
Washington, Harry

(c. 1740–1800s),

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Revolutionary-era runaway slave, British Loyalist, and early settler in Sierra Leone, is believed to have been born in the Senegambia region of Africa. George Washington, then a colonel in the army of the British Empire, purchased Harry in 1763, along with Nan (believed to have been his wife) and four other slaves as a part of Washington's Great Dismal Swamp plan. According to this plan, Washington and five other planters would each provide five slaves to form a workforce to drain sixty square miles of the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and establish a rice plantation. By 1766 Washington had moved both Harry and Nan to work on his Mount Vernon Plantation in Virginia.

In 1771 Washington sent Harry to work on the construction of a mill approximately three miles from the Mansion House. Clearly not content with his lot as a slave, Harry made his first attempt at obtaining his freedom by fleeing from the worksite on 29 July 1771. However, he only remained free for a few weeks before being recaptured and returned to his owner as a result of advertisements of his escape posted by Washington. (This escape attempt is noted in Washington's *Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 3, 45.) Ironically, Harry's unsuccessful attempt at freedom mirrored much of the language of his owner and other Revolutionary leaders in their quest for independence from England.

With the rising tensions between Britain and her American colonies, the Loyalist governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation offering freedom to those slaves able to cross over to his fleet. According to his proclamation issued on 14 November 1775, freedom would be granted to “all indented servants, Negroes, or others ... that are able to bear arms” (Robert L. Scribner, *Revolutionary Virginia*, vol. 4, 334). On 24 July 1776 a small boat carrying three of General Washington's slaves offering their services to the British docked with the HMS *Roebuck*. Owing in part to an entry found in the Book of Negroes (which listed freedmen evacuated from New York by the British following the war), in which Harry states that he had run away from General Washington seven years earlier, Cassandra Pybus contends that Harry was among those brought aboard HMS *Roebuck* (Pybus, 19).

Lord Dunmore hoped to form what he called the “Ethiopian Regiment,” a force of freedmen organized to fight in the southern colonies. However, depleting numbers, primarily due to smallpox epidemics among the freedmen, forced Lord Dunmore to leave Virginia for New York. On 7 August 1776 Harry and approximately two hundred to three hundred other surviving members of the Ethiopian Regiment and their families sailed along with Dunmore for New York. In New York, Harry worked for the Royal Artillery Department. Harry subsequently accompanied the British forces during their invasion of South Carolina, serving as a corporal in a corps of about sixty “Black Pioneers” with the Royal Artillery Department.

With the defeat of British forces and the surrender at Yorktown, an evacuation of the South became necessary. Those former slaves who could substantiate their role in aiding the British received a certificate of freedom and transport from Charleston. Harry had little difficulty proving eligibility for his certificate of freedom because of his many years of service with the Royal Artillery Department. As such, Harry took part in the final evacuation of Charleston and returned once more to New York. Terms of the provisional peace treaty, however, prohibited the removal of any slave property of Americans. Therefore, it became clear that if the British were to honor their pledge of freedom to escaped slaves they would need to be quickly removed from America. On 31 July 1783 Harry once again took part in an evacuation; this time leaving aboard *L'Abondance* destined for Nova Scotia.

The freedmen and women faced numerous problems in Nova Scotia and ultimately found residency there to be unacceptable. Among other concerns, whites denied blacks the right to vote and adequate protections from violence. In response to these complaints, the prime minister agreed to pay the expenses for those willing to relocate to the new colony of Sierra Leone in Africa. The Sierra Leone Company, interested in attracting settlers, promised to provide twenty acres for every man, ten acres for each woman, and five acres for each child. Harry was among the approximately twelve hundred who chose to venture to Sierra Leone in November 1791. Harry's distaste for life in Nova Scotia can perhaps best be seen in viewing what he was willing to leave behind: two town lots, a home, and forty acres (Records of the British Colonial Office).

Harry soon found trouble in Sierra Leone as well. Local blacks wanted the opportunity to select their own leaders as opposed to having them appointed by the Sierra Leone Company. As a result, in 1800 a number of men began considering ways to limit the authority of the governor solely to the affairs of the Sierra Leone Company. In response to appeals from the governor, British troops and Maroons from Jamaica arrived in order to quell the potential uprising. Harry and twenty-nine others ultimately surrendered to the British authorities. In October 1800 a military tribunal sentenced Harry to be exiled to the Bullom Shore, where the exile community elected him as their leader. He later received amnesty and may have returned to Sierra Leone. The date and location of his death was not recorded.

Further Reading

Frey, Sylvia. *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in the Revolutionary Age* (1991)

Norton, Mary Beth. "The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 4 (Oct. 1971).

Pybus, Cassandra. *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (2006)