

Black Continental Army doctor Cuffee Saunders uses enlistment pay to purchase his freedom, 1777

Introduction

This certificate verifies that enslaver Israel Wells received Cuffee (Wells) Saunders's Continental Army enlistment pay to secure Saunders's freedom. Cuffee Saunders was born in Guiana. While his exact birth date is unknown, records suggest he was born in the mid-1700s. As a child, Saunders was kidnapped and forcibly brought to Connecticut, where he was enslaved. Records show that he was sold at least once, to a Hartford-area doctor and apothecary, Israel Wells.

In 1777, Saunders enlisted in the Continental Army. His "considerable medical skill" was quickly noticed by his military superiors, and he was assigned duty as a "waiter," or assistant, to the surgeon general of an Army hospital in Danbury. In this capacity, he helped with medical procedures and prepared pharmaceuticals at the apothecary store, earning the title of "Doctor Cuffee." In the spring of 1778, Saunders was briefly transferred to Valley Forge and is listed on the muster rolls as "tending the sick." After the war, Saunders married and bought three acres of land in Lebanon, Connecticut, with his soldier's pay.

In the late 1830s, almost half a century after Saunders's death from influenza, his widow took advantage of a new law to apply for his Revolutionary War pension. The application dragged on for years and required testimonies by prominent Norwich residents about Saunders's history, his notable service, and the high standing in which he and his wife were held. These eventually swayed officials, and Phillis Saunders was finally granted her husband's wartime pension in 1843.

In this statement dated 1781, Richard Lamb and John Nutter verified that Cuffee Saunders enlisted in the Continental Army in May 1777 and earned a bounty of 30 pounds, part of which was used to purchase his freedom. Likewise, Justice of the Peace Benjamin Huntington confirmed that Saunders's commanding officer, Captain Jedediah Hyde of Norwich, "always understood that the money that was given to Saunders at his Enlistment Purchased his Freedom." The paperwork here is for "Cuffee Wells," Wells being the name of Cuffee's former enslaver. When Cuffee entered the Army, he was still known as Cuffee Wells, but during the war he took the last name Saunders.

Excerpt

This Certifies, that we Subscribers, in May 1777. Belonged to A Class in the Town of Norwich To Procure a Soldier for the Continental Army. . . . that Said Class Hir'd Cuffee Wells, a Free Negro to Enlist Into the Continental Service During the War, and Gave him Besides the Publick Bounty Thirty Pounds for Inlisting. . . . the money that was Given to Cuffee at his Inlistment Purchased his Freedom.

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Questions for Discussion

Answer the following questions based on the introduction above, the excerpt from the document, and your knowledge of American history.

1. Why do you think an enlistment bounty was used to recruit soldiers for the Continental Army in 1777? What made the bounty appealing to the enslaved?
2. What risk did Saunders take by discarding the name of his former employer during the Revolutionary War when his enlistment paperwork bore the name Wells?
3. What details about Saunders's life and standing do you think swayed the Revolutionary War pension board to approve his widow's application in 1843?

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Image

Norwich 30th April 1781
 This Certifies, that we Subscribers, in May
 1777. Belonged to a Class in the Town of Norwich
 To Procure a Soldier for the Continental Army, of
 which Mr. Elihu Hyde was Head, and that said
 Class Thro' Cuffee Mills, a Free Negro to Enlist
 into the Continental Service During the War, and
 Gave him Besides the Publick Bounty Thirty
 Pounds for Enlisting, and that Cost of the Voyage of the said Cuffee
 then understood was paid to him by the said Class
 Jⁿ Nutter
 Richd Lamb
 Norwich April 30th 1781 Personally appeared Messrs John Nutter
 and Richard Lamb Signers to the above Certificate and made
 solemn Oath to the Truth of the same and Capt J^d Wells
 Head of said Norwich add being sworn on Oath that
 he was the Captain of the same Company where the said
 Cuffee was Enlisted into, and that he always understood
 that the Money that was given to Cuffee at his Enlistment
 Purchased his Freedom
 Sworn before me Benjamin Huntington Justice of Peace

Benjamin Huntington, Certifies Cuffee Wells's purchase of freedom, April 30, 1781.
 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00318)

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Transcript

Norwich 30th April 1781

This Certifies, that we Subscribers, in May 1777. Belonged to A Class in the Town of Norwich To Procure a Soldier for the Continental Army, of Which M^r. Elihu Hyde was Head, and that Said Class Hir'd Cuffee Wells, a Free Negro to Enlist Into the Continental Service During the War, and Gave him Besides the Publick Bounty Thirty Pounds for Inlisting and [*inserted*: the John Nutter Surgn.] that Part of the Whole of Said £30.0.0 as we then understood was Paid to [*struck*: his] [*inserted*: Cuffee's] old Master for his [*struck*: Cuffee's] Time

Jno Nutter

Richard Lamb

Norwich April 30th 1781. Personally approved Messer. John Nutter and Richard Lamb Signers to the Above Certificate and made Solemn Oath to the Truth of the Same and Capt Jedediah Hyde of Said Norwich adds being himself on Oath that he was the Captain of the Same Company which the said Cuffee was Inlisted into, and that he always understood that the money that was Given to Cuffee at his Inlistment Purchased his Freedom

Sworn Before me Benj. Huntington Justice of Peace