



# Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

Month, 2013

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

## *African Americans and the War of 1812*

By Kyle Stevenson

A special thanks goes to Kyle Stevenson, a Sophomore at Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA. An Alexandria native, Kyle assisted me last summer by researching the role of African-Americans during the War of 1812 and the surrounding rhetoric and imagery. His research will be included in Carlyle House's upcoming War of 1812 exhibit later this summer. Background on the War of 1812: After years of struggle on the part of the United States to gain a foothold on the international stage, in June, 1812, Congress declared War on Great Britain. Multiple factors were involved in making this decision, but the ultimate goal was to increase American landholdings in Canada and in the Western territories still held by the British. The war took place in many theaters and eventually reached the Chesapeake region and Alexandria. Very few members of the population were left untouched by what happened during the war, so join us as we take a brief look at things from the African-American perspective.



*The Author noting down the narratives of several freeborn people of colour who had been kidnapped.*

*Jesse Torrey, a Philadelphia physician and among those against the slave trade, took accounts and interviews of freedmen.*

undeclared war, between 1798 and 1801 (Hickey 5 -6). The War ended with the Convention of 1800, and the United States agreed to give up compensation and the French suspended the treaty with the United States.

Impressment by the British gave the Democratic-Republicans, or "war hawks," more than enough reason to justify their Anglophobia and go to war with Great Britain. The British, they reasoned, were violating their free trade agreement with America which infringed greatly upon their liberty

Between 1793-1815, the British and the French were engaged in war and conflict. The United States, being a relatively new country, took a policy of neutrality with a later goal of becoming a world power. However, in 1794 the American government entered into a trade agreement with the British causing American exports to rise from 33 to 93 million dollars. The French resented this American-British deal and began to seize American ships and launched the French Navy on commercial ships. These actions by the French led to an undeclared war with the French, known as the Quasi War, an

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
*Sarah Coster, Site Administrator*  
*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*  
*Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant*



as an independent Nation. Propaganda the Democratic-Republicans used to gain public support was the image of the American family. They argued that the British showed little regard toward the American family when they impressed American sailors. When the British impressed American sailors and put them on warships they were in fact “stealing” husbands from their wives and fathers from their children. The Democratic-Republican Party, which during the war consisted mainly of the slave-holding elite, who saw no contradictions with the values of liberty. A prevalent argument in abolitionist circles, was that slavery and impressment resembled each other. Like impressment, slavery denied people liberty and separated families (Eustace 171).

Furthermore, the War of 1812 kindled a new debate among the white population about the future of slavery in the United States. A prominent figure who brought the issue to the forefront was Jesse Torrey. Torrey was a white anti-slave trade advocate who did not think slavery should be abolished but improved and made more discreet. He thought that the British burning of the Capitol building was God’s judgment on the cruelty fostered by the slave trade. Torrey proposed that the separation of family members was too cruel, and that this aspect of the institution should be altered. This “family” rhetoric was used to justify the war by suggesting that America as a country had become very popular in the public sphere. Most whites were very hesitant to use the same language and apply it to African-Americans and were very clear about keeping the institution of slavery. Others like Torrey focused on the family status of slaves or on their dependency arguing that blacks were mentally inferior, foolish, and childlike (Eustace 179-180).

African-Americans, both free and enslaved, fought on both sides of the war. The British offered freedom to anyone who fought for their cause. Over 4,000 slaves successfully ran away to fight for the British. There was a black regiment of runaway slaves who escaped to Tangier Island across the Potomac River. This regiment of blacks marched into Washington and participated in the burning of the capital (Eustace 181). Throughout the war the British offered

freedom to blacks who fought on their side. After the war, the United States compensated slave owners who had lost slaves to the British or who had run away. 600 slaves in the Chesapeake region ran to the British to gain their freedom. Their options were to enlist in the British military or settle in the West Indies. By the time the British had departed they had carried away over 2,000 slaves and settled them in British holdings in North America and in the West Indies (Hickey 204). Among these documented slaves are runaways some are from the Whiting household in Alexandria, two specifically: Dunman and Eliza. Also, a descendent of George Mason, Thompson Mason, put in a claim for a slave by the name of Bett. The names of slaves in the register are a list of property claims made by Americans whose property had been carried off by the British.

This information is from the 1789-1859 American State Papers (814 and 818 ). The slaves listed separately were either captured by the British, ran to the British, or just simply ran away.

African-Americans also fought for the United States; there was a black regiment in the battle of New Orleans (Howe 15). However, the black



*George Roberts, pictured here, was a sailor aboard an American privateer during the War of 1812. His death in 1861 was recognized in the Baltimore Sun with the title: “Another Old Defender Gone.”*

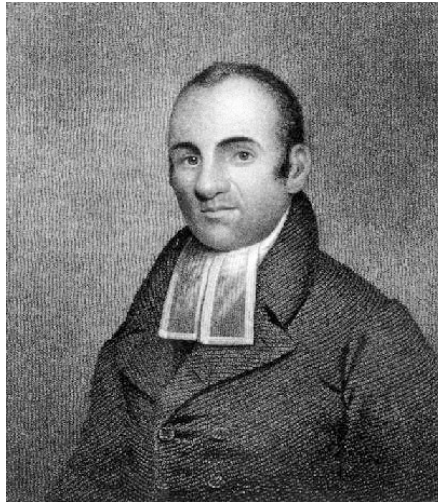


community was divided on whether they should get involved in the conflict. One group of black intellectuals in the north argued that blacks should get involved in the war as a way of proving their loyalty to their country. If they fought for their country, they reasoned, blacks could make the case that the black families' contributions to their country's liberty would be valued and slavery would be considered harmful to the black family. Others thought the freedom rhetoric used to justify the war did not apply to African-Americans, and they, therefore, should not get involved (Eustace 171).

Meanwhile, in the north, blacks were not silent about the contradictions in the rhetoric and the denial of freedom for African-Americans. This discussion was expounded predominately from the pulpit. George Lawrence, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church minister, delivered a sermon on January 1, 1813 on the anniversary on the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. George Lawrence was a supporter of the war effort. (Eustace 186).

In contrast to the African-Americans who identified themselves as Democratic-Republicans there were African-American Federalists who opposed the war. Lemuel Haynes was a Puritan minister living in Brandon, Vermont. He was raised as an indentured servant and gained his freedom when he came of age. He was a Revolutionary War veteran who had served in campaigns with George Washington. Haynes preached a sermon called "Dissimulation Illustrated," in which he criticized support of the war on the basis that love of freedom and one's country is hypocritical when that country enslaves people (Eustace 193).

African-Americans played a role in the War of 1812 because they saw participation in the war as a means to fight for their own freedom. Bondspersons were offered freedom after the war. Throughout the period of slavery in the United States, bondspersons brought to the forefront of the political debate the contradiction between their own bondage and the American value of individual freedom. The War of 1812 allowed new ways for abolitionist and anti-slavery supporters to frame their arguments.



*Lemuel Haynes was a puritan minister, of mixed descent and raised as an indentured servant, who criticized other African-Americans for their support of the war.*

### Sources

- Adams, John Quincy, et al. "Indemnities Due under the Award of the Emperor of Russia for Slaves and Other Private Property Carried Away by the British Forces in Violation of the Treaty of Ghent. Communicated to the House of Representatives, March 8, 1826." 1826. Print.
- Davis, Maya. "Maryland Archives: Research Archivist." Personal interview. 22 June 2012.
- Eustace, Nicole. *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012. Print.
- Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. N.p.: University of Illinois, 1989. Print.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.