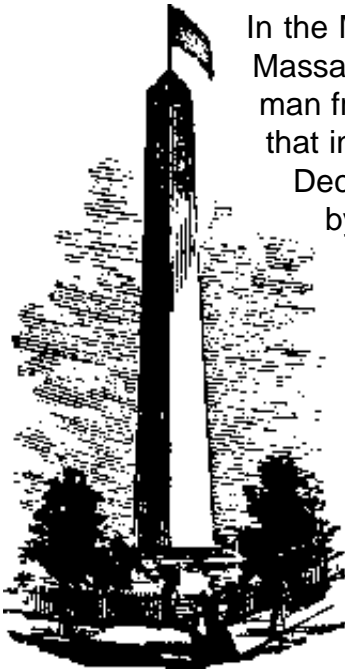


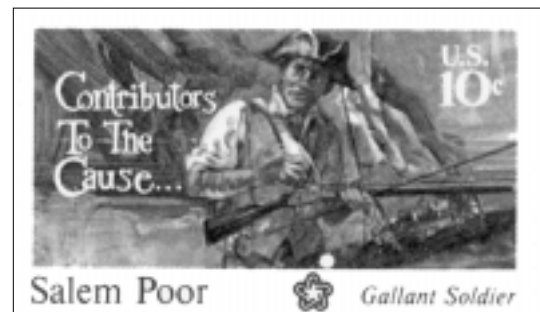
SALEM POOR: “A Brave and Gallant Soldier”



In the Massachusetts State Archives is a petition to the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, stating that in the “late Battle at Charlestown,” a man from Colonel Frye’s Regiment “behaved like an experienced officer” and that in this man “centers a brave and gallant soldier”. This document, dated December of 1775, just six months after the Battle of Bunker Hill, is signed by fourteen officers who were present at the battle, including William Prescott. Of the 2,400-4,000 colonists who participated in the battle, there is no other man singled out in this manner.

This hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill is Salem Poor of Andover, MA. Although documents show that Poor, along with his regiment and two others, were sent to Bunker Hill to build a fort and other fortifications on the night of June 16, 1775, we have no details as to exactly what Poor did to earn the accolades of these officers. The petition simply states, “to set forth particulars of his conduct would be tedious”. Perhaps his heroic deeds were too many to mention. One can only speculate.

Few details of this hero’s life are available to us. Born a slave from birth in the late 1740s, he managed to buy his freedom for the price of twenty-seven pounds in 1769, a year’s salary for many a working man at that time. He married Nancy, a free black woman, and they had a son. Salem Poor left his wife and child behind in May of 1775 and fought for the colonists’ cause at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, Valley Forge and Monmouth, among others. There are many reasons why this man may have chosen to undertake these actions. Was it his patriotism, or the possibility of a new and better life that led him to risk his life in battle? The Battle of Bunker Hill was a daring and provocative act against authority and oppression. This black man, who had literally bought his freedom, may have been fighting for another kind of freedom—equality with whites. In 1776 the Declaration of Independence stated that “all men are created equal”, but that equality did not extend to Poor’s race. As a man of African descent, he could not sit with whites on the main floor of his church, but had to sit in the balcony. He could work, but would find many jobs closed to those of his race. He could be taxed, but he could not vote, no matter how much money he had.



In 1975 Salem Poor was honored by the U.S. Postal Service.

Salem Poor is but one of some three dozen blacks who fought at Bunker Hill. As many as 5,000 African-Americans, both freemen and slaves, fought on the patriot side, while many more, tens of

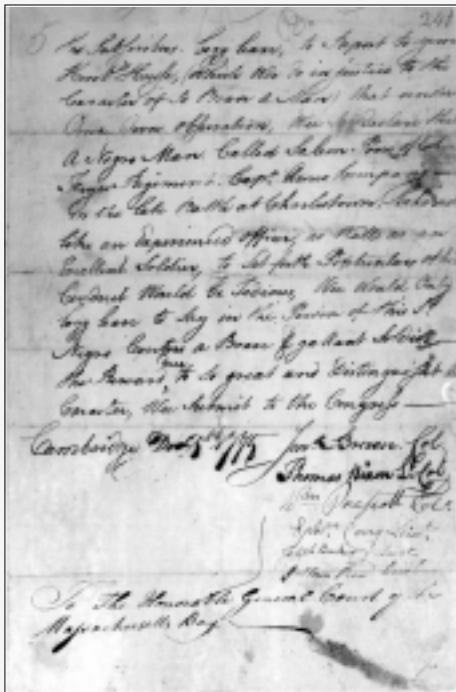
thousands, aided the British in this war. Neither Loyalist nor colonist affiliation afforded any advantage, for at the end of the War for American Independence blacks found themselves far from the freedom and equality for which they had hoped.

Many questions remain about this forgotten hero. We know little of his life, his death, his work, and his family. Why did this free black man choose to risk himself, fighting alongside men, some of whom owned slaves? And most important, why was this hero forgotten?

The Petition

The subscribers begg leave, to Report to your Honorable House (which wee do in justice to the carактер of so Brave a Man), that, under Our Own observation, Wee declare that a Negro Man, called Salem Poor, of Col. Fryes regiment, Capt. Ames company, in the late Battle at Charlestown, behaved like an Experienced officer, as well as an Excellent Soldier, to set forth Particulars of his conduct would be tedious, Wee Would Only begg leave to say in the Person of this said Negro Centers a brave and gallant soldier. The Reward due to so great and Distinguisht a Carácter, Wee Submit to the Congress.

Cambridge, Dec. 5, 1775



**The actual petition
with signatures**

Jona Brewer, Col.
Thomas Nixon Lt. Col
Wm. Prescott Col.
Ephm Corey Lieut
Joseph Baker Lieut
Joshua Read Lieut

To the Honorable General Court of the Massachusetts Bay

Jonas Richardson Capt
Eliphalet Bodwell Left
Josiah Foster Lieut
Ebenr Varnum Lt
Wm Hudson Ballard Capt
William Smith Capn
John Martin S ___ of a ___
Lieut Richard Welsh

In Council Decr 21 1775
Read and Sent Down

Perez Morton Sec'y

*Recommendation of Salem Poor a free Negro for his Bravery
at Battle of Charlestown*

leave to withdraw it

To the Honorable General Court of the Massachusetts Bay