

Jeff Liberty:

African-American Revolutionary War Veteran

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Note: Researchers have identified historic documents, including paystubs, that establish Jeff Liberty's service as a soldier in the Revolutionary War, but not necessarily encamped in Redding during the winter of 1778-79.

It was an offer he had yearned for, hardly dared to hope for, and was relieved to receive. Jonathan Farrand, a Captain in the Continental Army, proffered his 55-year-old African captive, Jeff, the longed-for proposition: Serve as a fighting soldier in this War of Rebellion against England and I will grant your freedom. Though well past middle age, Jeff eagerly consented, taking on the surname, "Liberty" acknowledging his personal emancipation and espousing the concept he and other African-American soldiers were fighting for. For a man who had spent a life in bondage, it has a sound of irony.

Jeff Liberty's military service commenced on June 27, 1781

when he entered the all-Black Second Company of the Fourth Connecticut Regiment. He signed up for a term of three years, but was discharged on October 11, 1781, because of Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown in September.<sup>1</sup> Every officer, commissioned and non-commissioned, was white; all of the privates were black. Interestingly, there were over 40 other African Americans serving in various Connecticut regiments that could have collectively formed a second all-black company, but instead remained in their integrated units.<sup>2</sup>

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775 with the firing of armaments at Concord and Lexington, Massachusetts, freed and enslaved Black people responded to the call for troops. There was concern, however, by the military and private property owners that those in bondage would use the excuse of joining the army as a means of running away and they feared that arming slaves could cause an insurrection.<sup>3</sup> Even George Washington decided to exclude Blacks from serving in the Continental Army in 1775 to the unanimous approval of all his officers. By the end of 1777, though,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Liberty, #3715 2996-7, U.S., Compiled Revolutionary War Military Service Records, 1775-1783, Ancestry.com. The service record indicates he may also have used the name Zephaniah Liberty.

<sup>2</sup> David O. White, *Connecticut's Black Soldiers 1775-1783* (Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1973), 32.

<sup>3</sup> White, 18.

the war situation had deteriorated with the British taking control of New York, and the Continental Army having increasing troubles recruiting men to fight. As a consequence, both freed and enslaved Black men were being actively recruited in many states.

Captive men were motivated to enlist in the army for a number of reasons, but the primary incentive was the promise of emancipation by their owners at the end of the war. Many were used as replacements to fill quotas for the Continental Army that many towns found hard to achieve, while others fought in place of their masters. There is no record as to how many slaves received their freedom by the end of the war. <sup>4</sup>

Jonathan Farrand's large farm was snuggled into the hummocks of Judea Parish, the east region of the Town of Washington, in Connecticut's Litchfield Hills. Jonathan was born in Milford, Connecticut, in 1728, but moved as a youth to the farming community of Washington. When the Revolutionary War broke out, Farrand was a member of the Committee of Inspection to root out loyalists to English. He enlisted as a Lieutenant and was soon

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<sup>4</sup> Moore, George H., *Historical Notes on the Employment of Negroes in the American Army of the Revolution*, New York, 1862, pp. 6-7.

promoted to Captain in Colonel Increase Moseley's Regiment. After the war he continued to rise in prominence among the town's citizens when they elected him as State Representative to the Connecticut General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> He also operated a tollgate at his residence along the Woodbury Turnpike, an important road connecting the river port of Derby at the confluence of the Housatonic and Naugatuck Rivers to the state's northwest corner. He owned seven African-American slaves: Caesar, Jeff and his wife, Phyllis, and four others.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, we know little about Jeff Liberty and his family other than he survived the War of Independence and returned to his home in Washington where he lived with his wife and two daughters in an area then known as "under the hill."<sup>7</sup> Here, Jeff Liberty farmed a small piece of land that was given to him for his military service. In the federal census of 1790, he is listed as having four people in his household under the census column "all other free persons," leaving blank the columns that recorded ages and sex.<sup>8</sup>

He died in 1797 at the age of 72. He was buried in Old Judea

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<sup>5</sup> *History of Ancient Woodbury, Connecticut*, 187, 781, 789.

<sup>6</sup> [www.gunhistoricalmuseum.pastperfectonline.com](http://www.gunhistoricalmuseum.pastperfectonline.com)

<sup>7</sup> Kendra Baker, "To gain his liberty, he had to fight a war: How a CT man went from slavery to freedom," *Newstimes*, Feb. 22, 2022, <https://www.newstimes.com/news/article/To-gain-his-liberty-he-had-to-fight-a-war-How-a-16938583.php>

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Libberty, US Federal Census (1790) accessed via Ancestry.com.

Cemetery, which was located on the hill just upslope from his farm.

Today by the entrance to the Old Judea Cemetery is a stone memorial that was raised in 1998 by the Judea Chapter of the Connecticut Daughters of the American Revolution commemorating thirty-four soldiers of the War for Independence who are buried within the cemetery (see Figure 1). Except for two, all of the burial sites of the white soldiers have engraved headstones, but the gravesite of Jeff Liberty remained unmarked. If his burial was originally marked in any manner, it had been lost over time. In the 1920s, in remembrance of Mr. Liberty and his service to this country, the Connecticut Society of the Sons of the American Revolution erected a small iron marker over an area that was assumed to be his burial site. It is engraved, "*Jeff Liberty And His Colored Patriots*"<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 2).

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<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judea\\_Cemetery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judea_Cemetery)



*Figure 1. A photograph of the memorial at the entrance to the Old Judea Cemetery listing provincial soldiers who served in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and are buried within the cemetery. Jeff Liberty is listed on the top right-side of the marker.*



*Figure 2. Burial Marker for Jeff Liberty. This iron marker was erected at his suspected burial site in the Old Judea Cemetery by the Connecticut Sons of the American Revolution in the 1920s,*