THE AFRICAN AMERICANS' REVOLUTION: BLACK PATRIOTS, BLACK FOUNDERS, AND THE CONCEPT OF INTEREST CONVERGENCE

By LaGarrett J. King and Jason Williamson

Recent scholarship has argued for the consideration of Black people as founders of the United States of America. The Founding Fathers are associated with the development of the various freedom documents leading to the new democracy; however, Black people were restricted from participating based on racial ideology. Therefore, it is believed that the concept of a Black Founder should not be conceptualized in the same way as a White Founder. Black Founders had a distinctly different set of beliefs, ideas, and moral aptitudes than White Founders.[1]

Black Founders were persons from 1787-1837 who conceptualized and developed a separate country for Black people within the United States. They are defined by their efforts to (1) build social institutions for Black people in the United States; (2) emphasize universal emancipation; and (3) incite dialogue over the meaning of Black identity.[2] Their purpose was to help establish a separate and safe country for Black people, both free and enslaved, within the racist structures of the United States. Black American revolutionary soldiers fit within this paradigm. Black American revolutionary soldiers were Black Founders who fought for universal emancipation and challenged the meaning of Black identity. Their presence and actions made political statements about Blackness and race.

Yet, within most school resources and textbooks, Black revolutionary soldiers are referred to as Black patriots. The term *Black patriot* implies that Black and White revolutionary soldiers fought for the same causes. The authors of this article argue that is not the case, and a clearer conception of these terms could provide a more holistic explanation as to who these Black American revolutionary soldiers were, why they would join the Continental army, and how their presence influenced democracy.

Black American revolutionary soldiers did fight in the war, not out of love for a country that oppressed them, but out of love for life, survival, and the preservation of their race. As well, these soldiers fought because of their desire to be free of enslavement and second-class citizenry. The mere presence of the Black soldiers repudiates racist ideas that Black people were not brave and capable of military service. Their existence not only demonstrated physical strength, but required a certain mental capability. Overall, Black revolutionary soldiers were fighting for their own freedom, not for the freedom of America—which was decidedly not *the land of the free.* And, while many soldiers played a significant role in the war in pursuit of their own liberty, they continued to be met with the unforgiving, race-laden reality of servitude. Nevertheless, Black soldiers were needed to fill enlistment quotas, and were therefore sought out to continue to fight in the war. In fact, the American Revolution is a case study of interest convergence. Interest convergence[3] denotes that within racial states such as the burgeoning United States, any liberatory progress for Black people is only made if that progress also benefits the dominant culture, in this case, the liberation of the White colonists of America. In other words, the decision about Black enlistment within the Continental army was not revised out of some moral mandate, but based on manpower needs for the colonists to win the war.

George Washington's revised policy on Black military soldiers was based on a convergence of the interests of a growing British military, securing the slave economy, and increasing labor needs for the Continental army. Dunmore's proclamation increased the British military numbers when hundreds of the enslaved population defected to the British side in search of freedom. Washington even admitted that the proclamation would benefit the British war efforts. When enslaved persons left the plantations, this caused serious social and economic unrest in the colonies, and encouraged many White plantation owners who were initially ambivalent about whether to join the Patriot cause. Another interest that converged

to produce the need for Black enlistment was the fact that many White American revolutionary soldiers only fought in three- to four-month increments and returned to their farms or plantations afterwards. Many Black soldiers could serve longer terms. In these three cases, the Black soldiers were essential for the war efforts; the need to win the war became stronger than racial/racist ideology.[4]

Interests converged with Black revolutionary soldiers as well. Being a Black revolutionary soldier was about freedom, not loyalty, which troubles the terminology of the Black Patriot. For one, more Black people defected to the British military for a chance to be free. Once the American colonies promised freedom, about a quarter of the Continental army became Black. Black revolutionary soldiers understood the stakes of the war and realized that they could also benefit and leave bondage. In other words, the Black revolutionary soldier "can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place, not to a people, but to a principle."[5] Black people played a dual role: service with the American forces and fleeing to the British, both for freedom.[6] The notion of the Black Patriot is a misused term based on what Black soldiers were fighting for in principle—Black freedom. In many ways, Black American revolutionary soldiers were fighting the "African Americans' Revolution," a separate cause from the majority of White Americans fighting in the American Revolution.[7]

The American Revolution served as a turning point not only in American independence, but in Black liberation. The war sparked the "first slave rebellion in American history, initiated the first civil rights movement, spawned the first large scale construction of Black life, brought forth the first written testimonies from African Americans, involved the emergence of the 'talented tenth,' and had international repercussions."[8] After the American Revolution, White colonists established a new country, new governments, and social institutions and are affectionately known as Founders of the United States of America. We rarely recognize Black Founders and their efforts at institution building to create a separate Black country built within a new country, with troubling racist policies, called the United States.

In an effort to reveal more fully the contributions of the Black Revolutionary soldiers, the accompanying lesson plan will feature James Armistead Lafayette—a significant figure to add to American Revolution units. James Armistead Lafayette, an enslaved man, was known for most of his life simply as James. James initially took the surname Armistead from his owner and later added the name Lafayette to honor the Marquis de Lafayette, who helped in his emancipation. James's experience provides an interesting case for students to examine because his work as a colonial spy led to a colonial victory and the surrender of Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown. After the war, James was not granted his freedom for serving and was only freed after petitioning the Virginia state legislature. Using the story of James and several primary sources, this lesson highlights the differing experiences of Black Patriots and provides historical context to help teachers and students understand interest convergence.

Notes

[1] Richard S. Newman, *Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 2008); Richard S. Newman and Roy E. Finkenbine, "Black Founders in the New Republic: Introduction," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 83-94.

[2] Lerone Bennett, "The Shaping of Black America," in *The Shaping of Black America*, ed. Lerone Bennett (Chicago: Johnson, 2011), 113-42; LaGarrett J. King, "More Than Slaves: Black Founders, Benjamin Banneker, and Critical Intellectual Agency," *Social Studies Research & Practice* 9, no. 3 (2014): 88-105.

[3] Derrick A. Bell Jr., "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518-33.

[4] Gary Nash, "The African Americans' Revolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 250-72; Christopher Brown, "The Problems of Slavery," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 427-46.

[5] Gary Nash, "Introduction," in *The Negro in the American Revolution*, ed. Benjamin Quarles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012), xx.

[6] Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Citadel Press, 1939), 5-6.

[7] Nash, "The African Americans' Revolution."

[8] Nash, "The African Americans' Revolution," 250.

This is to certify That the Bearer by the Name of James has done essential Service to the State, & had the Honour to Command in this State. His Intelligence from the Enemy's Camps Was Industriously Collected and Most faithfully delivered. He Perfectly Acquitted Himself in the Same Important Commission I Gave Him and Appears to me Entitled to Every Reward to Circumstances Can admit of. Done under My Hand, Richmond November 21st 1784

Lafayette

FACSIMILE OF MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE'S CERTIFICATE
OF COMMENDATION OF JAMES ARMISTEAD LAFAYETTE, 1784

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LESSON PLAN:

BLACK FOUNDER, JAMES ARMISTEAD LAFAYETTE

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Connections to Middle School and/or High School: High school classes often present history as an inevitable continuum of events, which removes agency. The primary documents and the case study of James Armistead Lafayette will introduce students to the agency of Black men and women during the war and introduce them to the concept of ***interest convergence***.

Goals and Objectives: By the end of the lesson, students will be able to analyze historical documents to form their opinions in preparation for a Socratic seminar.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

History Teacher Expectations—guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation; and assist learners in acquiring knowledge of historical content in United States history in order to ask large and searching questions.

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions Teacher Expectations - help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings.

Warm-Up (Anticipatory Set):

- As a class the students will read the following excerpt: *"I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms to resort to his Majesty's STANDARD, or be looked upon as Traitors to his Majesty's Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences, such as Forfeiture of Life, Confiscation of Lands, &c. And I do hereby further declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops..."* from John Murray the Earl of Dunmore's Proclamation of November 7, 1775.

- After reading the excerpt, have students free write on the following questions after reading the document: Why did Black Americans fight during the Revolutionary War? How does Dunmore feel about slaves in the colonies? Whom does this benefit and

why? After sharing student ideas, define *interest convergence* and ask students how this might be an example of interest convergence.

Activity: Looking at the life of James Armistead Lafayette as a case study for why Black Americans fought during the war and what happened to those that fought after the war.

- Start with the video in the teacher resources titled *James Armistead Lafayette: African American Trailblazer*. As students watch the video, have them answer the following questions: What surprised you about James's life? What impact did he have on the war? Why does he fight? Why was he not freed after the war, and when was he granted his freedom?

- Split the class into small groups to have them discuss their answers. After the small group discussion, elicit student responses to the main questions: Why did James fight and why was he freed? Record these initial assertions on the board on a T-chart.

- Next, students, in their groups, will travel to at least three stations to closely examine three primary documents (found in teacher resources numbers 3, 4, and 5). As they read each document, they should answer the main questions of why he fought and why he was eventually freed (the addition of questions that focus on comprehension of the documents will add to student analysis).

- Then have students discuss, in their small groups, reasons they think James fought and why he was freed based on the new information from the documents. Have them write a group answer on a notepad and have them add it to the T-chart that was previously written on the board. Students then discuss if they changed their minds on the answers to the questions.

Assessment: The previous day's work with documents prepared students for a Socratic seminar in which students use all the documents they reviewed to discuss the question: Why did Black Americans fight in the war? Students should use all of the documents and their own analysis as part of this discussion. Teachers can also have students research other Black Americans who participated in the war but are often silenced, to add depth to the dialogue. A reference sheet of possible individuals and groups is presented in the Teacher Resources section.

Teacher Resources:

1. The proclamation of John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, on November 7, 1775, can be found at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h42t.html.

2. The Library of Virginia's video *James Armistead Lafayette: African American Trailblazer* can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8aggoAU04s.

3. **Primary Document:** James's second petition to the Virginia Legislature for emancipation can be found at http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/docs/LafayettePet.pdf.

4. **Primary Document:** Letter from the Marquis de Lafayette: http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/american-spies-of-the-revolution/lafayettes-testimonial-to-james-armistead-lafayette/.

5. **Primary Document:** Chap. LXXXIX of the Virginia Legislature can be found at http://vagenweb.org/hening/vol12-17.htm#page_381. (Make sure to note that James's master was paid and that he could have voluntarily freed James, but then he would not have been compensated for the slave.)

6. Reference sheet of other African Americans who served in the war: http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume5/images/reference_sheet.pdf.