

CR BIB # 405176

PETER SALEM

By

Teresa Wallace, Ph.D.
Curator

June 2000

Introduction

Historians for generations either ignored or underestimated the contributions that African Americans made during the American Revolution. Racism was the major reason for the exclusion of people of color from the story of the creation of the nation. However, as historians began to correct the neglect of the past, they encountered difficulties in trying to uncover the stories of those who had been marginalized by the dominant race. For example, in the lists of those who had fought in the war, African Americans often were not identified by name. On the military rolls, an African American might only be known as "A Negro Man" or 'Negro by Name' or 'A Negro name not known' or 'Negro Name unknown'.¹ The stories associated with these soldiers may never be known.

Even for men whose service in the war was acknowledged by name, the information about them is scant. The existing early town histories, always written by whites, which include the exploits of African-American soldiers, reflect the racial bias of the times in which they were written. There is often a patronizing or condescending tone to the sections of these histories that discuss African Americans.

Because of these factors, it is often difficult to develop an accurate picture of the life of a specific African American who fought in the American Revolution. For many individual African-American soldiers, their lives can be documented only by gathering together the scattered bits of information concerning them and trying to strip away the racial bias of the time in which the information was written. This article will attempt to document the life of one African-American soldier, Peter Salem, who fought both on April 19, 1775 and at Bunker Hill.

African-American Soldiers in the American Revolution

The American Revolution is most often seen as a battle for liberty. What meaning could fighting England for freedom have for an African American who was enslaved? Benjamin Quarles, the author of *The Negro in the American Revolution*, states, "The Negro's role in the Revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those 'unalienable rights' of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken."² African Americans fought in the war to free themselves from slavery. If that goal could be accomplished by fighting with those who opposed England, they did. For others the choice was to fight with the British. To be free was the compelling motivation.

The choice to fight for either side was not always available. Before the war, laws excluded African Americans from the militia, although in practice African Americans served in militias before the Revolution and at the very beginning of the war. Within the first year of the war, however, states, including Massachusetts, passed laws enforcing the exclusion of African Americans, both free and slave, from military service. As the war continued and the difficulties

¹ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 74.

² *Ibid.*, p. vii.

of recruiting men to fight grew, the policy changed again so that African Americans could join the military.³ For slaves military service offered an opportunity to earn their freedom.

African Americans, both free and slave, had lives of demanding work with few amenities. The hardships of army life for some were an improvement over the lives they had led before. The average African- American soldier was a private. "Even more than other privates, he tended to lack identity". He often was an orderly, waiter, drummer or served in the commissary. African- American soldiers commonly enlisted for longer terms, such as three years or the duration of the war, than whites did. They also tended to serve in the Continental Army, which required long tours of duty.⁴

Peter Salem

Peter Salem was born a slave in Framingham, Massachusetts. Only one source mentions a possible date of birth of about 1750.⁵ On one of the Framingham reenlistment rolls the ages of the soldiers are included but for Salem no age is listed.⁶ It was not unusual for a slave not to know his age or date of birth. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, abolitionist and African- American leader of the nineteenth century, explained in his autobiography that he did not know his own age. He added, "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. " For Douglass not knowing his age or date of birth was another bitter consequence of slavery.⁷ As a slave Peter Salem was also denied this knowledge of his own life.

Perhaps even more closely tied to personal identity than knowledge of one's age is one's name. A loving family did not give Peter Salem his name. One source suggests that the name Salem was used because Peter Salem's owner, Jeremiah Belknap, originally came from the town of Salem.⁸ Two other sources state that Peter Salem at times was known as Salem Middlesex.⁹ However his name was created, it was not a family name that was passed down through generations.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9, 13, 16, 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 74, 77, 78.

⁵ David E. Phillips, "Negroes in the American Revolution," *Journal of American History*, 5 (1911), 143. Phillips is not a reliable author. In his article he includes information on Salem's life without citing the sources he had researched. Many of the details on Salem's life that are included in the article are taken from Emory Washburn's *Historical Sketches of the Town of Leicester, Massachusetts, During the First Century from Its Settlement*, 1860 but without citing Washburn's book.

⁶ Josiah H. Temple, *History of Framingham Massachusetts 1640 – 1885*, A Special Centennial Year Reprinting of the 1887 Edition (New England History Press in Collaboration with the Framingham Historical and Natural History Society, 1988), p. 320.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993), p. 39.

⁸ Phillips, "Negroes in the American Revolution" p. 143. See footnote 5 for a cautionary note concerning this article.

⁹ Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 324 and William Barry *A History of Framingham, Massachusetts, including the Plantation from 1640 to the Present Time* (Boston: James Munroe & Co., 1847) p. 64 footnote.

Little is known about Salem's life before he became a minuteman. Who were his parents? Were they slaves of Jeremiah Belknap? Was Salem separated from his family as a child? Did he have siblings? It is assumed that Salem was born at Jeremiah Belknap's home, which still stands in Framingham. In a valuation of property that was completed in 1760 there were seven "servants for life" in Framingham. Presumably Salem was one of the seven. Perhaps other family members of his were also included in this number. On August 16, 1760 he was admitted to the church under the half-way covenant. Slave owners were concerned that their slaves be Christians and part of the church. Only twenty-five African Americans resided in Framingham between 1764 and 1765.¹⁰ It is assumed that Salem was one of the twenty-five.

Salem's owner, Jeremiah Belknap, sold him to Lawson Buckminster before the war. Buckminster owned a sawmill in Framingham where Salem may have worked. The sawmill no longer exists, although the site of the mill is known. Buckminster allowed him to join the town's minuteman company. By giving him permission to join the company, Buckminster gave Salem his freedom, since slaves were not allowed to join minuteman companies.¹¹

Salem was a private in Captain Simon Edgell's Framingham Company of minutemen when the company responded to the alarm on April 19, 1775. The companies that marched from Framingham to Concord joined the fighting east of Meriam's Corner. Salem and the other Framingham soldiers were part of the force that battled the Regulars as they retreated to Boston. The Framingham companies fought all the way to Cambridge. Salem served a total of four days and had the distinction of fighting in the first battle of the American Revolution.¹²

On April 23, 1775 the Continental Congress requested that Massachusetts provide 13,500 men for eight months of military service. On April 24, 1775 Salem enlisted in the company of Thomas Drury who had been a lieutenant in Captain Edgell's company. Drury had resigned his commission and recruited men for his own company of which he became captain. Sixty-three men enlisted in the company and received pay beginning on April 24. The enlistment was for eight months.¹³

Fifty men of Drury's company, including Salem, fought at Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. It is this battle for which Salem is remembered. His fame derives from the traditionally held belief that during the battle, along with others, Salem shot and killed Major John Pitcairn of the Royal Marines, who had also fought on April 19, 1775.¹⁴ Benjamin Quarles in *The Negro in the American Revolution* comments on traditional stories of African-American heroism in the Revolution. Concerning Peter Salem he states, "...the contention that at Bunker Hill the shot that killed marine officer John Pitcairn was fired by former slave Peter Salem must be handled cautiously."¹⁵ It is documented that Salem, as well as other African Americans, fought at Bunker Hill. There is no documentation, however, to prove that he shot Pitcairn.

¹⁰ Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 324, Barry, *History of Framingham, Massachusetts*, p. 63 and Telephone Conversation between Stephen Herring, Chair, Framingham Historical Commission, and Teresa Wallace, May 23, 2000.

¹¹ Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 324 and Telephone Conversation with Stephen Herring.

¹² Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 277 – 278.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁵ Quarles. *The Negro in the American Revolution*, p. xi.

Salem's fame as the man who shot Major Pitcairn also comes from a painting by John Trumbull that depicts the death of Pitcairn. The painting is dramatic but not historically accurate. Trumbull was not at the scene of the battle. He created his painting in 1786 in London and may have used a model to represent Peter Salem.¹⁶ The painting itself contributes nothing to understanding Salem's actions at Bunker Hill.

Lithographs of Trumbull's painting were created. By 1855 the lithographs had eliminated Salem from the scene.¹⁷ Although the painting is not historically accurate and does not provide a portrait of Salem, removing the African-American soldier from the scene reflects the continuing and growing racism of American society in the mid-nineteenth century. African Americans fought at Bunker Hill but in the lithographs the African-American contribution is erased.

In January 1776 there was a call for 4,368 men to serve at Cambridge until April 1. Captain Simon Edgell raised a company of eighty-five men of which twenty-five were from Framingham. Peter Salem was among them. Framingham paid the men who had enlisted a bounty of one pound each.¹⁸

In January 1777 Salem enlisted in the Continental Army for three years. Salem's enlistment for three years reflected the trend, noted by historian Benjamin Quarles and discussed earlier, for African Americans to serve longer in the military than whites and to enlist in the Continental Army. Although some who enlisted at the same time as Salem chose to enlist for the duration of the war, Salem decided to enlist only for three years.¹⁹ Salem served until he was discharged in March 1780. (See Appendix 1 which is a copy of the entry for Peter Salem that appears in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*).

When the war ended, Salem returned to Framingham. In 1783 he married Katy Benson who was the granddaughter of Nero Benson, a slave who had been born in Africa and who had been owned by the Reverend John Swift. On Swift's death in 1745 he bequeathed Benson to his son-in-law, Ebenezer Robic. Benson had married Dido, who also was Swift's slave. Dido remained with Swift's wife until the widow died. Swift's will stipulated that Dido then would be given to his daughter, Martha Farrer. Katy Benson's grandparents were slaves and most likely she was born a slave. In 1783, however, Massachusetts ended slavery so Katy probably was free when she married Peter. The marriage ended about 1792 or 1793.²⁰ It is unknown if the marriage produced children.

After the marriage ended, Salem moved to Leicester (pronounced Lester), Massachusetts. In Leicester he made and mended baskets and caned chairs. Basket making was not an unusual

¹⁶ Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770 - 1800* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 297 - 298.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 304 - 305.

²⁰ Phillips, "Negroes in the American Revolution", p. 144. See footnote 5 for a cautionary note concerning this article.

occupation for African Americans in New England. It was a traditional African craft.²¹ Although Salem was born in American, he may have acquired the skill from other slaves.

In Leicester he built a cabin on the south side of the road leading to Auburn and planted flowers, trees and a vegetable garden. The road would later be named Peter Salem Road in his honor. It is still called that today and is near a Pitcairn Road and a Bunker Hill Road. Many years after Salem had left Leicester, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a marker at the site of his home which no longer stood. The marker stated, "Here Lived Peter Salem a Negro Soldier of the Revolution".²²

In *Historical Sketches of the Town of Leicester, Massachusetts* about two and a half pages are devoted to Salem's life. It is significant that an African American would be included in a town history of 1860 in an overwhelmingly white town. The tone of the sketch, however, makes a modern reader cringe. A story is told how Salem would come to attention and "salute Massa Moore or Mistress D. on passing, in return for the salutation or nod with which everybody greeted him." The use of the word, massa, is particularly offensive. Salem is depicted in an inferior relationship to the white community in which he lived.²³ He likes everyone and they like him, he and the children especially like each other, but he does not appear to have been given the respect one would expect a man of his age and a veteran of the Revolution to receive.

Despite the warm feelings the town supposedly had towards Salem, when he became old and could no longer support himself, he was sent back to Framingham, where he had been born, in order for the town of Framingham to support him. Samuel Hemenway and Salem's former masters, Jeremiah Belknap and Lawson Buckminster, provided financial support for Salem for the rest of his life. He died August 16, 1816 and was buried in a pauper's grave. Later a monument was erected to honor his service in the American Revolution. The marker states, "Peter Salem/A Soldier of the Revolution/Concord/Bunker Hill/Saratoga/ Died August 16th, 1816". It still stands in the cemetery where Salem is buried, although the exact location of Salem's grave is unknown.²⁴

Much later Salem was again remembered and honored for his contributions to the American Revolution. In 1971 the American Negro Commemorative Society, an organization that honors African Americans who have significantly contributed to America's history, honored Peter Salem with its thirty-fourth medal for his role as a soldier in the American Revolution.²⁵

The information concerning Salem's life and his years as a soldier is limited. It is also difficult to separate fact from fiction. It is important that an African-American soldier's involvement in the war has not been either totally forgotten or ignored in the town histories of Framingham and

²¹ William Dillon Pierson, *Black Yankees: the Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) p. 98.

²² Emory Washburn, *Historical Sketches, Town of Leicester, Massachusetts, During the First Century from Its Settlement* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1860) p. 267 and *Handbook of Historical Data Concerning Leicester, Massachusetts* (1900) p. 30.

²³ Washburn, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 267 – 268.

²⁴ Washburn, *Historical Sketches*, p. 268 and Temple, *History of Framingham*, p. 327.

²⁵ Medal Honors Framingham Black who Fought in the American Revolution, *South Middlesex News*, June 13, 1971.

Leicester. One wonders though how Peter Salem would have been remembered in Framingham and Leicester if he had been white.

APPENDIX 1

Below is the entry for Peter Salem that appears in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*, Vol. XIII, pages 743 and 744.

SALEM, PETER, Framingham. Private, Capt. Simon Edgel's co. of Minute-men, which marched on the alarm of April 19, 1775, to Concord and Cambridge; service, 4 days; *also*, petition addressed to Gen. Ward, dated Camp Cambridge, June 5, 1775, signed by said Salem and others belonging to Capt. Drury's co., stating that they had enlisted to serve in Col. Nixon's regt. but had been shifted to Col. Gardner's regt., and requesting that they might be permitted to continue in Col. Nixon's regt.; *also*, Private, Capt. Thomas Drury's co., Col. John Nixon's (5th) regt.; muster roll dated Aug. 1, 1775; enlisted April 24, 1775; service, 3 mos. 15 days; *also*, company return dated Winter Hill, Sept. 30, 1775; *also*, Capt. Micajah Gleason's (3d) co., Lieut. Col. Thomas Nixon's (4th) regt.; regimental return dated North Castle, Nov. 9, 1776; *also*, (late) Capt. Gleason's co.; company receipts for wages for Sept.-Dec., 1776; *also*, list of men raised to serve in the Continental Army from 2d co., 5th Middlesex Co. regt., as returned by Lieut. Lawson Buckminster to Col. Micah Stone; residence, Framingham; engaged for town of Framingham; joined Capt. Barnes's co., Col. Nixon's regt.; term, 3 years; *also*, Private, Capt. J. Holden's (4th) co., Col. Thomas Nixon's (6th) regt.; Continental Army pay accounts for service from Jan. 1, 1777, to Dec. 31, 1779; *also*, Capt. Thomas Barnes's co., Col. Nixon's (5th) regt.; return of men who were in camp on or before Aug. 15, 1777, and who had not been absent subsequently except on furlough, etc., certified at Camp near Peekskill, Feb. 16, 1779; *also*, Capt. John Holden's co., Col. Nixon's regt.; muster roll for May, 1779, dated Highlands; enlisted Jan. 1, 1777; enlistment, 3 years; *also*, same co. and regt.; pay rolls for June-Dec., 1779; *also*, Capt. Clayer's co., Col. Nixon's regt.; Continental Army pay accounts for service from Jan. 1, 1780, to March 1, 1780; reported discharged March 1, 1780.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barry, William. *A History of Framingham, Massachusetts, including the Plantation from 1640 to the Present Time*. Boston: James Munroe & Co, 1847.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston: Bedford Books, 1993.

Handbook of Historical Data Concerning Leicester, Massachusetts. 1900.

Kaplan, Sidney. *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770 - 1800*. Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973.

Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, A Compilation from the Archives Prepared and Published by the Secretary of the Commonwealth. Vol. XIII. Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1905.

Nash, Gary. *Race and Revolution*. Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1990.

Nell, William. *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons: to which is added a Brief Survey of the Condition and Prospects of Colored Americans*. Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855.

Pierson, William Dillon. *Black Yankees: the Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Phillips, David E. "Negroes in the American Revolution." *Journal of American History*. 5 (1911), 143 - 146.

Quarles, Benjamin. *The Negro in the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961.

South Middlesex News. Medal Honors Framingham Black who Fought in the American Revolution. June 13, 1971.

Temple, Josiah. *History of Framingham Massachusetts 1640 - 1885*. A Special Centennial. Year Reprinting of the 1887 Edition. New England History Press in Collaboration with the Framingham Historical and Natural History Society, 1988.

Washburn, Emory. *Historical Sketches, Town of Leicester, Massachusetts, During the First Century from Its Settlement*. Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1860.

Wright, Donald R. *African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution*. Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1990.