's elite society placed an emphasis on the importance of patriarchalism. This makes Laurens' decisions all the more interesting

³¹Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 10 October 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 11:550.

obeyed as such.”³² Within one month from his preliminary appointment, John Laurens proved himself a worthy member of Washington’s family. George Washington’s military “family” referred to some thirty-two men, his aides-de-camp, including the Marquis de Lafayette, a young French nobleman fighting with the Americans, and Alexander Hamilton, a Caribbean immigrant who became Treasury Secretary after the war.³³ The primary job of the aides was to help Washington with the war effort. Most of their work centered on keeping up with the military correspondence of the day, gathering intelligence, and conducting some diplomatic missions.³⁴ During their time as Washington’s staff, Laurens, Lafayette, and Hamilton became close friends because they possessed strong opinions, especially regarding the institution of slavery. Richard Godbeer argues that this group of “aides also conceived of themselves in familial terms, bound to each other by fraternal love and a collective devotion to the patriot cause, the latter embodied in their military father.”³⁵ This close cadre joined Washington in 1777, with Laurens and the Marquis joining in the same week in September.³⁶

Washington’s military family forged a strong camaraderie in the face of war. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Laurens formed strong friendships with other young men, especially Kinloch, Day, and Bicknell, while in Europe. In addition, while in Washington’s service, Laurens formed a strong bond with Alexander Hamilton, who was just as idealistic.

³²“General Orders, 6 October 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0425>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 11, *19 August 1777–25 October 1777*, ed. Philander D. Chase and Edward G. Lengel. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, p. 404.]

³³Gerald Edward Kahler, “*Gentlemen of the Family: General George Washington's Aides-De Camp and Military Secretaries*,” M.A. thesis, (University of Richmond, 1997), 1.

³⁴Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 80.

³⁵Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 120.

³⁶Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 73.

Laurens leaned heavily on Hamilton after proposing his plans to form a Black battalion, and their letters are critical in deciphering Laurens' frustration with its eventual failure.

On the first day of November, Henry Laurens was elected President of the Continental Congress, with a “unanimous vote, except for his own.”³⁷ John's place with Washington's staff proved vital for the new president, as he kept his father up to date on the happenings within the Continental Army.³⁸ This was increasingly important because decisions were being made on what to do over the winter of 1777-1778. Laurens expressed his apprehension to his father “Winter Campaigns it is said are ruinous to the best appointed and best disciplined Armies.” However, at this point, the Continental Army was neither.³⁹ In John Laurens' mind, this break from campaigning would allow the soldiers “an opportunity of being disciplined and instructed,” which was badly needed by the time the army settled in camp at Valley Forge on 19 December.⁴⁰

The tone of John Laurens' letters, once at Valley Forge, reflected the disheartened mood that pervaded the Continental forces. In writing to his father, John showed a sense of desperation: “the want for provisions I could weep tears of blood when I say it_ the want of provisions render'd it impossible for us to march.”⁴¹ Never one to miss the opportunity to use poetic language, Laurens described the men before him, enlistees in the Continental Army, as “the shivering, half naked defenders of liberty.”⁴² It was in this moment, that the young officer read –during the course of his duties—a letter by Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum, of

³⁷United States. et al., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 vols. (Washington: U.S. Govt. print off., 1904-37), //catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006771172. 9: 854.

³⁸For example, see John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 5 November 1777, *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 12,:25.

³⁹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 3 December 1777, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 12: 130.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 12:130; and George Washington to Henry Laurens, 22 December 1777, in *Ibid.*, 12: , 177.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 12: 190.

⁴²John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 10 December 1777, in *Ibid.*, 12: 139.

Rhode Island – one that inspired him and helped set him on course to propose the Continental Black battalion.

As reflected in this short timeline of John Laurens’ early service with the Continental Army, we see that he kept up a very regular correspondence, including ten letters that mention the formulation of his plan for a Black battalion, with his “dear” father.⁴³ These letters reflected the strong bond that Henry and John Laurens shared, as they explored topics ranging from military plans, congressional reports, to philosophical debates on the institution of slavery, and the struggles that both were experiencing during their time apart. The Laurens men influenced one another, and it is clear that despite the tensions and resentments between them, each valued the opinion of the other.

John Laurens wrote primarily to his father, Hamilton, and Washington regarding this issue. However, the most critical set of letters on John Laurens’ attempt to create a Black battalion were sent to his father in the early months of 1778. The first, which I have dubbed the “untried Source” letter, was sent in January and addressed the subject during a particularly bleak moment for the Continental Army. Due to his position within Washington’s inner staff, Laurens understood that the army was in dire straits and needed more soldiers. This battalion “would reinforce the Defenders of Liberty with a number of gallant Soldiers.”⁴⁴ It is unclear if John Laurens knew at this point that the war was heading for the South. In this letter, however, he made the startling claim that enslaved men, because they “have the habit of subordination almost indelibly impress’d on them, would have one very essential qualification of Soldiers.”⁴⁵ Those

⁴³The correspondence between father and son tended to follow a similar pattern, with John using similar greetings.

⁴⁴John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 305.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*; See John Resch, *War and Society in the American Revolution: Mobilization and Home Fronts* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), for literature on militia versus Continental Army service.

troops would be able to tolerate what many white men regarded as the indignity of following orders, being disciplined, and having to serve for extended periods far from home.

In one sense, Laurens was asserting that a servile nature would make enslaved men good soldiers. Yet at the same time he described his project in loftier terms, as being intended to “advance those who are unjustly deprived of the Rights of Mankind” by finding a way to grant those men their freedom.⁴⁶ At the first reading of the letter, it appears that Laurens was concerned about the rights of those enslaved men, but, on closer inspection, it was mainly about the manpower shortage felt by the army. Tactically, Laurens wrote this letter to make the idea of a battalion of enslaved men slightly more palatable to the “gentlemen” who saw standing armies as hirelings. It was due to this idea that led to many of the issues surrounding filling the ranks, as traditionally, people preferred militia service.⁴⁷ Laurens emphasized the enslaved men’s servile nature as a way to make this idea successful.

Henry Laurens responded to his son’s first letter eight days later, on 22 January, and its tone further illustrates the relationship between the two. In this letter, Henry did not belittle his son’s ideas but instead suggested that perhaps “more time will be required for me to consider the propriety of your scheme for raising a black Regiment.”⁴⁸ The politician cautioned his son that his request would appear as “nothing reasonable” until he could “mature such a Plan” through careful consideration and caution.⁴⁹ Henry Laurens hoped that his son would see this plan as a

⁴⁶John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 14 January 1778, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 305.

⁴⁷Colonel L.W.V. Kennon, “Standing Armies,” *Journal of The Military Service Institution of the United States* 50, no. CLXXVIL (1912): 305- 317; and James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). During the eighteenth century, serving in a “standing” army was seen as taking away one’s personal autonomy, and subjecting a man to harsh discipline – almost like being in servitude. For this reason, men felt more comfortable fighting with militias. Military service was also equated with citizenship, which would call into question whether Black men fighting for the army would be granted citizenship following their active participation in military service.

⁴⁸Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 22 January 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*. 12: 328.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

“very serious and important affair which shall have every proper degree of respect paid to it.”⁵⁰

The elder Laurens insisted that this could not be presented as just a fleeting idea, but careful forethought and planning must go into the mechanics of such a scheme before presenting it to Washington or Congress.

On 28 February, Henry Laurens again wrote to his son on the topic of the Black battalion, further underscoring how difficult it would be to popularize such a plan, given John’s failure to provide concrete plans. He explained that he had been “cautious of speaking openly of the project, but hitherto I have not heard one person approbate the Idea from the hints which I dropped in order to gain opinion.”⁵¹ Laurens, ever the politician, wanted his son to understand that the ground must be better prepared if the government were going to be receptive to the plan. He also hesitated in discussing John’s plans too widely, out of fears that it might not resonate. He explained that a plan to raise and maintain a Black battalion would be better served if his son were able to find “twenty more Men to share the reproach of Quixotism and to carry it into respectable execution.”⁵² Broader support was needed, the elder Laurens thought, to make this plan viable enough even for discussion through official channels.

It was Henry Laurens, more than John, who gave some thought as to how enslaved people themselves might react to the call to raise a Black battalion. He asked whether John had considered the “great proportion of Women and Children” who would be affected by forming a battalion such as this. This concern was in harmony with Henry Laurens’ belief that families sold into the slave trade should not be separated. Secondly, Laurens asked his son on whether the enslaved would be resentful of the harshness of army life in a time of war. He viewed slavery as

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 28 January 1778, in *Ibid.*, 12:367.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 12: 368.

a “comfortable” experience compared with the service in the army because enslaved men would be “taken from their Wives and Children and their little Plantations to the Field of Battle where Loss of Life and Loss of Limbs must be expected by every one every day.”⁵³ This letter is fascinating because through it we can intuit that Henry Laurens understood the concerns that enslaved men might have—that they valued their lives, families and small possessions—and would have a difficult time leaving all those things behind, especially families needing their protection.⁵⁴ While John Laurens had soaring hopes for military service leading to freedom for Blacks, his father pointed out that he may not have fully ascertained the willingness of those he sought to help. Henry Laurens, ever the pragmatist, also caused his son to consult with General Washington about the tactical and strategic desirability of raising a Black battalion.

John Laurens continued writing to his father, hoping to persuade him to aid in the cause of creating a Black unit. In the next volley of letters, dated February 1778, the young officer answered his father’s doubts about this idea, asserting that the execution of his plan by “no means appeared insurmountable.”⁵⁵ Laurens directly addressed his father’s doubts as to whether the enslaved knew enough to want “the untasted Sweets of Liberty,” and he asked directly, “do you think they are so perfectly molded in their State as to be insensible that better exists?”⁵⁶ This is possibly steeped in the Enlightenment logic to which he had been exposed, or in the fact that enslaved persons in some areas had been petitioning for their freedom since the beginning of the conflict. John Laurens asserted that many plantation owners in the lower south might not have considered the aspirations of those enslaved. He further demonstrated self-awareness in this line of reasoning: “can their Self-Love be totally annihilated as not frequently to induce ardent wishes

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴See Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, esp. in chapters 2, 8, and 9.

⁵⁵John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 12: 391.

⁵⁶Ibid.

for change.”⁵⁷ Finally, John Laurens presented that those who enslave may not have been well versed enough nor care enough to see that the enslaved wished for freedom.⁵⁸

John Laurens addressed the question of whether his thinking had been too sentimental, but thought it had not been so. He said instead that he was “tempted to believe that this trampled people have so much human left in them, as to be capable of aspiring to the right of men by noble exertions.”⁵⁹ John Laurens asserted that enslaved men were not all that different from himself and other free men because they were capable of just as much. This harkens back to the South Carolina General Assembly’s Acts, which allowed under the slave code for colony-sponsored emancipation in certain circumstances. As Laurens argued in his “untried Source” letter, this regiment would benefit all those involved. Laurens argued that this arrangement would “rescue” the enslaved men “from a State of perpetual humiliation” and would advance them in their new state of freedom.⁶⁰ Laurens promised much in this letter: “those who fall in battle will not lose much_ those who survive will obtain their reward.”⁶¹ In this letter, John Laurens showed no recognition of enslaved men’s concerns, such as their families, homes, and the small number of possessions. Laurens did not consider all that an enslaved person might have had to sacrifice even if he wanted freedom above all else and was willing to fight for the American cause in order to obtain it.⁶²

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸ This idea can be found in John Locke, *Two Treaties on Civil Government* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1887).

⁵⁹ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 391. This idea connects well to “Sam’s Doctrine” – referring to Samuel Adams-- as found in Francois Furstenberg’s work, which argues that eighteenth-century people saw freedom as a form of autonomy for which one was required to struggle and fight. See Furstenberg, “Beyond Freedom and Slavery.”

⁶⁰ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12:391.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶² Following Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, it appeared to many enslaved people that the British could offer far more than the Americans. It does not appear that Laurens considered this to the extent that Washington did.; For further reading on enslaved people’s lives during the war, see: Frey, *Water From the Rock*; and Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*.

John Laurens said unequivocally that his “plan is to give freedom to the Negroes and gain Soldiers to the States.”⁶³ Laurens told his father that this was not just some youthful enthusiasm but a real plan intended to accomplish practical good:

upon the whole my dearest friend and father, I hope that my plan for serving my country and the oppressed Negro-race will not appear to you the Chimara of a young mind deceived by false appearance of moral beauty_ but a laudable sacrifice of private Interest in Justice and the Public good.⁶⁴

This line illustrates John Laurens envisaging something far greater — he was trying to make a difference: a country without slavery. His line on “sacrifice” most likely referred to the way his reputation might suffer if he opened himself to public debate and even, perhaps, if he brought the plan to fruition.

Regarding Henry Laurens’ line of questioning concerning the role of women and children, John conceded that “I do not know whether I am right for I speak from impulse and have not reasoned upon the matter.”⁶⁵ This appeared within character for the young man. He had not himself considered his own family in matters having to do with this war; his public service came first. Furthermore, his personal relationships appear not to have mattered as much as his military service, and those relationships took a subsidiary role. In particular, he wrote about the bounds he had set in “serving my Country in the Military Line_ I answer glorious Death, or the Triumph of the Cause in which I am engaged.”⁶⁶ Laurens believed that the glory of the cause

⁶³John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens* 12: 392.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 12: 391-392.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 12:392.

⁶⁶John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 23 January 1778, in *Ibid.*,12:329.

should be first, and he wanted his battalion to do the same, if it came to fruition, although those enslaved men had far fewer advantages than he.

Laurens' fundamental argument in the letter was that enslaved men were capable of performing the task of being a soldier and that this opportunity would take them out of the "humiliations" of slavery. Within this letter, Laurens set out a detailed plan for the battalion as being "A well chosen body of 5,000 black men, properly officer'd" who would "act as light troops, in addition to our present establishment," a manpower boost that "might give us decisive success in the next campaign."⁶⁷ In this letter, Laurens described for the first time how he imagined the battalion would function within the army. Significantly, he indicated that his battalion would "act as light troops," which shows that Laurens viewed them as important allies within the fight. Light troops were combat infantry troops. Enslaved men were often used within the army as servants to officers, so the fact that his plan had the battalion actually serving in combat as troops was significant. Laurens also suggested that as of 2 February Washington's thoughts on the plan were cautiously favorable: "[H]e is convinced that the numerous tribes of blacks in the Southern parts of the Continent offer a resource to us that should not be neglected_ with respect to my particular Plan, he only objects to it with the arguments of Pity, for a man who would be less rich than he."⁶⁸ Washington's estimation of the plan was two-fold in that he saw the idea might be militarily viable but, at the same time, that it must be approached carefully because it could impoverish those who owned enslaved peoples. This letter is a concrete look into John Laurens' thoughts on the Black battalion. It illustrated that some thought had been put into the plan he sent his father. The following day, Laurens wrote again to his father of Colonel

⁶⁷John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *Ibid.*, 12:392.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

François Louis Teissendre de Fleury, a French volunteer in the American Army. John Laurens had hoped the Frenchman would be a “Coadjutor in raising the famous black battalion,” but he had been “called to another employment.”⁶⁹

On 6 February, Henry Laurens sent another letter to his son, harshly rebuking him for his plans for the Black battalion. First, he asserted that his son had “filled six Pages on the Negro scheme without approaching a Plan & Estimate,” adding that “your whole is enveloped in the Cloud of the project.”⁷⁰ It is not hard to imagine that this would have been devastating for the young man because, above all else, he had wanted his father’s approval. Second, the politician asserted: “I will undertake to say there is not a Man in America of your opinion.”⁷¹ This was not true; other men held that enslaved people could be an important asset to the war effort if allowed to fight, and men of this opinion included the British and other members of Washington’s staff besides Laurens, including Washington and Hamilton, who saw its pragmatism.

Henry Laurens further questioned his son concerning the stakes for himself in this scheme, “for you have either property in them, or you have not_ admitting the latter which you seem to acknowledge, upon what ground of justice will you insist upon their inlisting for Soldiers, as the condition of their infranchisement._ if they are free_ tell them so_ set them at full liberty.”⁷² This argument addressed inconsistencies as to how the battalion would be recruited. Would John Laurens, under this logic, have the “right” to grant these men their freedom, even if they were serving the army? The answer was that Laurens would not be able to grant those men their freedom. Henry asserted that despite all his contrary arguments that “all this by no mean intimates that I am an Advocate for Slavery_ you know I am not, therefore it is unnecessary to

⁶⁹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 3 February 1778, *Ibid.*, 12: 398.

⁷⁰John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 6 February 1778, *Ibid.*,12:412.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*Ibid.*

attempt a vindication.”⁷³ Even though he was a harsh critique of his son’s plans, Henry Laurens wanted him to know that he still did not support the institution. This letter further solidified Henry Laurens’ argument in 1776 on his aversion toward slavery.

Henry Laurens’ harshest rebuke came when he argued that if John wanted to add a regiment to the Continental Army, he should go to South Carolina and work on the recruitment of white soldiers: “go to Carolina and I’ll warrant you will soon get one, I Will venture to say, sooner than any other Man of my acquaintance_ you will have many advantages_ in raising a Regiment of White Men.”⁷⁴ Laurens here revealed his preference for a white soldiery over his son’s grandiose ideas for a Black battalion, not to mention that this course of action would be easier. The father ended his scathing letter: “Your own good sense will direct you to proceed warily in opposing the opinions of whole Nations_ lest without effecting any good, you become a bye word, & be so transmitted, to Your Children’s Children.”⁷⁵ Significantly, this part of the letter directed his son to further give up on the Black battalion because his association with such a plan, which Henry considered vastly out of step with the times, would bring great embarrassment down upon the family for generations to come. South Carolina, Henry knew, was not ready to grant freedom on terms that implied citizenship in the new nation.

When he responded to his father on 9 February, John Laurens decided not to address his father’s recent letter. Instead, he wrote to speak about his plans for the projected Black battalion’s uniforms, as well as his own: “[I]f you should give me leave to execute my black project, my uniform will be a white field, (faced with red)_ a Color which is easiest kept clean and will form a good Contrast with the Complexion of the Soldier.”⁷⁶ Laurens’ choice of uniform

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., 12:413.

⁷⁵Ibid., 12: 413.

⁷⁶John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 9 February 1778, in Ibid.,12:430.

differed dramatically from the simple smock that Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment wore, which had "this inscription on their breasts: 'Liberty to Slaves.'" ⁷⁷ This appeared to be in response to his father's earlier claim that no one saw enslaved men as troops. The style of uniform he preferred was similar to that of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. His choices for the uniform supported Laurens' earlier claim that the soldiers who participated in this regiment would be combat troops.

John Laurens sent another letter to his father in February, but this letter's tone was far different from all the previous ones. This letter showcased the limits to Laurens' plan if he did not have his father's full support; he insisted that "the presumption which would lead me to pursue my project after what you have said upon it, would be unpardonable." ⁷⁸ The young officer cared deeply for what his father had to say about this plan, and he did not wish to upset him. It was clear that his father's last letter weighed heavily on him: "praying your forgiveness therefore my dear Friend for the trouble which I have given you on this excentric Scheme I renounce it as a thing which cannot be sanctified by your approbation." ⁷⁹ This letter demonstrates his desire for approval, and that, without it, he would let the project go. To end the discussion, he asserted that this plan for a Black battalion was, in his mind, just another way to serve his country and that he would be satisfied with any service he could give:

I declare upon my honor that I would not have desired any other than my present Rank, and that I would even have taken the Title of Captain of an independent Corps_

⁷⁷*The Virginia Gazette*, December 2, 1775, 3.

⁷⁸ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 15 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12:446.

⁷⁹*Ibid.* .

for the pleasure of serving my Country so usefully as I fondly hoped I should have been able to do, had my Scheme been carried into execution.⁸⁰

From this letter, it can be posited that John Laurens, though passionate about his ideas of working toward liberty for all, was cognizant of his father's feelings and did not want to put the family in jeopardy or bring embarrassment upon them. Through Henry had worried about whether John was sufficiently dedicated to family, this letter would seem to suggest that family loyalty weighed heavy on him.

In 1778, in his final letter about the Black battalion, John Laurens professed “that nothing would tempt me to quit my present Station, but a prospect of being more useful in another.”⁸¹ Like many other of his generation, Laurens believed that one had to lead troops in order to fulfill his obligations to his country. He admitted that he wished to gain fame like many from elite families of the day, in his commanding of troops.⁸² John Laurens poignantly wrote of the troops with whom he served, saying that he “would cherish those dear ragged Continentals, whose patience will be the admiration of future ages” and would “glory in bleeding with them.”⁸³ Laurens truly cared about the troops who fought for American independence, just as he cared to bring freedom to those who were enslaved. This letter was in direct response to Henry Laurens' letter from 1 March, in which he hastened his son to remember the family's reputation and to realize that anything of this “magnitude may originate with an Individual but must be extended after mature deliberation by the Collective Wisdom of the States.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 9 March 1778, in Ibid., 12:532.

⁸²On the concept of “fame” and its allure for the founding generation, see Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974).

⁸³John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 15 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 12: 446.

⁸⁴Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 1 March 1778, in Ibid., 12: 494.

An interesting element in the letters between John and Henry Laurens is the way in which the letters were signed—and they were frequent. From the private papers of Henry Laurens, it can be seen that John sent his father letters almost every day, which shows the need to have a connection with his blood-related family as well as his military family. John Laurens signed his letters in ways showing special respect. He often described himself to his father as “your most dutiful,” “your most affectionate,” or “your.”⁸⁵ The way in which Henry Laurens signed his letters is telling because, in the beginning, they were all signed “adieu” but as the war progressed, he began to refer to his desire for God’s protection of his son. Henry was probably conscious that the war was becoming more dangerous, with causality rates rising, something he would have been aware of as president of the Continental Congress.

These ten letters – between John and Henry Laurens—concerning the plans for a Black battalion are poignant, as they illustrate the thoughts of an idealistic young man. The younger Laurens had dreams of making a difference to those who were enslaved and believed that this would come through an opportunity to fight and earn that freedom, while within the elder Laurens’ letters, there appeared to be more pragmatism based on the southern white majority’s thoughts. These letters are vital in understanding John Laurens’ plans and beg questions of his loyalty to his father rather than his commander-in-chief. John Laurens posed the questions first to his father rather than the military officer who potentially could have had a direct role in making it happen. Laurens desperately wanted the support of those within his network.

Following the intense debate concerning the plan to form a Black battalion, Laurens was able to see the Black soldiers of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment in action. During the Rhode

⁸⁵See John and Henry Laurens’ correspondence for 1778 in the twelfth volume of *The Papers of Henry Laurens*.

Island Campaign, in the summer of 1778, the 1st Rhode Island was the one untested unit.⁸⁶ This battle was the first attempt in which the French and American forces cooperated together. During the Battle of Rhode Island, Laurens would have been aware of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, especially after having had to fall back with the light troops he commanded into the same area as the Black soldiers.⁸⁷ Laurens was praised for his conduct during battle. Nathanael Greene told Washington that “ his command of regular Troops was small, but he did every thing possible to be done, by their numbers.”⁸⁸ For many of the men in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, this battle was one in which they fought next to their former enslavers to defend their newfound liberty. Following this, General John Sullivan, who led the Continental troops at the battle, expressed the widespread approval of the Black troops’ service: “the Commander-in-Chief thinks that (black) regiment will be entitled to a proper share of the Honors of that day.”⁸⁹ The successes of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment during the Newport Campaign demonstrated what John Laurens had argued in his correspondence with his father – that free Black men, formerly enslaved, fought bravely and could aid the American cause. This came after John Laurens had effectively given up his plan in March, but this moment led him to argue again for the Continental Black battalion.

During his service with the Continental Army, the Black battalion remained a viable option, before the southern legislatures ultimately struck it down. This is the moment in which John Laurens’ military and his blood family worked to make strides toward creating the battalion. John Laurens had spoken to General Washington as early as February 1778 about his plans for an enslaved battalion. Like Laurens, Washington viewed the use of enslaved peoples as

⁸⁶Paul F. Dearden *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance* (Riverside: The Rhode Island Publications Society, 1980), 23-4.

⁸⁷Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 120.

⁸⁸George Washington to Laurens, 4 September, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 14: 265.

⁸⁹Charles Warren Lippitt, *The Battle of Rhode Island*, (Newport: Mercury Publishing House, 1915), 11.

beneficial to the Continental Army when they needed these resources, but it had to be handled delicately.⁹⁰

This can be juxtaposed to the response that Henry Laurens received a year later in which Washington had an air of reluctance about bringing enslaved men into the army. Nevertheless, by March 1779, due to constraints on the Continental forces and the rapid British movement towards the South, Henry Laurens approached Washington with a form of John's earlier plan:

Our affairs in the Southern department [are] in more favorable light, than we had viewed them in a few days ago; nevertheless, the Country is greatly distressed, and will be more so, unless further reinforcements are sent to its relief. had we arms for 3000 such black Men, as I could select in Carolina I should have no doubt of success in driving the British out of Georgia and subduing East Florida before the end of July.⁹¹

This letter was reminiscent of what John Laurens had been writing in January 1778. It anticipated a Black battalion to be used in an official capacity to further the war aims and expel the British from the lower south. Three thousand troops, rather than the five thousand as proposed by John, would supplement the currently insufficient manpower faced by the American army. Henry Laurens also shifted the argument tactically to driving the British out of the

⁹⁰For Washington's overwhelmingly cautious attitude as far as slavery was concerned after the Revolution see Francois Furstenberg, "Atlantic Slavery, Atlantic Freedom: George Washington, Slavery and Transatlantic Abolitionist Networks," *William and Mary Quarterly* 68, No. 2 (April 2011), 247-286.

⁹¹"To George Washington from Henry Laurens, 16 March 1779," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-19-02-0499>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 19, *15 January–7 April 1779*, ed. Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 503–505.]

southern States, where they found a stronghold. During this period, Washington was under intense pressure to win the war. Henry Laurens' endorsement of the plan came when John wrote to his father about the dangers South Carolina faced, with Charleston about to fall: "Dont you think it would be saving time, to obtain a Recommendation from Congress to the State of So Carolina to raise black Troops for her defense?"⁹²

Following Henry Laurens' seeming endorsement of his son's plan, Washington wrote back to Henry voicing his hesitancy. First, Washington argued that "the policy for our arming Slaves is, in my opinion, a moot point, unless the enemy set the example."⁹³ Here it can be inferred that Washington was hesitant to enlist Black men unless the British did so first, particularly with the fighting having moved south. This is a telling argument, because the British had been debating the merits of using enslaved men in battle. But with Dunmore's Proclamation of 1775 in Virginia, Black troops had only been used within their role as a floating army rather than combat troops. It also followed when Henry Clinton, a commander of the British Army, issued his "Philipsburg Proclamation," focused on offering freedom to the run-away human property of American patriots.⁹⁴ The British's use of enslaved people had been, for the most part, in subsidiary roles and not in combat.

Washington further argued what could happen if these battalions were be formed: "I have not the smallest doubt (if the war should ever be prosecuted) of their following us in it, and justifying the measure upon our own ground; the upshot then must be, who can arm the fastest,

⁹²John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 6 March 1779, in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 131.

⁹³"From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 20 March 1779," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-19-02-0533>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 19, *15 January–7 April 1779*, ed. Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 542–543.]

⁹⁴Laurens Duval, "Mastering Charleston: Property and Patriarchy in British-Occupied Charleston, 1780-82," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 75 No. 4 (October 2018), 596.

and where are our Arms?”⁹⁵ Clearly, Washington was worried that by arming enslaved men within the war, an “arms race” would ensue between the two warring nations and it was not guaranteed that the Continental Army could promise more. Washington was being highly pragmatic in that he did not want to provoke the British into expanding their promises to enslaved people. If the American army were to use enslaved men as light infantry, it would be seen as a provocation by the British, and Washington could imagine sore defeat if that were the case. Politically, he had seen how policies such as Lord Dunmore’s had alienated the American public and perhaps realized that American’s use of similar tactics might anger their own supporters or neutrals into active support of the British, while not drawing enough of the enslaved people to be worthwhile. We know that Washington struggled with the persistence of slavery after the Revolution in a highly measured manner that spoke more to his idea of the United State’s honor. This particular moment, however, was not conducive to him thinking in philosophical terms.⁹⁶

Washington also made an argument regarding enslaved men’s thoughts. “I am not clear,” he said, “that a discrimination will not render Slavery more irksome to those who remain in it,” so that “a comparison in this case will be productive of much discontent in those who are held in servitude.”⁹⁷ Washington, who would give much thought to slavery after the war, admitted that “this is a subject that has never employed much of my thoughts,” which served in a way as a

⁹⁵From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 20 March 1779,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-19-02-0533>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 19, *15 January–7 April 1779*, ed. Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 542–543.]

⁹⁶See Furstenberg, “Atlantic Freedom, Atlantic Slavery;” and Philip D. Morgan, “To Get Quit of Negroes,’: George Washington and Slavery” *Journal of American Studies* 39 (2005).

⁹⁷From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 20 March 1779,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-19-02-0533>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 19, *15 January–7 April 1779*, ed. Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 542–543.]

dismissal of the plan.⁹⁸ Washington did not believe that this should be the tactical gamble taken by the Continental forces and that tactics far outweighed the social engineering of society.

Following this exchange, on 29 March 1779, the Continental Congress recommended that the southern states of South Carolina and Georgia recruit and enlist “three thousand able bodied negroes” to fight in the Continental Army, but only if “they shall think the same expedient.”⁹⁹ The Congress set forth a plan for the battalion and stated that they should be “formed into separate corps as battalions, according to the arrangements adopted for the main army, to be commanded by white commissioned and non-commissioned officers.”¹⁰⁰ This decision by the Continental Congress effectively allowed for Laurens’ plan to go into action in the southern States. The report from Congress also asserted “that every negro who shall well and faithfully serve as a soldier to the end of the present war, and shall then return his arms, be emancipated and receive the sum of fifty dollars.”¹⁰¹ This set out how emancipation should be handled for the men who fought to aid the American cause. At the same time, Congress held that owners would be compensated up to one thousand dollars, for their lost property.¹⁰² This same report promoted John Laurens to the rank of lieutenant colonel: “Whereas John Laurens, Esq. who has heretofore acted aid de camp to the Commander in Chief, is desirous of repairing to South Carolina, with a design to assist in defense of the southern states: Resolved, That a commission of lieutenant colonel be granted to the said John Laurens, Esq. his rank to commence.”¹⁰³ This promotion

⁹⁸From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 20 March 1779,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-19-02-0533>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 19, *15 January–7 April 1779*, ed. Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 542–543.]

⁹⁹*Journals of the Continental Congress* 9: 386-388.

¹⁰⁰*Journals of the Continental Congress* 9: 386-388.

¹⁰¹*Journals of the Continental Congress* 9:386-388.

¹⁰²Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 83.

¹⁰³*Journals of the Continental Congress*, 386-388.

allowed for John Laurens to lead troops, and could not have been arranged without the help of George Washington. John Laurens, reckless as always, was glad to take on the responsibility for which he had long been angling for.

This decision by the Continental Congress was important in the timeline for trying to bring enslaved men into the Continental Army as soldiers. Laurens' appointment gave him new career opportunities. Soon he joined the Southern Campaign, and he later served as a minister to France, finally being present at the Yorktown victory after his return. Congress' action had far greater implications for the institution of slavery itself. Following the decision William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a representative of New Hampshire, wrote that, if the plan was brought to fruition "it will produce the Emancipation of a number of those wretches and lay the foundation for the Abolition of Slavery in America."¹⁰⁴

During his time with the army, Laurens forged a close friendship with Alexander Hamilton, the future treasury secretary. As members of the "family," they were in close contact and wrote many letters in which they discussed the "plan" that Laurens so desperately wished to put into action. Other than his father, it appeared that Hamilton and Washington were the only ones whom he trusted to speak of it. Hamilton believed in his friend's plan. Prior to Congress' decision to endorse the plan, he wrote to John Jay, then serving as President of the Continental Congress: "[T]his is to raise two three or four battalions of negroes; with the assistance of the government of the state, by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess."¹⁰⁵ Hamilton asserted to Jay that he believed "the negroes will make very excellent

¹⁰⁴William Whipple to Josiah Barlett, 27 April 1779, in Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Penguin: 2005), 328

¹⁰⁵"From Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, [14 March 1779]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0051>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 17–19.]

soldiers, with proper management.”¹⁰⁶ This letter also served as a way to promote Laurens as the leader of this battalion: “he has the zeal, intelligence, enterprise, and every other qualification requisite to succeed in such an undertaking.”¹⁰⁷ This letter showcased Hamilton’s confidence in his friend and his hope that Congress would act due to the very real British threat.

It is unknown whether Hamilton’s letter had any effect on the decisions made by Congress, but it reveals the confidence Hamilton had in Laurens’ military plans. Following the Continental Congress’s decision in 1779, Hamilton wrote to Laurens congratulating him on the positive trajectory of John’s career and plans: “I am pleased with your success, so far, and I hope the favourable omens, that precede your application to the Assembly may have as favourable an issue.”¹⁰⁸ Here Hamilton referred to the fact that Laurens had to speak to both the assemblies in the lower south, South Carolina and Georgia, to garner support for the Black battalion. Hamilton expressed his hope that Laurens would be victorious in his quest for the cause: “But both for your country’s sake and for my own I wish the enemy may be gone from Georgia before you arrive and that you may be obliged to return and share the fortunes of your old friends.”¹⁰⁹ This letter illustrated the strong camaraderie that the soldiers shared with one another.

¹⁰⁶From Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, [14 March 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0051>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 17–19.]

¹⁰⁷From Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, [14 March 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0051>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 17–19.]

¹⁰⁸From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.]

¹⁰⁹From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.]

During his time back in the south, John Laurens continued to fight to create a battalion of Black and enslaved men. In May 1779, Laurens wrote to John Rutledge and asserted that “those very blacks which have hitherto been regarded as our greatest weakness may be converted into our greatest strength.”¹¹⁰ The argument made by Laurens can be examined as he was trying to convince white assemblymen that, among other fears, his plan would not spark a slave rebellion. During this period, John Laurens relied heavily on the fact that southerners had an aversion to military service.¹¹¹ Laurens could work around this by recruiting enslaved men and set to work on the legislatures. John Laurens had been elected as a member of the South Carolina General Assembly, for St. Philip’s and St. Michael’s Parish in Charleston¹¹² Laurens presented his proposal to the legislature at least three times (1779, 1780, and 1782) but it was defeated in every instance.¹¹³ Although the dates of Laurens’ attempts are known, no records survive from this assembly, which has makes it difficult to reconstruct what happened.¹¹⁴What we do know of the attempts come from John Laurens’ future brother-in-law David Ramsay, who supported him.¹¹⁵ Ramsay wrote to Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a well-known physician, that “ our people refused to arm the negroes. White Pride & Avarice are greatest obstacles in want of Black Liberty.”¹¹⁶ From his writings, Ramsay appeared to have had a similar

¹¹⁰John Laurens to John Rutledge, May 1779, in Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 140.

¹¹¹See John Resch, *War and Society in the American Revolution: Mobilization and Home Fronts* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, “*A Respectable Army*”: *The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell: 2015), and Charles Royster “*A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783*” (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

¹¹²“South Carolina in the American Revolution- Members of the 3rd General Assembly- 1779-1780” *The American Revolution in South Carolina*, https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/sc_revolution_3rd_general_assembly_members_1778_to_1780.html

¹¹³Arthur H. Shaffer, “Between Two Worlds: David Ramsay and the Politics of Slavery,” *The Journal of Southern History* 50 no 2 (May 1984): 181, [https:// www.jstor.org/stable/2209458](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2209458)

¹¹⁴Maslowski “ National Policy,” 12.

¹¹⁵Shaffer, “Between Two Worlds,”181.

¹¹⁶David Ramsay to Benjamin Rush, 21 March 1779 in Shaffer, “Between Two Worlds,182.

antislavery bent. Another member of the House wrote that “only himself [Laurens], Ramsay, Mr. Ferguson & about 13 others also joined in.”¹¹⁷ Following his defeat, Henry Laurens offered John little in the way of sympathy: “your black Air Castle is blown up, with contemptuous huzzas’ ...A Man of your reading & of your Philosophy will require no consolatory reasoning for reconciling him to disappointment.”¹¹⁸ The senior Laurens did not mourn the failure of the Black Battalion to pass muster in the South Carolina legislature.

While trying to defend Charleston in 1780, John Laurens was taken prisoner by the British forces. He was paroled to Pennsylvania, where he promised to remain, under the terms of his parole, until he could be exchanged.¹¹⁹ During his time in captivity, Laurens continued his correspondence with Lafayette and Hamilton, to whom he complained about his predicament.¹²⁰ After his release in December, Laurens was “elected unanimously” by Congress and chosen to serve as an envoy to France.¹²¹ This decision made sense due to Laurens’ education in Europe and his understanding of the culture. Sadly, during this time John Laurens’ wife, Martha, died most likely in an effort to see her husband after five years apart, and to introduce their child to him.¹²² No record exists of Laurens’ reaction to her death. Following his diplomatic mission to France, Laurens returned to America and resumed service in the Continental Army. With the British surrender at Yorktown, at which Laurens fought, he returned to his home state to try and garner support for the Black battalion and expel the remaining British from the South.¹²³

¹¹⁷Aedanus Burke to Arthur Middleton, 25 January 1782, in Shaffer, “Between Two Worlds,” 182.

¹¹⁸Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 27 September 1779, in Massey *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 143.

¹¹⁹Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 163,164.

¹²⁰Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 166.; See Judith Van Buskirk’s *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalist in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 79-81 on the procedure of parole.

¹²¹Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 171.

¹²²Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 215.

¹²³Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 201.

Unfortunately, Laurens could not garner the support he needed from the southern legislatures following a break in his quest. From January to February 1782, Laurens tried to further push his proposal for Black troops, with the approval of General Nathanael Greene, who was well respected in the South.¹²⁴ On 24 January 1782, Laurens introduced a plan that would raise 2,500 Black soldiers, with the backing of Greene.¹²⁵ This plan was again struck down by the legislature. In April 1782, John wrote a dispirited letter to Hamilton in which he described his failure to convince the South Carolina and Georgia legislatures of his plan: “I had, in fact, resumed the black project, as you were informed, and urged the matter very strenuously, both to our privy council and legislative body; but I was out-voted.”¹²⁶ Although the plan failed, Laurens still found cause for comfort in what had happened: “It was some consolation to me, however, to find that philosophy and truth had made some little progress since my last effort, as I obtained twice as many suffrages as before.”¹²⁷ Laurens asserted to Hamilton that even though the plan failed, he was able to obtain more votes than previously, which he saw as a win. Alexander Hamilton, as a peer, was able to push John Laurens into fighting for what he believed in as well as helping to garner support for his plan.

The mentorship of George Washington was equally as important for Laurens, as he pushed John to examine the world through a more traditional lens rather than his idealistic one. Following Laurens’ failure in the state legislatures, Washington corresponded with the young

¹²⁴Maslowski, “National Policy,” 14.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

¹²⁶“To Alexander Hamilton from Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [July 1782],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0044>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 120–121.]

¹²⁷“To Alexander Hamilton from Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [July 1782],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0044>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 120–121.]

officer, which was reflective of the nature of their relationship. In June 1782, Laurens wrote to the general telling him of his plan to meet with the Georgia Legislature and the encouragement that he felt from Governor Howley of Georgia, regarding the Black battalion.¹²⁸ This letter was extremely optimistic, but he was disappointed yet again. In July, Laurens received a response from Washington, who, like the elder Laurens, noted that this was to be expected: “I must confess that I am not at all astonished at the failure of your Plans.”¹²⁹ Washington hinted that even though the price of liberty was high, self-interest prevented Americans from relinquishing their unfree labor force, and thus it would have been extraordinary for the idea to have passed: “under these circumstances it would have been rather surprising if you had succeeded.”¹³⁰ The lower south was devastated from the many battles fought in the region. So many enslaved people escaped or fled to the British, that the lower south desperately wanted to replenish their unfree labor force, which motivated these states to oppose even the proposals – popular in most other regions – to make the international slave trade illegal in the new nation.¹³¹ In his reply to Laurens, Washington showed his savviness about the political and economic viability of slavery in the south.

John Laurens was a complex figure whose fight to create a Black battalion ultimately failed. His knowledge of the Rhode Island regiment, his sense of the Continental Army’s precarious position, and his relationships with his father, Henry, and with George Washington and members of Washington’s “family” were critical in the formulation and fostering of

¹²⁸“To George Washington from John Laurens, 11 June 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08662>.

¹²⁹ “From George Washington to John Laurens, 10 July 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08890>

¹³⁰“From George Washington to John Laurens, 10 July 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-08890>

¹³¹Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 206.

discourse about this plan. The relationships that John Laurens forged shed new light on the heroes of the American Revolution and their ideas on freedom and bondage. The correspondence between these men created a strong network of debate on the place of slavery in the war, and thus in the new nation born out of it. These influences created a drive towards a change in policy. By perpetuating the conversation about abolition after the death of John Laurens, his family helped to keep his dream alive. Without network of debate and support, John Laurens would have never pushed for enslaved men to fight and be treated like their fellow soldiers. Though John Laurens may not always be remembered for his contributions to the early antislavery conversations, he influenced those closest to in the American Revolution.

Conclusion

John Laurens unfortunately was killed in action on 27 August 1782, near the Combahee River, in his beloved South Carolina.¹ From all accounts, Laurens' death was due to his recklessness. This moment marked the end of Laurens' short but fulfilled life. In his death, many wrote about how he inspired them. When he heard of John Laurens' death, his dear friend Thomas Day wrote an inscription for Henry Laurens that illustrated his fierce admiration:

Beyond, the rage of time or fortune's power,
Remain, cold stone, remain and mark the hour
When youthful Laurens yielded up his breath
And sealed his country's liberties in death.
For injured rights he fell and equal laws
The noble victim of the noble cause.
Oh! May that country which he fought to save
Shed sacred tears upon his early grave.²

Day was clearly affected by his friend's death and spoke of Laurens' best attributes: his love of liberty and his love of country. Laurens' family were in Europe, as a result of Henry Laurens being captured by the British, and did not hear of his death for months, but they were devastated.³ One of the most interesting accounts we have of John's death can be found in his sister's memoirs. She said she "never put up a prayer for him, though she was previously in the

¹ Massey *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 226.

² David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens with a Sketch of the Life of Lieutenant-Colonel John Laurens* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1915), 493.

³ Massey *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 230.

habit of praying frequently for him; and his death was unknown to her for two or three months.”⁴ It is unclear whether Martha had a premonition of her brother’s death, but her account reflected her grief. George Washington was upset by the news of Laurens’ death and wrote to Nathanael Greene, Laurens’s commander and friend, expressing his sadness: “The Death of Colo. Laurens I consider as a very heavy misfortune—not only as it affects the public at large—but particularly so to his family, and all his private friends and Connections, to whom his Amiable and usefull Character, had rendered him peculiarly dear.”⁵ These quotations illustrated the important role that John Laurens had in the lives of his friends. John Laurens’ story is important in our understanding of antislavery rhetoric during the American Revolution.

Even after John’s death in 1782, this early debate on arming enslaved men would impact further fissures in American history. The relationships that John Laurens forged created some of the most important bonds of the American Revolution. Their ideas on freedom and bondage shaped the historical narrative following. The correspondence between these men sheds a light on the strong network of antislavery thought. By perpetuating the conversation about abolition after the death of John Laurens, his family helped to keep his dream alive. Slavery became one of the most important issues in American history. Without his experiences away from South Carolina and without what he learned in his relationships with people different from his own family, John Laurens might never have pushed for enslaved men to fight and be treated like their fellow soldiers. John Laurens has not been widely recognized in his own right, yet he was a substantial figure in his time; and he had meaningful impact on other more readily recognizable figures, even including George Washington and Alexander Hamilton.

⁴Ramsay, *Memoirs of The Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, 19.

⁵“From George Washington to Nathanael Greene, 18 October 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-09755>.

This thesis has shown that John Laurens' education and relationships were critical in the plan to form a Black battalion that would fight alongside the Continental Army. Although Laurens failed in his mission, he was still succeeded in that he had an open dialogue with important members of society and influenced them to contemplate the shortcomings of slavery. By exploring these influences, I have been able to showcase the coalescing themes that influenced his world view. John Laurens was a complicated figure who truly believed that his work would serve "justice and the Public Good."⁶

⁶John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 2 February 1778, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens Volume 12*: 391.

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Appendix A - 1778 Letters

Letter No.	Author	Recipient	Date	Location of the Author
1	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	14 January, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
2	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	23 January, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
3	Henry Laurens	John Laurens	28 January, 1778	York
4	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	2 February, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
5	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	3 February, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
6	Henry Laurens	John Laurens	6 February, 1778	York
7	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	9 February, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
8	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	15 February, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge
9	Henry Laurens	John Laurens	1 March, 1778	York
10	John Laurens	Henry Laurens	9 March, 1778	Headquarters, Valley Forge