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Jack Arabas – Freedom Fighter / Coiner

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The men of Captain David Humphreys' Company A of the 4th Regiment of the Connecticut Continental Line were some of the most ardent patriots to serve the American cause during the Revolution. Most of the soldiers were enlisted for the duration of the war and had chosen a nom de guerre fitting their hope for freedom—two literally went by the name "Freedom." Others were known as Liberty, Freeman, Caesar, Cato, Hector, Lion, Prince, and Strong.² In all likelihood, more than half of the soldiers had only one name prior to the war, but army pay officers, needing an accurate account of who received wages, required both a first and last name for their books. All of the men under Capt. Humphreys' command were African-American, some were actually born in Africa; others were born into slavery in the American Colonies or the Caribbean plantations, and some were freedmen. Two of their number, Sambo Latham and Jordan Freeman, paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of Connecticut seaside towns raided by the traitor Benedict Arnold. Prior to the formation of Humphreys' all-black company in 1780, African-American soldiers were integrated into the regiments of the Connecticut-Line, something that would not be seen again until President

Truman desegregated the army in 1948. At the start of the war, General Washington was a vocal opponent of enlisting black men, both free and especially slaves; however, the army he took command of outside Boston was already comprised of a mixture of races. Indeed, a former slave who had purchased his own freedom in 1769 named Salem Poor performed so heroically at Bunker Hill that no less than 14 white officers wrote letters to the General Court of Massachusetts commending him as a “brave and gallant Soldier” deserving of an award. The courageous actions of black soldiers like Salem Poor were not enough to sway Washington who signed an order soon after assuming command forbidding the recruitment of blacks. As the war raged on, however, there were simply not enough young white men willing to enlist for the states to meet recruitment quotas set by Congress. The British, realizing an opportunity to divide the Colonists, offered freedom to any slave willing to join the British forces, resulting in an estimated 30,000 slaves crossing over to the British side. As a result, Washington relented, and on December 30, 1775, issued orders allowing the enlistment of free blacks, but continuing the ban on slaves. Despite Washington’s prohibition on slaves in the Continental Army, many slaves were forced into service. One such slave was Jack Arabas. Very little is known about Jack’s early life, and much of what we think we know of him is

gathered from the background of his master Thomas Ivers (1724-1808). Ivers was born in Boston, but moved to Stratford, Connecticut, where he married and had seven children. His home and warehouses were on the Housatonic River near where his trading ships moored. Many of the slaves living in Stratford at that time came from the Caribbean onboard trading vessels as deckhands. Oftentimes ship captains would round out their crews with men purchased in the slave markets of foreign ports, many of whom became skilled sailors. Crispus Attucks, who was killed in the Boston Massacre, came to America in this way and it is believed that Jack Arabas did too. In all likelihood, Jack was born in Africa where he was enslaved and transported to the New World. That he spoke little English and was illiterate is assumed as existing pay certificates show that most of the black soldiers serving in the Connecticut-Line signed their name with an "X". Additionally, it is surmised by some that Jack's unusual last name came about because he could not pronounce "Ivers," and what came out sounded like Arabas. In 1777, William Ivers, one of Thomas Ivers' sons, turned 18 and became eligible for induction into the Continental Army. Despite his other faults, Thomas was a patriot who wished his son to follow the law concerning military service. At the same time, he needed William to help with the family business. This dilemma was easily resolved as the

regulations governing conscription permitted a man to provide a substitute to serve in his place. Wealthy men such as Thomas Ivers could pay another man to serve or could provide a slave to take a family member's place, which is how Jack Arabas was inducted into the Continental Army for the duration of the war in November 1777, at Fishkill, New York. The town of Stratford provided a £10 bonus for all men who joined the army, which Thomas Ivers kept for himself upon Jack's enlistment—an act he would later regret. Pvt. Jack Arabas was first assigned to Capt. Elisha Ely's Company A of the 6th Regiment of the Connecticut-Line commanded by Col. Jonathan Meigs. His pay records indicate he was paid 2 shillings a month when there was money to distribute. Jack probably saw combat in the daring nighttime attack on the British fort at Stoney Point along the Hudson River near West Point on July 16, 1779, and was also involved in many other engagements prior to his discharge. A later report of his military service would state that he was "discharged with badges of honor."

Because the 6th Regiment was integrated until 1780, Jack would have had many opportunities to interact with men who would later have an ownership interest or involvement with the Connecticut mint then serving in the Continental Army. Despite Jack's military service, Thomas Ivers' maintained a strong belief that Jack Arabas belonged to him and he had no

intention of granting Jack his freedom after the war. After Jack was mustered out of the army in 1783, he returned to Ivers who was then staying on Long Island. With his honorable discharge papers in hand, Jack no doubt fully expected to live out the rest of his life as a freedman. When Jack learned that Ivers had other ideas for his future, he fled by boat to New Haven. Ivers was quick on his heels and captured him the next day with the intention of carrying him back to New York to live out the rest of his days as a slave. While he waited for a ship to carry both of them back across the Long Island Sound, Ivers requested that the New Haven jailer keep Jack behind bars to prevent his further escape. The jailer, as was customary in the case of a runaway slave or servant, agreed to hold Jack in the town gaol. Jack, however, was no ordinary slave and had no doubt chosen New Haven as his destination because he had many influential friends there who would come to his aid. Chauncey Goodrich (1759-1815) was a young lawyer eager to make a name for himself. A 1776 graduate from Yale College, Goodrich was admitted to the Connecticut bar in 1781 and opened a law office in Hartford soon thereafter. His Yale biographical sketch describes him as a man of “unimpeachable character,” who always exhibited dignity, candor, and thoroughness in his work and dealings with others. Somehow Goodrich learned of Jack’s confinement in the New

Haven jail and took up the case. It is unknown whether Goodrich accepted the case pro bono or if Jack's friends paid for his legal services, but the retention of a lawyer to represent a runaway slave was highly unusual in the Confederation Era. Fearing Jack might be taken from the jurisdiction at any moment; Goodrich filed a writ of habeas corpus in the Superior Court at New Haven in the County of New Haven demanding that the jailer bring Jack before the court and explain by what right he was holding him against his will. A writ of habeas corpus is a legal remedy with its roots in the Middle Ages; the words literally mean in Medieval Latin "that you have the body." The writ of habeas corpus or the Great Writ is one of the fundamental rights of free men, as it can be used to require any government official, monarch, or private individual who is holding a person against their will to come before the court and explain by what right they are restraining the person's liberty. In 1772, the writ of habeas corpus was successfully used in the landmark English case of *Somerset v. Stewart* to determine the ability of a master who had transported his slave from Boston to England for a short period to forcibly transport that slave from England to Jamaica. After the slave's relatives filed a writ of habeas corpus, the Chief Justice of the King's Bench, William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, ordered a hearing to determine if the detention was lawful. A

month after the hearing, Murray ruled that there were no English laws that authorized slavery and no support for it in the English common law; therefore, James Somerset was set free. The Somerset case had the additional effect of freeing all slaves held in England and Wales, but was not extended to the British colonies. Chauncey Goodrich was undoubtedly well aware of the Somerset precedent. Unlike England, which had no laws establishing slavery at the time the Somerset case was brought, Connecticut specifically recognized and approved of the institution of slavery in 1784. Thus, the arguments made before the English court could not be successfully employed to free Jack. Instead, Goodrich argued that because Congress had regulated that only a freeman could enlist in the Continental Army, Thomas Ivers had by default granted Jack his freedom when he permitted him to enlist. Ivers objected to this argument and asserted that he had never manumitted Jack who was a slave for life, that he never promised him his freedom, and that he had a right to transport his property, including his slave, back to New York. The judge in the case was future Connecticut mint inspector James Wadsworth (1730-1816) from Durham, Connecticut. Wadsworth was a 1748 graduate of Yale College and a veteran of two wars, having served as a major general in the Connecticut militia during the Revolution and a company commander in the

French and Indian War. All accounts of him describe him as a man of peculiar dignity of manner “with an antique strictness of morals.” In his legal opinion rendered on December 7, 1784, Wadsworth found that prior to the war Jack was Thomas Ivers’ slave for life and that he was being held as a runaway slave by New Haven’s jailer at Ivers’ request. Wadsworth drew attention to the fact that Ivers had accepted and retained the £10 bounty offered by the town of Stratford after Jack’s enlistment; thus, making it clear that Jack joined the army with the knowledge and approval of his master. Wadsworth further found that Jack had faithfully served in the army for the full period of his enlistment and been honorably discharged. Because only freemen could enlist in the army at the time of Jack’s induction, Judge Wadsworth held that “the Consent of Said Master to such Enlistment in judgment of Law Amounts to a Manumission and that Said Negro Jack cannot be any longer held as a Slave for life and therefore Order and Decree that he be no longer held in Custody but Set at Liberty.” The case of *Arabas v. Ivers*¹⁵ established a legal precedent that all slaves who served in the Continental Army with the permission of their master were free. The case was the first in Connecticut where a slave was manumitted against the will of his owner and it is believed that it resulted in freedom for hundreds of black Revolutionary War veterans. Judge Wadsworth’s ruling

was praised by the New-Haven Gazette, which stated “[i]t is pleasing to the benevolent mind to reflect, that in this state no person who hath through the course of the late war hazarded his life in the defense of liberty and independence, may by the laws of the land be doomed to perpetual servitude.” After receiving his freedom, Jack stayed in New Haven for several years. The recently transcribed Leavenworth Account Book shows that he was employed by the Connecticut mint in 1787. Because no records of the mint exist for 1785 or 1786, there is no way to know if he worked for the mint during those years, but the Connecticut and Federal Mint Account Book confirms that he was not employed at the mint after ownership changed hands in June 1787. The mint’s new owners’ close ties with New York City merchants and friends of Thomas Ivers may explain why Jack was not employed there in 1788. Jack was paid wages at the mint from March through May 1787. He mostly operated the coining press stamping Connecticut coppers for which he was paid 3 shillings a day.¹⁷ His wages placed him at the lower end of what was paid for labor by the mint, but in line with what was paid some other employees for the same or similar work. In addition, Jack was paid the standard rate of 1 shilling per pound for scrap copper he sold to the mint and for odd jobs around the mint like cutting wood. The man who paid Jack’s wages was Mark Leavenworth,

a 1771 graduate of Yale College and a patriot who served as an officer in the Connecticut-Line from 1775 to 1778. Mark's first-cousin, Maj. Eli Leavenworth, who was active in the mint in 1787, served on Col. Meigs' staff and as a company commander in the 6th Regiment. Both Mark and Eli would have known Jack from their time serving together during the war.¹⁸ Mark's close partner in the Connecticut mint, John Goodrich, was a cousin of Jack's lawyer Chauncey Goodrich. Leavenworth's 1787 Account Book shows that Jack worked alone or with a small group of others at the mint stamping coins - a position of extreme trust. Clearly, the mint's owners thought very highly of Jack's character to entrust him with this position. The men who served with Jack would have been aware that he was a brave soldier possessing both a high moral character and hard work ethic. An officer's duty is to care for his troops. A good officer places the needs of his soldiers above his own, and they in turn obey his commands without question or hesitation. The bond that is often forged in combat between soldiers can outlast active military service and transcend race and politics. Considering that many of the owners of the Connecticut mint served in the Continental Army with Jack, it seems likely that one or more of them came to his aid when they learned his master had double-crossed him. It also seems natural that Jack would seek out these same men in his time of

need. In all probability, one or more of the men who assisted Jack were associated with the mint since he later found employment there at a fair wage. Currently, nothing is known of Jack Arabas after the May 11, 1787 Account Book entry stating he sold 1¼ pounds of “Old Copper” to the mint for one shilling and three pence. Many believe he returned to a life at sea after work dried up on land. He probably changed his name from Arabas, as that was likely never his true name, making it even more difficult to track his final days. What is known of Jack is this – he fought the British for six years so that others could be free of tyranny and when his own liberty was denied, he fled oppression and fought for his personal freedom, which he received through the intercession of his brothers-in-arms. On the reverse of every coin struck by Jack are two words that had special meaning to him: Independence and Liberty.