

Post War Poverty

By Peter Moran

The Revolutionary War saw the last racially integrated units fighting for the United States until President Harry Truman and the Korean War. Cuff Freeman was one Black veteran whose surname indicates manumission: the end of one's enslavement. He was one of many who fought not just for American independence, but for his own freedom. Freeman's notes for pay – IOUs from Connecticut – preserved by the Gladstone Afro-American Military Collection indicate that he was still owed a great deal of backpay by the war's end. So, every year, Cuff would travel to Hartford to collect a percentage of the pay he had earned while fighting for independence. This trickle of pay, as opposed to a lump sum, would have made it difficult to start a new life as a free man. This money was not enough to invest in land or other real estate. We do not know what work Cuff Freeman did undertake after the war, but notations on the rear of these IOUs document him collecting this meager interest years after the war's conclusion.

Besides national questions of rights and liberty, newly manumitted veterans like Cuff Freeman had to face the concrete everyday challenges of their new life. By examining a few of these men, we can a better understanding of the postwar world, and the challenges it presented to newly freed men.

Though no longer enslaved, there was no backpay or compensation for years of unpaid labor. For Black veterans, their widows, and their descendants, backpay and pensions for their service in the Revolution offered a vital lifeline in a nation where anti-Black racism was growing stronger. These pensions were authorized for veterans in 1818 and again in 1832 by Congress, then extended to widows four years later.¹ The sums available were relatively minor: \$8 a month. But for some, this could mean the difference between desperation and deprivation.

But in this young republic, questions of freedom and liberty abounded. Then, as now, people debated the meaning of the revolution. That urgent phrase “All men are created equal” echoed across a country of settler colonists and indigenous cultures, enslaved people and enslavers.

Lawsuits soon appeared in New England as enslaved men and women cited the founding documents of their new nation as grounds for freedom.²

Different states negotiated different answers to new questions about slavery and race. Some, like Connecticut, began to end slavery within their borders with excruciating slowness.³ Nationwide, however, racial divisions become starker.⁴ Voting rights, a useful barometer of racial and democratic ideals, were taken from many people of color, even in those states that hesitantly ended slavery.

Alongside these legal and political struggles, economic survival posed a perpetual challenge for manumitted veterans in the early republic.

By 1820 Peter Freeman, another manumitted veteran of the Revolutionary War, lived in Hartford. This sixty-six-year-old widower inventoried his meager home for a pension application: “One old hut without chimney, 2 pots, 2 kettles and 1 frying pan, one old bed, 6 old chairs...”

He goes on to state, “I am by occupation a day labourer in very feeble health, have no wife, have one granddaughter named Brunette who is an idiot and depends on me [my] support said child is thirteen years of age I have been obliged to apply to the town for assistance and during the last sickness of my wife was assisted by the town. [signed] Peter Freeman.”

Pensions were initially intended only for Revolutionary veterans in dire need. This means that applications attesting poverty may not represent the average experience. It’s also possible that applicants exaggerated their need to improve their chances of approval. But as legal documents, many pensions contained sworn testimony and inventories conducted by third parties describing unmistakable poverty. These were hard times.

At the Revolution’s onset more people were enslaved in Connecticut than any other colony in New England.

Starting in 1775, enslaved men were officially allowed to enlist and fight alongside – or serve in the place of – their enslavers.⁵ In return, they were promised manumission: the end of their enslavement. But new laws promised former enslavers that they would have no obligation to the people they had once enslaved. There is no specific count for how many people served in the Patriot cause in return for manumission, but those who survived the perils of wartime service earned their long-awaited reward: life as a free man.

In the emerging market economy of the United States, money was the necessary twin of freedom. For veterans and their descendants, another lifeline could be found in land warrants: acreage promised by the nascent, cash-strapped US congress during the Revolutionary War. Privates like Pomp Liberty were promised 100 acres, which would eventually be allocated from present-day Ohio as indigenous people there were dispossessed of their traditional homelands. By robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul Congress created a reward out of displacement. It also kindled a small hope among veterans and their descendants, alienated and themselves dispossessed in the growing young republic. There was some small hope of an agrarian idyll for the everyday American.

More practically, the land warrant could be sold on the open market. Unclaimed land warrants could also be claimed by descendants who could prove their connection. This was the case for Pomp Liberty, who had died on Long Island in 1798. In 1830, his daughter Dinah Freeman successfully applied for her father's land warrant, which she ultimately sold for an unknown sum. Just two years later, New Haven's congressman, Ralph Ingersoll, wrote to the land warrant office in Washington D.C. asking about that same land warrant.

In Ingersoll's letter, we can see how the meanings of race in America and the American Revolution itself remained contested. Ingersoll asked about the land warrants of two deceased veterans: Pomp Liberty and another formerly enslaved veteran, named Dick Violet. The congressman goes on to ask if the former enslavers of these men can claim the land they earned fighting in the Revolution.

Much to my relief, the preserved response from the war office says no: Pomp Liberty and other formerly enslaved people were free at the time of their service. No enslaver could again claim the fruits of their labor. Pensions and land warrants applied only to veterans and their descendants.

As we again approach an anniversary of the nation's founding, Americans are once more asked to reflect on the Revolution and its meanings. It is a good time to remember that paler skin should hold no primacy here: American independence was won by men and women of different complexions. It's also a fine occasion to recall that revolutionary struggles are not confined to war. They are not even confined to politics and law. Freedom without economic security was a cruel fate for manumitted Revolutionary veterans. They deserved better and they did not find it.

1. Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017): 16.
2. Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
3. David Menschel, "Abolition without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery 1784-1848," *The Yale Law Journal* 111, no. 1 (2001): 183–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/797518>
4. Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*, Reprint edition (New York London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017) 468.
5. Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 231.