

Paging Doctor Cuff Wells: Continental Doctor

By Joseph Mumley

As the Continental Army suffered many defeats and casualties in the first few years of the war, they began to recruit African Americans, who were previously barred from enlistment by the Continental Congress. To fight the war, Congress needed as many able bodies in its army as it could get, resulting in a draft of all white men who were eligible. However, many of the colonists were reluctant to fight and instead offered their enslaved men in their place. While historians debate the exact number of African Americans within the Continental Army, their contributions to the war have been pushed into the spotlight over the past years. The career of Doctor Cuff Wells illuminates the significance of African American enlistment.

Cuff Wells was brought to Connecticut by a ship. However, scholars disagree whether he was born in **Guyana**, South America or in Guinea, West Africa. In Connecticut he was enslaved by a Deacon Israel Wells of Colchester, Connecticut, then sold and enslaved to a Dr. Langret of Hartford Connecticut. An apothecary was similar to a pharmacist or doctor. They created and prescribed salves made from herbs and medicinal plants as treatments for ailments. (Shryock, 3-4)

Within the muster rolls, the specific occupation of a few African American soldiers appears, such as Sharp Liberty of the Connecticut 6th Regiment, who was listed as a wagoner (Revolutionary War Rolls, 265). Many of these men were combatants or drove wagons, but Cuff Wells had experience in the medical field. In New England, a person did not need a formal education to pursue a profession, and enslaved people rarely had an opportunity to attend school. They trained through an apprenticeship with the local apothecary. (Starr 37-40, While it is not known whether Dr. Langret bought Cuff to help him in his work, he taught Cuff the trade. In 1777, Cuff Wells enlisted in the Continental Army to earn his freedom. (Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 671-672) The following year, after his superiors noticed that he was familiar with medicinal practices, he became the medical assistant to Dr. Philip Turner, the Surgeon General of the Continental Army's Eastern Department, at the Redding winter encampment of 1778-1779. From the few sources that spoke of the conditions at the Redding Encampment, life in the camp for soldiers were atrocious. While not as famous as the winter in Valley Forge the year before, the soldiers at Redding experienced many similar hardships.

In a petition from soldiers of the camp to Governor Jonathan Trumbull, the soldiers expressed the state of their living conditions, "But may it please your Excellency they are naked in a severe winter, they are hungry & have no money." (*Petition of the Connecticut soldiers in the Revolutionary Army, to his excellency, Jonathan Trumbull, Governor of Connecticut*) General Putnam, also expressed the situation of the camp in a letter, he stated "Several companies of enlisted artificers are in the same situation and unable to work in the field," (General Putnam Letter).

The lack of supplies can be attributed to the Danbury Raid of 1777. The British attack on Danbury caused a significant portion of the town's stores to burn. Among the cache of lost supplies were, but not limited to, a large quantity of hospital bedding, 15 large casks filled with medicines, and 5000 pairs of shoes and stockings. The shoes, clothing, and blankets lost were the same exact supplies officers and soldiers demanded the following year but could not get as the town was still recovery from the loss.

Without provisions, the soldiers suffered from the harsh winter elements. Diseases such as smallpox and infestations of lice, were common issues for Continental Army camps of this period. Without proper sanitation methods, camp layouts, and inoculation of the soldiers these issues persisted, sapping the strength of the army (Fenn, 42-43).

However, given the fact that Cuff Wells was trained as an apothecary, it can be assumed that he created or applied salves and medicinal concoctions. For example, Adders Tongue is a common fern in England and New England. The fern is prepared first by being stamped then boiled in olive oil. This mixture then could make a balsam that could be applied to infected wounds. If it is mixed in distilled water and drunk it was supposed to slow bleeding. Barberry was a common addition to gardens in England and brought over to the Americas. When made into a sauce it lowered fevers and increased the coagulation of blood in wounds. (Leighton, 232-233- 250).

The exact procedures and responsibilities of Cuff Wells are unknown, as the written records of the camp's patients, illnesses, and medical practices that were conducted at Redding were not accessible when writing this.

(The papers of the doctor, Philip Turner, are located in the library located at Duke University, but the library was closed to visitors due to Covid restrictions.) It can only be assumed that Cuff's knowledge of medicinal properties of local vegetation was used to help the suffering in the camp.

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