

[Resurrecting the Black Regiment](#)[Print](#)

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Most Americans today would probably still recognize the stirring words from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn": "By the rude bridge that arched the flood,/ Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,/ Here once the embattled farmers stood,/ And fired the shot heard round the world." Most of us are still aware that those embattled farmers won for us the freedoms we too often take for granted today.

But how many of us are aware of the extent to which faith motivated those farmers to leave their families and homes and risk their lives for a cause that most would have considered hopeless at the time? How many are aware of the extent to which preachers actively participated in our War for Independence — and not just rhetorically from the pulpit, though the great sermons on behalf of the freedom fight provoked many parishioners to action? How many are familiar with the phrase "Black Regiment"?

That phrase encapsulates what Colonial America possessed in its War for Independence that is sadly lacking today.

The Black Regiment is a moniker that was given to the patriot-preachers of Colonial America. They were called the "Black Regiment" owing to the fact that so many of them had a propensity to wear long, black robes in the pulpit.

According to historian/educator Reverend Wayne Sedlak, in his article "The Black Regiment Led the Fight in Our War for Independence":

It was British sympathizer Peter Oliver, who actually first used the name "Black Regiment." He complained that such clergymen were invariably at the heart of the revolutionary disturbances. He tied their influence to such colonial leaders as Samuel Adams, James Otis and others of prominence in the cause. He quotes colonial leadership in its quest to gain the voice of the clergy. In one instance, he disparagingly cites a public plea of James Otis who sought the help of the clergy in a particular manner:

"Mr. Otis, understanding the Foibles of human Nature advanced one shrewd position which seldom fails to promote popular Comotions, that 'it was necessary to secure the black Regiment.' These were his Words and his meaning was to engage ye dissenting Clergy on his Side.... Where better could he fly for aid than to the Horns of the Altar?... This order of Men ... like their Predecessors of 1641 ... have been unceasingly sounding the Yell of Rebellion in the Ears of an ignorant and deluded People."

So influential were the patriot-pulpits of Colonial America that it was said by Prime Minister Horace Walpole in the British Parliament, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson." In fact, America's War for Independence was often referenced in Parliament as "the Presbyterian Revolt." And during the Revolutionary War, British troops often made colonial churches military targets. Churches were torched, ransacked, and pillaged.

Legendary Exploits

These patriot-preachers were staunchly patriotic, seriously independent, and steadfastly courageous. They were found in almost all of the various Protestant denominations at the time: Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican, Lutheran, German Reformed, etc. Their Sunday sermons — more than Patrick Henry's oratory, Sam Adams' and James Warren's "Committees of Correspondence," or Thomas Paine's "Summer Soldiers and Sunshine Patriots" — inspired, educated, and motivated the colonists to resist the tyranny of the British Crown, and fight for their freedom and independence. Without the Black Regiment, there is absolutely no doubt that we would still be a Crown colony, with no Declaration of Independence, no U.S. Constitution, no Bill of Rights, and little liberty.

The exploits of the Black Regiment are legendary. When General George Washington asked Lutheran pastor John Peter

Muhlenberg to raise a regiment of volunteers, Muhlenberg gladly agreed. Before marching off to join Washington's army, he delivered a powerful sermon from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 that concluded with these words: "The Bible tells us there is a time for all things and there is a time to preach and a time to pray, but the time for me to preach has passed away, and there is a time to fight, and that time has come now. Now is the time to fight! Call for recruits! Sound the drums!"

Then Muhlenberg took off his clerical robe to reveal the uniform of a Virginia colonel. Grabbing his musket from behind the pulpit, he donned his colonel's hat and marched off to war. And as he did, more than 300 of his male congregants followed him.

Muhlenberg's brother quotes John Peter as saying, "You may say that as a clergyman nothing can excuse my conduct. I am a clergyman, it is true, but I am a member of society as well as the poorest layman, and my liberty is as dear to me as any man. I am called by my country to its defense. The cause is just and noble. Were I a Bishop ... I should obey without hesitation; and as far am I from thinking that I am wrong, I am convinced it is my duty so to do — a duty I owe to my God and my Country."

Remember, too, it was Pastor Jonas Clark and his congregants at the Church of Lexington who comprised that initial body of brave colonists called Minutemen. These were the men, you will recall, who withstood British troops advancing on Concord to confiscate the colonists' firearms and arrest Sam Adams and John Hancock, and fired "the shot heard round the world."

The "Supreme Knight" and great martyr of Presbyterianism was Pastor James Caldwell of the Presbyterian church of Elizabethtown (present-day Elizabeth), New Jersey. He was called the "Rebel High Priest" and the "Fighting Chaplain." He is most famous for the story "Give 'em Watts!" It is said that at the Springfield engagement, when the militia ran out of wadding for their muskets, Parson Caldwell galloped to the Presbyterian church and returned with an armload of hymnbooks, threw them to the ground, and exclaimed, "Now, boys, give 'em Watts! Give 'em Watts!" — a reference to the famous hymn writer, Isaac Watts.

Caldwell so angered British commanders that they made martyrs of both him and his wife. General Knyphausen's expedition took Elizabethtown in 1780, burning Caldwell's church and shooting his wife. Later Caldwell himself was shot. (Source: Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America*, 1924)

Then there was the Baptist, Joab Houghton, of New Jersey. Houghton was in the Hopewell Baptist Meeting-house at worship when he received the first information of Concord and Lexington, and of the retreat of the British to Boston with heavy losses. His great-grandson gave the following eloquent description of the way he treated the tidings:

Stilling the breathless messenger, he sat quietly through the services, and when they were ended, he passed out, and mounting the great stone block in front of the meeting-house, he beckoned to the people to stop. Men and women paused to hear, curious to know what so unusual a sequel to the service of the day could mean. At the first words a silence, stern as death, fell over all. The Sabbath quiet of the hour and of the place was deepened into a terrible solemnity. He told them all the story of the cowardly murder at Lexington by the royal troops; the heroic vengeance following hard upon it; the retreat of Percy; the gathering of the children of the Pilgrims round the beleaguered hills of Boston. Then pausing, and looking over the silent throng, he said slowly: "Men of New Jersey, the red coats are murdering our brethren of New England!



Not an easy path: Presbyterian minister James Caldwell, who gained fame during the battle of Springfield, New Jersey, when he gathered Watts hymnals from a church for use as rifle wadding and shouted to the troops as he handed them out, "put Watts into them," was killed in the war, as was his wife.

Who follows me to Boston?" And every man of that audience stepped out into line, and answered, "I!" There was not a coward nor a traitor in old Hopewell Baptist Meeting-house that day. [Source: Cathcart, *The Baptists and the American Revolution*, 1876]

Consider, too, Pastor M'Clanahan, of Culpepper County, Virginia, who raised a military company of Baptists and served in the field, both as a captain and chaplain. Reverend David Barrow "shouldered his musket and showed how fields were won." Another Baptist, General Scriven, when ordered by a British officer to give up Sunbury, near Savannah, sent back the answer, "Come and get it." Deacon Mills, of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia, "commanded skillfully" 1,000 riflemen at the Battle of Long Island, and for his valor was made a brigadier general. Deacon Loxley of the same church commanded the artillery at the Battle of Germantown with the rank of colonel. (Source: McDaniel, *The People Called Baptists*, 1925)

A list drawn up by Judge Curwen, an ardent Tory, contained 926 names of British sympathizers living in America — colonial law had already exiled a larger number — but there was "not the name of one Baptist on the list." Maybe this is why President George Washington, in his letter to the Baptists, paid the following tribute: "I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members has been, throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously, the firm friend to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious Revolution." Maybe it explains why Thomas Jefferson could write to a Baptist church, saying, "We have acted together from the origin to the end of a memorable Revolution." (Source: *Ibid.*)

Faith and Conviction

These were not the acts of wild-eyed fanatics; they were the acts of men of deep and abiding faith and conviction. Their understanding of the principles of both Natural and Revealed Law was so proficient, so thorough, and so sagacious that their conscience would let them do nothing else. Hear the wise counsel of the notable colonial preacher Reverend Samuel West (1730-1807):

Our obligation to promote the public good extends as much to the opposing every exertion of arbitrary power that is injurious to the state as it does to the submitting to good and wholesome laws. No man, therefore, can be a good member of the community that is not as zealous to oppose tyranny, as he is ready to obey magistracy.

Reverend West went on to say:

If magistrates are ministers of God only because the law of God and reason points out the necessity of such an institution for the good of mankind, it follows, that whenever they pursue measures directly destructive of the public good, they cease being God's ministers, they forfeit their right to obedience from the subject, they become the pests of society, and the community is under the strongest obligation of duty both to God and to its own members, to resist and oppose them, which will be so far from resisting the ordinance of God that it will be strictly obeying his commands.

This was the spirit of 1776; this was the preaching that built a free and independent nation; this is what Colonial America had that, by and large, America does not have today.



In the thinking and preaching of the Black Regiment, freedom and independence were precious gifts of God, not to be trampled underfoot by men; human authority was limited and subject to proper divine parameters; and the mind of man was never to be enslaved by any master, save Christ Himself.

Membership in the Black Regiment was unofficial and without human oversight. Preachers of the black robes were young and old, loud and soft-spoken, rough and gentle, urban and rural. They differed on secondary doctrines and never surrendered their theological distinctives. Yet they formed an irresistible and indefatigable army that neither King George nor the demons of



Moral underpinnings: Baptist minister David Barrow gave his whole being to causes he joined. He was nearly drowned by vigilantes for preaching as a Baptist in areas dominated by the Church of England, and he took up a gun to fight in the Revolutionary War.

gall of Massachusetts?

hell could stop.

As one reads the colonial history of the United States, one must be struck with the observation that the American people, on the whole, seemed to appreciate the courage and independence of their preachers. Even America's early political leaders shared in this appreciation.

For instance, John Adams once remarked,

It is the duty of the clergy to accommodate their discourses to the times, to preach against such sins as are most prevalent, and recommend such virtues as are most wanted. For example, if exorbitant ambition and venality are predominant, ought they not to warn their hearers against those vices? If public spirit is much wanted, should they not inculcate this great virtue? If the rights and duties of Christian magistrates and subjects are disputed, should they not explain them, show their nature, ends, limitations, and restrictions, how muchsoever it may move the

The problem today is that America's preachers have taken off the black robes and put on yellow ones. Where is the preaching against prevalent sins? Where is the spiritual, scriptural explanation concerning the rights and duties, or limitations and restrictions of civil magistrates from America's pulpits today?

The famed 19th-century revivalist Charles G. Finney had some trenchant words on this subject. He said,

If there is a decay of conscience, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the public press lacks moral discrimination, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the church is degenerate and worldly, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the world loses its interest in religion, the pulpit is responsible for it. If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it.

Black Regiment Today

Yes, indeed. It was the patriot-pulpit that delivered America from bondage; and it is the timid pulpit, on the part of those who do or should know, that is helping to deliver America to the brink of destruction and judgment.

It is for this reason that I took on the task of resurrecting the Black Regiment. In July of 2007, I put out my first appeal to help locate a modern-day Black Regiment. (And my appeal echoes other great Americans', such as Professor David Alan Black and Rev. Wayne Sedlak, who called for a resurrection of the Black Regiment even before I did.) I asked readers to help me locate brave and courageous patriot-pastors in the similitude of the Black Regiment of old. The result of this appeal has been truly exciting.

On my Black Regiment website (www.chuckbaldwinlive.com/blackregiment.php), we now have over 200 pastors and evangelists who have signed up to be included in a modern-day Black Regiment. This was done primarily so that people around the country who hunger to attend a church that has a patriot-pastor in the pulpit can find a place of worship. I extend the invitation to readers of this column to further assist me in locating such patriot-preachers.

I am personally convinced that the only thing necessary for God to send another Great Awakening — along with the accompanying reclamation of liberty and independence — is for God's men in the pulpits to return to their heritage by becoming the champions of freedom: sounding forth the clarion call to resist tyranny and defend liberty, as did our forebears in the Black Regiment.

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— *Paintings: Library of Congress*