

VIRGINIA'S USE OF BLACKS IN THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

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PERHAPS one of the least widely recognized facets of the Negro's role in American history is his frequent participation in military affairs. Most Americans are aware, although somewhat vaguely, of the contributions he made during the Civil War and the conflicts which came later, but the Negro's role in military matters prior to the 1860's has been overlooked. In recent years, however, this neglected area has received increased attention and a clearer picture of black involvement has emerged. A number of historians, among them Benjamin Quarles, have studied the part the black played in the pre-Civil War engagements and they have established that he played a much more vital role in those wars than previous generations recognized.

The most significant work done which deals with an episode of Negro participation in military operations prior to the Civil War is Benjamin Quarles' *The Negro in the American Revolution*.¹ In his masterful study Professor Quarles meticulously examined the whole Revolution, and then he wrote an account of the war pointing out the not inconsiderable contribution made by blacks to both sides as a combatant and non-combatant. In preparing the background of his book, Quarles briefly alluded to the use of blacks in the colonial militias during the French and Indian War.² This topic, the use of the Negro in the militia prior to the 1770's, has not been examined in any great detail. A step in the right direction to correct this oversight can be made by studying Virginia's record in employing blacks in the French and Indian War.

Virginia seems the best example to use for several reasons. First, Virginia played the leading role, among the southern colonies, in the war from its beginning to its conclusion. Furthermore, Virginia's large

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1 Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 3-200. Cited hereafter as Quarles, *Negro in the Revolution*.

2 *Ibid.*, 8. Also see Benjamin Quarles, "The Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLV (1959), 643-652.

frontier was quite vulnerable to attack which required the mobilization of considerable manpower to defend it. And finally, of course, Virginia's large black population coupled with the urgent need for manpower invites study.³

During the periods of relative peace between the colonial wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Negroes, free or slave, were usually barred from service with the militia in any capacity whatsoever.⁴ Virginia was no exception and the ban against blacks was enforced in peacetime.⁵ Only when the French and Indian War began and the pressure for more and more manpower mounted did Virginia alter its policy and provide for limited use of its black population. The reasons for excluding the Negro population from military service in Virginia are the obvious. Arming Negroes, free or slave, and acquainting them with military organization and discipline created the danger of providing them the means for engaging in an insurrection which Virginia constantly feared.⁶ Moreover, the exemption of slaves was deemed mandatory since they were a form of private property which required, if slaves were to be mobilized even on a limited scale, special and very complicated legislation to direct the care and use of slaves and to provide compensation to the owner should the slave become a casualty. All this was considered too dangerous or complex to make the use of blacks, under ordinary circumstances, seem attractive.⁷ So Negroes were not used in the Virginia militia throughout the colonial period on any regular or extensive basis.

In the latter part of 1754, as the French and Indian War got under way, the Virginia assembly authorized that troops be raised

3 United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D. C., 1960), 756. According to the foregoing source in 1750, the Negro population of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia was 204,702. Of that total figure of 204,702 Virginia's black population was 101,452. By 1756, blacks in Virginia numbered 120,156. According to Robert Dinwiddie to Lords of Trade, February 23, 1756, in R. A. Brock, ed., *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie, Lieutenant-Governor of the Colony of Virginia, 1751-1758*, in *The Collections of the Virginia Historical Society* (Richmond, 1884), IV, 345. Cited hereafter as *Dinwiddie Papers*.

4 Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York, 1967), 45-46. Cited hereafter as Quarles, *Negro in Making of America*.

5 Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through the Middle Settlements in North-America in the Year 1759 and 1760 with Observations upon the State of the Colonies* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1960), 15. Also Benjamin Quarles, "The Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLV (1959), 643.

6 Quarles, *Negro in Making of America*, 46. James C. Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (Baltimore, 1902), 73-74.

7 *Ibid.*

to assist in the planned assault upon the French positions in the Ohio River country. No one fully understood the magnitude of the struggle commencing at that point so the assembly maintained a fairly traditional attitude toward the use of blacks. The legislation which created the desired force specified that servants, indentured or bought, were automatically exempt from service and that free Negroes and mulattoes could be recruited but they could not be armed.⁸ The permission to enlist free blacks and mulattoes to serve as menials was the only concession the assembly made to the emerging crisis.

As General Edward Braddock formed his expedition to march on Fort Duquesne, he decided to take advantage of the 1754 legislation. He ordered that free Negroes and mulattoes be allowed to enlist and serve as batmen to his officers who had not brought personal servants to Virginia.⁹ A number of such batmen were recruited to serve on the expedition at the expense of Virginia.¹⁰ Thus were blacks to make their first contribution to Virginia's war effort. While they were originally intended to serve as menials on the campaign the batmen became combatants in the crisis which arose. Toward the end of the campaign, as the pressure on Braddock's column mounted, General Braddock ordered that all batmen carry a firelock and to ready themselves for combat.¹¹ When the final disaster befell the expedition and it was crushed the batmen fought and a number of them were casualties.¹² The blood of blacks was shed in the first major engagement in which Virginia participated.

Virginia's Lieutenant Governor, Robert Dinwiddie, was horrified over the results of Braddock's efforts in the Ohio valley and he grimly began to prepare for the anticipated onslaught upon Virginia's frontier.

8 William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of all the laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (Richmond and Philadelphia, 1809-1823), VI, 421. Cited hereafter as Hening, *Statutes at Large*. A mulatto according to Virginia law was the child of an Indian and the child, grandchild or great-grandchild of a Negro, *ibid.*, III, 252. John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865* (Baltimore, 1913), 109-110.

9 Edward Braddock to Robert Napier, March 17, 1755, in Stanley M. Pargellis, ed., *Military Affairs in North America, 1748-1765* (New York, 1936), 78. Franklin T. Nichols, "The Organization of Braddock's Army," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, IV (1947), 145.

10 *Ibid.* The number of batmen would not have been too great, and, obviously, letting blacks enlist as personal servants was hardly a massive mobilization but it was a departure from the norm.

11 Robert Orme's *Journal*, in Winthrop Sargeant, ed., *The History of an Expedition Against Fort Duquesne, in 1755, under Major-General Edward Braddock* (Philadelphia, 1855), 350.

12 *Virginia Gazette*, Hunter, September 5, 1755. Also Stanley M. Pargellis, "Braddock's Defeat," *American Historical Review*, XLI (1936), 257-259.

Dinwiddie was to experience two major problems in the early years of the war and both would contribute to increased use of blacks in the militia. One of his constant frustrations was the low quality and poor performance of the militia.¹³ To his dismay, Dinwiddie discovered that whites who were eligible to bear arms came forward with great reluctance and then deserted in droves. And secondly, he found the Virginia assembly unwilling to improve upon the militia which caused him to warn the legislators they were shirking their responsibilities which served to widen the gulf between Dinwiddie and the assembly already evident in the latter part of 1755.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Dinwiddie tried to bring order out of chaos with what means he had. Dinwiddie commissioned George Washington a colonel in the militia and gave him a regiment with which to protect the Virginia frontier.¹⁵ Washington established his headquarters at Winchester, Virginia, and assumed the vexing task of organizing the militia and trying to protect the vulnerable settlements.

As the assembly proved reluctant to provide the manpower Dinwiddie requested in 1755, the use of blacks as laborers became more attractive. In 1755, the assembly did authorize the enlistment of blacks in the militia to serve as drummers, trumpeters and pioneers or to do such servile labor as they were directed to perform, but under no circumstance were they to be armed.¹⁶ For Colonel Washington, who needed men badly, the utilization of Negroes had the obvious merit of releasing white militiamen from ordinary labor and allowing them to bear arms. So, by the end of 1755, Washington's command made free use of blacks in such capacities as carpenters, axemen and all other sorts of labor.¹⁷ As the year ended, blacks had been elevated, however slightly, above the status of a body servant even though many continued in that capacity.

In 1756, the legislature agreed to increase the strength of the Virginia Regiment under Washington's command to 1,500 men.¹⁸ The

13 Robert Dinwiddie to Sir Thomas Robinson, July 23, 1755, and Dinwiddie to Colonel John Buchanan, August 14, 1755, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 112-113, 156-157.

14 *Journal of the House of Burgesses*, 1755, microfilm copy, 1-2. Louis K. Koontz, *The Virginia Frontier* (Baltimore, 1925), 166. Cited hereafter as Koontz, *The Virginia Frontier*.

15 *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 184-186.

16 Hening, *Statutes at Large*, VI, 531-533.

17 George Washington to Captain Peter Hogg, December 27, 1755, in J. C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D. C., 1931-1944), I, 259. Cited hereafter as Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*.

18 The Virginia Regiment was to be on duty at all times and not a reserve force such as was the normal function of the militia. *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 184-186.

assembly did not, however, really help the situation as it provided that the additional manpower was to come from voluntary enlistments and if the volunteers were not forthcoming in great enough numbers the balance was to be conscripted from unmarried men in the militia.¹⁹ Unmarried men could avoid serving in the Virginia Regiment by finding a substitute or by paying a £10 fine.²⁰ Consequently, the raising of sorely needed manpower went slowly and the use of blacks as laborers was unabated.

Washington soon learned that the quality and number of men reporting to his command were unsatisfactory.²¹ Coupled with the trickle of new manpower, Washington's command was plagued with injury, disease and desertion all of which made black laborers more valuable. Then, to complicate matters even more, the Virginia Regiment was ordered to build a string of forts across the Virginia frontier to protect settlers and the task was assigned to Captain Peter Hogg who commanded one of the companies of Washington's regiment.²² This additional burden assigned to the Virginia Regiment, which was already overburdened, caused Washington much distress and he turned to the increased use of Negroes and mulattoes to provide the labor supply to complete all the duties required of his regiment.²³

The pressure to use servants of all kinds in the militia and the Virginia Regiment mounted in late 1756 into 1757. Recruits who reported for service in Virginia were of poor quality and too few in number.²⁴ Washington seemed convinced that the only answer to his

19 Hening, *Statutes at Large*, VII, 3-5.

20 *Ibid.* Richard L. Morton, *Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1960), II, 686. Koontz, *The Virginia Frontier*, 85. Governor Dinwiddie to Colonel Washington, August 21, 1756, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 485.

21 George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 25, 1756, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 394. Governor Dinwiddie to Colonel Washington, August 19, 1756, and August 21, 1756, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 479-483, 484-485.

22 George Washington to Captain Peter Hogg, July 21, 1756, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 460-461. "Instructions for Captain Hogg," July 21, 1756, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 400-402. The Virginia Regiment was composed of sixteen companies and Captain Hogg commanded First Company, *ibid.*, I, 272. Hayes Baker-Crothers, *Virginia and the French and Indian War* (Chicago, 1928), 101-105.

23 George Washington to Captain John McNeil, July 21, 1756, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 407. Governor Dinwiddie to Captain Hogg, August 23, 1756, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 488-489. Washington's need for men was so great he began to suggest that Dinwiddie attempt to secure authority for him to enlist servants, Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, August 4, 1756, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 418.

24 Loudon to Cumberland, March 8, 1757, in Pargellis, *Military Affairs in North America, 1748-1765*, 319. Washington to John Robinson, November

need for men was to persuade the Virginia assembly to authorize the use of servants. When the assembly met in 1757, however, it chose to disregard all the pleas for broadening the provisions of the militia act and instead demonstrated a rather conservative approach to the question. Free Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians could enlist in the militia as drummers, trumpeters, pioneers or to perform servile labor, but, as usual, they were not to be armed.²⁵ All imported servants were exempted from service.²⁶ And slaves, of course, were ruled out in that the regulations carefully stipulated that only free Negroes and mulattoes might serve in limited ways. About the only concession the assembly made to the plea for additional manpower was to alter the age at which a man became old enough, or too old, to serve with the militia. In the militia act of 1755, the assembly set twenty-one as the minimum age for service in the militia and fifty as the oldest age.²⁷ Because of the need for men the act of 1757 declared that the eighteen-year-old was eligible to serve and all men up to sixty were to stand ready to serve.²⁸ As a result of this new act, the situation was not much improved and blacks were to continue as a primary source of labor for the Virginia war effort.

The main reason the assembly balked at arming blacks, free or slave, was the fear of insurrection. Since the struggle began in 1755, the people of Virginia were fearful that the turmoil attending the war might promote a slave rebellion.²⁹ All public figures had to take this view into account while making policy decisions and the assembly, which was most sensitive to public opinion, refused to retreat from its usual position against arming blacks.

Not only were blacks viewed with suspicion in Virginia, so were Catholics. The assembly passed an act in 1756, which required that all known or suspected Papists take an oath of allegiance to His Majesty's government.³⁰ If the accused individuals took the oath, they were to be kept under surveillance by local Justices of the Peace. On the other hand, if the reputed Papist refused to take the prescribed oath he was

9, 1756, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 499-507. Governor Dinwiddie to Colonel Washington, January 26, 1757, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 584-585.

25 Hening, *Statutes at Large*, VII, 15-16.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, VI, 533.

29 Governor Dinwiddie to Charles Carter, July 18, 1755, in *Dinwiddie Papers*, IV, 102. Governor Dinwiddie to Earl of Halifax, July 23, 1755, in *ibid.*, 114. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, I, 336n.

30 Hening, *Statutes at Large*, VII, 15.

to surrender all arms, ammunition and weapons to the county in which he resided other than those a Justice of the Peace might allow him to retain to defend his home and person.³¹ A Papist, or reputed Papist, who refused to take the oath and surrender his arms within ten days could be imprisoned in the county jail for three months, have all his arms seized and be forced to pay a fine three times the appraised value of the confiscated weapons.³² In view of the suspicions of Catholics and the action taken against them, it is not difficult to understand why the attitude toward arming blacks went essentially unchanged. War often stirs and reinforces the deepest prejudices in men. Papists might prove troublesome, but armed blacks might prove to be a disaster. Consequently, the Virginians remained steadfast in their opposition to mobilizing blacks except in a very limited and controlled manner.

The decision not to arm blacks and to exclude servants of all types from serving in the militia guaranteed that blacks would serve in un-spectacular ways. Occasionally, however, a black received recognition for outstanding service to the colony. One such case involved a black slave named Francois. Francois had escaped from Fort Duquesne and made his way to Virginia in 1757. He was able to provide Governor Dinwiddie with useful information regarding French actions directed at the Virginia frontier which was under attack. Dinwiddie was so pleased with Francois' aid he recommended that the slave be set free, which was done.³³

After 1757, the attitude on arming Virginia blacks remained the same. Manpower needs did not diminish noticeably over the ensuing three years but the assembly simply ignored the question. Consequently, blacks were never mobilized on any large scale during the French and Indian War. Nevertheless, blacks provided valuable, albeit limited, service to the Virginia Regiment as laborers and servants. Had the assembly given free blacks an opportunity to serve in other capacities they would have done so. As Benjamin Quarles has said the black often was the man "behind the man behind the gun"³⁴ and while that service was not so dramatic or colorful it was nonetheless an extremely important function.

31 *Ibid.*, 16.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Benjamin J. Hill, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, 1966), VI, 66.

34 Quarles, *Negro in the Revolution*, 94.