

Book Lists Revolutionary War's Black, Native American Soldiers

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In their haste to enroll enlistees to fight on the American side in the Revolutionary War, officials jotted down names, where the men came from — and little else.

Occasionally, records identified someone as black, but for the vast majority of those soldiers and sailors, their distinction as black or Native Americans was lost, and with that the fact that thousands of blacks and Native Americans fought for their country's independence.

Now, after years of pressure by two Plainville natives, many black and Native American soldiers are properly identified. In May, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution published a book that lists those veterans and identifies them as either black or Native American.

The book, "Forgotten Patriots — African American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War," names 5,000 black soldiers and an additional 1,600 who were Native Americans. They were among the estimated 250,000 Americans who fought in the war.

The book lists the names of 450 blacks and Native Americans from Connecticut, a number of whom distinguished themselves in combat — soldiers such as Jordan Freeman and Lambert Latham, two black men from Groton who died in the Battle of Groton Heights in 1781. In that engagement, a small garrison of Americans was overwhelmed by a much larger British force.

Important Contribution

For Maurice Barboza, who grew up in Plainville and now lives in Washington, D.C., the book came as a surprising and happy conclusion to an uphill battle. Since 1984, he and his aunt, the late Lena Ferguson, had been pressing the DAR to honor a settlement with Ferguson and do a full accounting of black soldiers in the war. For many years, Ferguson and Barboza complained that the DAR was dragging its feet and making only a half-hearted effort.

Barboza said he thought he would never see the book published.

"This is extraordinary research," Barboza said about the 854-page volume. "It makes me feel happy. I feel like my aunt is inside of it."

Ferguson died in 2004.

According to the DAR, the book is intended to be as definitive a list as possible of the soldiers whose role in our nation's birth is often overlooked. DAR has published previous books that did not list many of the blacks and Native American soldiers.

"For the past few years this has been as important to us as anything we have ever done," said DAR Administrator Stephen Nordholt. "We have collected a wealth of information."

Gary Nash, a history professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, said the book makes an important contribution to scholarship on the American Revolution.

"Now we have names, and that's important to historians," Nash said. "And we have concrete evidence of how many black soldiers there were, rather than a rough guess."

Nash co-wrote an op-ed piece with Barboza that was published by The New York Times in 2004. The piece criticized the DAR's efforts on the project. Soon afterward, Nash organized a conference on black soldiers in the war for the DAR that he said helped get the work going again.

"A number of historians believed that the DAR was excluding people who were partly black and people for whom they thought there was no contemporary description, but who historians know were black," he said.

Nash said there may be more black soldiers who are still not properly identified, and Nordholt said the DAR is open to adding more people to the list.

"We hope this ignites more research," Nordholt said. "We haven't said this is the end."

Sloppy record-keeping by American officials during the war hindered research, he said. The lists of men who signed up often do not describe them and some descriptions were confusing. The book includes lengthy descriptions of what often appears to be detective work by the DAR's researchers. Records kept during the war often had to be verified through pension records and information from the census done after the war. Names were also an important clue. Many names given to blacks were rarely given to whites.

One such man was Primus Babcock of Preston. He came forward many years after the war when he applied for a pension for his service. He had to document his experience as a soldier with an honorable discharge that had been written by George Washington, according to a contemporary account included in "Forgotten Patriots."

Incomplete Victory

The book gives some details about a few of the soldiers, but most of the volume consists of each soldier's name, his racial background and where he came from, if possible. A few are simply listed as being African American.

But like many battles, this was not a complete victory for Barboza. He is thrilled to see so many soldiers named, but frustrated that the DAR did not mention his aunt and her role in how the book came about.

"I praise the research and the researchers, but conclude that the leadership of the DAR was not sorry for what they did to Lena," Barboza said in an e-mail. "There was never a formal apology. The book, and the acknowledgment of her role in its creation, was supposed to be an apology and a way of making her whole."

Ferguson tried to join the DAR in the early 1980s and was rejected even though she was descended from a man who fought in the Revolutionary War. Ferguson, who was black, said at the time that she believed she was rejected because of her racial background. She threatened to sue the DAR and the resulting settlement admitted her to the organization and obligated the DAR to do as full a list as possible of the black soldiers in the war.

The DAR published a book in 2001 that stemmed from that 1984 settlement. It listed 2,000 black soldiers, but Barboza said at the time that many black soldiers were left out and he accused the DAR of making a half-hearted effort. He said in a recent interview that the new book is far more thorough and is what he and his aunt were seeking all along.

In 2002, the DAR insisted it had done all it could. Barboza thought he and the DAR were at a standoff and moved on to other projects. But in 2005 he heard that another book was in the works. He contacted the DAR, offered ideas and pressed organization officials to recognize Ferguson's role.

In an e-mail exchange with Barboza, Nordholt said Ferguson was not mentioned in the new book because the DAR believes that it is a separate project from the one published in 2001, which stemmed from the 1984 settlement. Nordholt said in an interview with The Courant that outside pressure such as lobbying by Barboza had nothing to do with the new book.

"We were aware of concerns about the first book," Nordholt said. "Did it influence us? No. The research was already underway. We understand certain points of view about what we were doing, but they were not representative of what was going on here."

Barboza dismissed the DAR's explanations, saying it is trying to rewrite the history behind the book. But he's not dwelling on his aunt's not getting credit he thinks she's due.

"She finally won her battle, even though she's not here anymore," Barboza said. "It's pointless to harp on whether or not her name is in the book. We know what we did."

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