THE HOEFER PRIZES FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

In Recognition of Writing Achievement in the Undergraduate Field of Study

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 26, 2004
"As a Soldier, As a Citizen, As a Man": Henry and John Laurens, the Slave Regiment, and the Influence of Revolutionary and Republican Ideals on American Perceptions of Slavery

HAL BRANDS

History 272/ Political Science 321
Creating the American Republic

JACK RAKOVE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
Perhaps no “deficiency” of the American Revolution has been pointed to so often as its failure to end slavery in the colonies. How could a practice so incompatible with Revolutionary ideals survive the ideological furor of a struggle infused with principles of equality and liberty? While slavery did persist, it did not escape the Revolution unscathed. To some Americans the crisis exposed the incompatibility between slavery and Revolutionary ideology, and in these cases, arguments for human liberty and freedom went far in undermining the legitimacy of the institution.

One such case is that of Henry and John Laurens.¹ Henry Laurens was a wealthy and politically influential South Carolina planter who owned several hundred slaves around the beginning of the Revolutionary War. Prior to the war and for some time after its outbreak, he served as President of the Continental Congress. John Laurens, Henry’s son, was pursuing his studies in Europe at the start of the Revolution, and returned to the colonies shortly thereafter with the intention of joining the Continental Army. Through a combination of his father’s influence and his own bravery (or recklessness, depending on who was being asked), John Laurens was quickly promoted, eventually becoming an aide to George Washington. As revealed by the Laurenses’ correspondence during the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary periods, both men perceived the fact that slavery could not be reconciled with the ideology and rhetoric of the Revolution. Specifically, they realized that American cries for liberty as the defining ideal of their cause rang hollow in the face of slavery’s existence. The Anglo-American dispute thus heightened the incipient anti-slavery sentiment of the Laurenses, pushing them toward more radical positions on the issue. In 1778, John Laurens,

then a colonel in the Continental Army, proposed to free and arm slaves in South Carolina, creating a black regiment to reinforce the Continental troops in the region. The discussion of this idea with Henry Laurens shows the culmination of the influence of Revolutionary ideals on the Laurenses' perceptions of slavery.

But John's position on the subject, and Henry's responses, were not formed exclusively by their conceptions of the uneasy relationship between slavery and liberty. Other republican principles played a large role in guiding their discussions. The Laurenses' beliefs were determined, in large part, by the interplay of social and political aspects of Revolutionary thought. Three themes of Revolutionary and republican ideology are essential to explaining how John Laurers arrived at his eventual plan for the slave regiment: 1) a conception of the universal appeal of liberty and freedom; 2) the need for the sacrifice of individual interests to the public good; and 3) the idea of responsible citizenship. By examining the discussion of the slave regiment, we are thus able to understand the influence of Revolutionary ideology on the Laurens's conceptions of slavery. At the same time, the manner in which Henry Laurens criticized the plan privately, and its eventual public reception, renders obvious the limits of these altered conceptions in effecting actual change.

This essay is divided into several parts. The first briefly examines the pre-war attitudes of Henry Laurens toward slavery, providing a starting point from which to follow the development of his and John's reflections on the issue. The second looks at the Laurenses's conceptions of the Anglo-American dispute generally and the specific principles involved, tracing those elements relevant to their later discussion of the slave regiment. The Laurenses were hardly unique in being heavily influenced by the ideas embodied by the Revolution; this section also places their belief and fervent advocacy for seemingly abstract
principles in historiographical context. The third section, examining correspondence written at the height of the crisis and directly after independence, illustrates how the Laurens's opinions on Revolutionary ideas informed their thoughts on slavery. The fourth section explores their dialogue on the slave regiment specifically, establishing connections to Revolutionary and republican ideas. The concluding section looks at the themes examined here within the context of arguments made about the nature of the American Revolution.

I

To understand the perspectives that Henry Laurens brought to the discussion of slavery in general and the proposed slave regiment in particular in the late 1770s, it is necessary to examine his previous conceptions of slavery. Only by looking at where Laurens started in his views on the institution can we understand how his beliefs were susceptible to influence and transformation by Revolutionary ideas and rhetoric.

Two letters written by the elder Laurens indicate the troubled pragmatism with which he viewed slavery. In March 1773, Henry wrote to Lachlan McIntosh, describing difficulties Laurens was experiencing with his plantation overseer. Calling the overseer "An Improper Man" for such a job, Henry launched into a lengthy discourse on the rough manner in which this employee treated slaves. As he noted, "I must . . . repeat what I have often said to you upon such occasions, that I would rather be without Crops of Rice than gain the largest by one single Instance of Cruelty or Inhumanity." Clearly, Laurens was not comfortable with making a living off the physical suffering of others. Going beyond distaste for brutality,

---

2 In terms of a pre-war discussion of slavery, we are limited almost entirely to Henry Laurens's views on the subject. John Laurens was born in 1754, and in the years preceding the Revolution was pursuing an education in Geneva and London. Of his available correspondence, little mention of slavery is made previous to 1776. It should be noted that the later correspondence of John Laurens reveals similar themes regarding the treatment of slaves.
Laurens expounded his view of the proper nature of the master-slave relationship: "Those poor creatures...look up to their Master as their Father, their Guardian, and Protector...there is a reciprocal obligation upon the Master." Whether from humanitarianism or a feeling of paternal responsibility, Henry Laurens had qualms with the brutal aspects of slaveholding. As this letter makes clear, he was uneasy about a relationship based on potentially unmitigated domination.

Yet the same letter also conveys a more pragmatic approach to the treatment of slaves. Henry Laurens's discussion of the subject was apparently occasioned by the desertion of nine of his slaves in response to brutality at the hands of the overseer. Not only did the rough treatment of his slaves pain their owner's conscience; it cost him money. Henry's recommendations to McIntosh reveal a keen regard for the economic aspects of humane slave treatment. "I have no doubt," he wrote, "of his making more Rice by gentle and discreet Authority than by perseverance in a contradictory conduct." Henry Laurens had two motives, then, for encouraging his employees to treat his slaves in a manner of unusual (relatively speaking, of course) gentleness. Another letter, written roughly one year later, showed a similar duality. Discussing the economics of slavery, Laurens harshly criticized one aspect of the institution—the continued importation of slaves from Africa. Alluding to his views on the cruelty of slavery and a vague desire to manumit his slaves at some future juncture, Henry Laurens wrote, "The African Trade is So repugnant to my disposition and my plan for future life that it Seems as if nothing but dire necessity could drive me to it."

Here again is the dual nature of Henry Laurens's attitude toward slavery—he condemned the despicable brutality characteristic of the institution, yet felt himself bound to slavery by

---

economic dictates.⁴ Henry Laurens might have been susceptible to appeals to mitigate or even proscribe the rough treatment of slaves, but the influence of such appeals would be limited by his perception of economic necessity.

These letters are the last substantive discussion of slavery in the published pre-Revolutionary correspondence of either Henry or John Laurens. Though the issue would not reappear for more than two years, its return to their correspondence in early 1776 clearly show both the influence and limit of Revolutionary ideals and rhetoric in pushing the Laurens toward more radical positions on slavery.

II

Between 1772 and 1776, both John and Henry Laurens often expressed their views of the deepening rift between the colonies and Britain. The priority they accorded the issues in the dispute involved is evident in both the frequency and fervency with which they wrote on this topic as compared to others.⁵ Exploring their perspectives of the tide of events in the years preceding independence allows the reader to understand the eventual interplay of political and social ideas pertaining to slavery.

As the Anglo-American dispute escalated, Henry Laurens became an advocate of what might be termed principled reconciliation. To be sure, he believed that, in terms of principle, the American colonists were in the right. In 1774, responding to the Coercive Acts against Boston, Henry Laurens wrote, "Virtue, discretion, and firmness on our part will conduct us safely through every difficulty, this I persuade myself from the goodness of our

⁴ HL to John Lewis Gervais, February 5, 1774, PHL Volume 9, p. 264.
⁵ In the three years preceding independence, Henry Laurens made very frequent reference to the Anglo-American dispute. The importance he placed on this issue is evident in a comparison of the number of letters he wrote regarding the conflict to the volume of correspondence on other letters of central importance; for instance the maintenance of his plantation and slaves. See PHL Volumes 8-11.
Cause and a conviction that however we may have erred in our resistances we are not the Movers of the present Evils." In other words, even if the colonists were occasionally provocative, the righteousness of their principles and the facts of British persecution justified the struggle. Thus, he firmly believed that should the colonists yield to British demands, they would be sacrificing sacred principles. Accordingly, Laurens denounced attempts at accommodation regarding the taxation dispute, writing,

The present language is, ‘Let the Americans yield a little and make some concessions and all their grievances shall be redressed’....This would be tolerable enough among Children and in certain domestic quarrels, but it would not be wise or just any where....If the measure of Taxation be just and constitutional, it should be maintained and supported....If it be, as it certainly is, an unconstitutional, an inexpedient, and impolitic mode of Raising a Revenue in America, Wisdom and Justice dictate that it ought immediately to be Suppressed....I Say it appears to me that in the main and grand question we are on the right Side.7

Thus, resistance was justified, and a compromise of principle unwise. In terms of the conception of the dispute as one of goodness versus corruption, Henry Laurens was a true believer. Yet at the same time, he was skeptical of the intensity and fervor with which many expressions of American resistance were carried out. Because he still saw a community of interests (political, cultural, and economic) between the colonies and the mother country,

---

6 HL to James Laurens, October 17, 1774, PHL Volume 9, p. 591.
7 HL to John Petrie, September 7, 1774, PHL Volume 9, p. 553.
Laurens believed that a reconciliation on just principles was possible, and regretted the increasingly vitriolic nature of the struggle, which he saw as making compromise all the more unlikely. Accordingly, he argued for moderation in the conduct of resistance, so that the colonists might retain the moral high ground and not forsake any chance of a just reconciliation. In late 1774, for instance, Laurens wrote, “Threats and high words on each side will draw nearer to the view of each party the dangerous consequences of open Rupture. . . . Errors have been committed by both, but America is not the Aggressor. Her grand claim must be granted, and peace and Union a constitutional dependence and subordination will be re-established.”

This passage nicely captures Henry Laurens’s broad views on the dispute: colonial views of the conflict were correct in that they stood on just principles and were aggrieved by persecution, yet the vigor with which the colonists resisted such measures threatened to undermine the justness of their cause and preclude a possible reconciliation. Essentially, the means of struggle needed to be as pure as the motives for resistance. This devotion to principle would later go far in convincing Henry of the incompatibility of slavery and Revolutionary ideals.

John Laurens shared this belief in the morality of the colonial cause, but the younger Laurens was less given to moderation in pursuing high principles than the elder. Still a young man in the pre-Revolutionary years, his correspondence on the subject is sketchy, though enough of a record exists to make evident his beliefs regarding the Anglo-American dispute. Echoing his father’s belief in the odiousness of accepting compromise at the expense of principle, the younger Laurens wrote of the colonists, “Their cause is the sacred cause of Liberty, in which no shifts or evasions should be used. . . . It would be base in us to submit. If we can be united to Great Britain upon no other terms, let us hasten a separation.”

---

8 HL to William Cowles, September 14, 1774, PHL Volume 9, p. 557.
In the same letter, John displayed a distaste for his father’s calls for moderation: “I wish my countrymen to speak out and to speak boldly....I go further and say if we are not entitled to the Privilege [liberty] which we contend for it is time now to procure it, which, if we cannot do peaceably, we must purchase it with our swords.”\(^9\) Though Henry and John had different views on the general appropriateness of zealous resistance, their disagreement stemmed from a premise that both readily accepted; that the colonists were in the right. If Henry felt that a just cause required just measures, John believed that a pure cause justified more extreme action.

Shaping these broad views of the pre-Revolutionary dispute were beliefs about the specific principles seen to be embodied by American resistance to perceived British oppression. As touched on above, the ideas of freedom and liberty, in both the collective and individual sense, are present throughout the writings of John and Henry Laurens in the period leading up to independence. As early as 1772, Henry Laurens argued that these ideals were at the very heart of the struggle. Writing in response to a conflict between the South Carolina legislature and the royal governor, Henry Laurens attempted establish the primacy of liberty in the Anglo-American conflict. Concerning mounting opposition to the representatives of the crown, Laurens wrote, “With submission I do aver, that we are not pursuing a false light, nor puzzling our Brains about a mere Phantom. We contend as Englishmen and Freemen, for nothing less than the very Essence of true Liberty.” Laurens went on to say that the specific occurrences inciting tension between Britain and the colonies were only symptoms of this larger conflict.\(^10\)

---

\(^9\) John Laurens (JL) to HL, February 19, 1774, *PHL* Volume 9, p. 293.
\(^10\) HL to Alexander Garden, May 24, 1772, *PHL* Volume 8, p. 327.
In believing that the particular areas of conflict between the colonists and Britain were only the most visible manifestations of a great struggle between British power and American liberty, Henry Laurens subscribed to a major tenet of Revolutionary ideology, or—in Bernard Bailyn’s phrasing—"the logic of rebellion." Bailyn summarizes the prevailing view among American patriots: "Unconstitutional taxing, the invasion of placemen, the weakening of the judiciary, plural officeholding, [John] Wilkes, standing armies—these were major evidences of a deliberate assault of power upon liberty. Lesser testimonies were also accumulating at the same time: small episodes, they took on a large significance in the context in which they were received." Each flare-up in the Anglo-American dispute could be put within a broader context providing by perceiving the conflict as a clash of polar opposites. To Henry Laurens, and to the patriot majority, liberty's primacy in the struggle was regularly underscored by specific conflicts between colonists and British officials.

Beyond his belief in liberty as a collective right, Henry Laurens was quite protective of individual freedom. Laurens was just as upset over the enforcement of non-importation and non-exportation resolutions by over-zealous patriots as he was by the oppression of British authorities. Concerning a South Carolina resolution against the importation of tea, Laurens’s writing betrays disagreement with the proposed measures. "I believe I love my country as extensively and disinterestedly as any man in it," he wrote, "Because I feel a willingness to sacrifice my life and fortune in defense of its true liberties, but I shall never be so much of a patriot as to rush into measures which are at the same time Unconstitutional and obstructive to our own wishes." Henry Laurens feared that British oppression, combined

12 HL to George Appleby, May 4, 1774, *PHL* Volume 9, p. 428.
with coercive colonial responses based, could only lead to the derogation of personal freedom. Laurens referred to this possibility as a form of slavery, meaning the absence of freedom, rights, and choice.\textsuperscript{13} In October 1774 he expressed this fear, writing, “At present the Aspect of my country is covered by a dismal gloom, nothing less talked of on this Side that forcing us to Submit to Laws which would enslave us, and on the other side, Resolutions are forming for cutting off all Intercourse with Great Britain…Hence I consider myself as going to a land where Disorder and Distress have fallen upon the inhabitants, and that I must expect to participate the General Calamity.”\textsuperscript{14} Henry Laurens thus conceived of the struggle as one that threatened to extinguish liberty, and felt that the colonial cause had to be prosecuted in a manner representative of the principles for which patriots claimed to be fighting.

On these themes of liberty and freedom, the writings of John Laurens prior to the outbreak of hostilities reveal a remarkable similarity to those of his father. As mentioned above, John Laurens saw the idea of liberty as being at the center of the Anglo-American dispute. He further developed this view in later writings. On November 5, 1774, Laurens responded to a letter from his father, and argued that the escalating struggle was based on the efforts of the colonists to maintain “their just rights.”\textsuperscript{15} Like his father, John conceived of the existence of certain liberties that could never be denied, and saw the struggle through this lens. A month later, he extended this view of the dispute to the establishment of the Continental Congress, an extra-legal body created in the power vacuum following the breakdown of British authority in the colonies. Laurens saw the Congress acting as the

\textsuperscript{13} See, for instance, Bailyn, \textit{Ideological Origins}, pp. 232-46. As Bailyn defines it, slavery meant, in its common political usage, “the inability to maintain one’s just property in material things and abstract rights, rights and things which a proper constitution guaranteed a free people.”

\textsuperscript{14} HL to Laurens Theodore Grovoni, October 19, 1774, \textit{PHL} Volume 9, p. 607.

\textsuperscript{15} JL to HL, November 5, 1774, \textit{PHL} Volume 9, p. 632.
protector of colonial freedoms, calling it "the depository of our liberties." In the same letter, he considered the possibility of open war between the colonies and the crown. "If there is that firmness on both sides," he wrote, "What can ensue but that most dreadful curse of Humanity, Civil War." Yet for John Laurens, such a calamity might be necessary, if only to protect colonial freedom: "If it must be, it must be."16 For both John and Henry Laurens, then, ideas of liberty and freedom were crucial in determining their view of the Anglo-American dispute. For John, moreover, these principles were so sacred that they justified extreme measures on their behalf.

A second aspect of Revolutionary thought clearly present in the pre-war writings of the Laurenses is a belief in the necessity of self-sacrifice and the subordination of individual preferences to advance the common good. Both John and Henry Laurens subscribed to the idea that the ideals pursued by the colonists were worthy of every exertion, and, as discussed below, this belief would play an important role in their later discussion of the prospective slave regiment.

Henry Laurens's writings are rich with examples of his belief in this principle. In mid-1772, the elder Laurens wrote that disinterested sacrifice would play a key role in the colonial struggle for liberty. Because of the sanctity of the principles for which the colonists contended, no effort, however painful, should be spared in their pursuit. Discussing the perils of resistance, Henry wrote, "Some possible inconveniences may follow from your perseverance and success, but nothing less than the loss of your own and the liberty of your posterity will be the consequence of obedience....In short, sir, I find in my Mind a Disposition to give up all that I enjoy in Carolina, rather than to give up that important point." Laurens further argued that the happiness of future generations depended upon the

16 JL to HIL, December 5, 1774, PHL Volume 9, p. 650.
steadfastness of his own in making the sacrifices necessary to protect Revolutionary principles. "Let us not submit to any terms," he wrote, "which in their Consequences will restrain the ardour of those Boys in whom we have placed our hopes. How shall they be able to establish Colleges, or to carry on great works of any kind for the Benefit of their Country, if their Fathers shall tamely suffer the Right of freely giving and granting, the people's money, to be unconstitutionally restricted or wrested from them?"\textsuperscript{17}

Coupled with Henry Laurens's belief in the necessity of self-sacrifice was the sad realization that, for many other colonists, a proclaimed willingness to do likewise was mere rhetoric. Speaking of a legislator who apparently moderated his opposition to royal authority in return for some sort of pecuniary compensation, Laurens wrote, "I have heard People talk much of forfeiting all they had in the World, and Life into the Bargain, before they were tried, in Defense of Liberty and the Public Good, who having secured a Place or Pension, would forfeit every Thing rather than lose Post and Income. This is no new thing. I lament it."\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, in 1778, Laurens bemoaned the unwillingness of wealthy patriots to contribute to the colonists' cause. As he told John, "If Rich Men would open their hearts and their purses freely what infinite advantages would be gained to our Army and to our cause in general."\textsuperscript{19}

John Laurens shared his father's sentiments regarding the need for sacrifice to the public good, but he did not experience a similar disillusionment until after his slave regiment proposal had been rejected numerous times. In the pre-Revolutionary period, John regularly expressed the belief that adherents to the American cause would forgo their own interests out of a desire to advance to the common good. Responding to rumors that King George III

\textsuperscript{17} HL to Alexander Garden, May 24, 1772, \textit{PHL} Volume 9, p. 327-28.
\textsuperscript{18} HL to John Lewis Gervais, May 29, 1772, \textit{PHL} Volume 9, p. 352.
\textsuperscript{19} HL to JL, March 1, 1778, \textit{PHL} Volume 14, p. 494.
would attempt to quash separatist sentiment in the colonies by bribing members of the Continental Congress, John remained convinced that no such appeals to individual well-being would have the desired effect. The representatives, he wrote, "may convince their proud oppressors, that true Patriots are not to be awed by their Menaces or seduced by Bribes." Later in 1774, after hearing reports that the Continental Congress was bitterly divided on certain issues pertaining to the Anglo-American dispute, John Laurens repeated his belief in the unity of those pursuing the American cause: "It is impossible that Men so strongly united in a common Cause could give it such a Death Stroke." Thus, regarding ideals of liberty and sacrifice for the common good, both Henry and John Laurens subscribed to these beliefs, and perceived a responsibility in their fellow patriots to do likewise. The interplay of these beliefs with a developing conception of slavery as an unjust yet economically imperative institution would go far in informing their discussion of John Laurens's plan for a slave regiment.

In their devotion to freedom, liberty, and self-sacrifice, Henry and John Laurens were hardly unique. While the Laurenses eventually went farther than most in applying these beliefs to unseemly practices like slavery, the seemingly abstract principles that motivated them had a powerful influence in mainstream colonial thought. Gordon Wood outlines the intense emotional and political appeal of ideals of self-sacrifice to the common good in the Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary periods: "To make the people's welfare—the public good—the exclusive end of government became for the Americans, as one general put it, their 'Polar Star,' the central tenet of the Whig faith....No phrase except 'liberty' was invoked more often by the Revolutionaries than the 'public good.' It expressed the colonists'
deepest hatreds of the older and their most visionary hopes for the new.” This ideal was not the preserve of only the most radical Whigs; its adherents included “not only... Hamilton and Paine at opposite ends of the Whig spectrum, but... any American bitterly opposed to a system which held ‘that a part is greater than its Whole.’” Abstract as it may have been, this principle had a profound influence on patriot thought and action.

The same was true of liberty. There was a widespread colonial consensus that liberty was the crucial right and privilege of Englishmen. Bernard Bailyn writes, “The colonists’ attitude to the whole world of politics and government was fundamentally shaped by the root assumption that they, as Britishers, shared in a unique inheritance of liberty.” As the Revolutionary crisis took shape, colonists were apt to explain the struggle as a fight between polar opposites: liberty and power. Bailyn continues, “They saw about them... nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty.” Caught in such a struggle, virtuous republicanism demanded resistance: “In such situations one is ‘bound to throw off [his] allegiance’; not to do so would be tacitly to conspire ‘in promoting slavery and misery.” Thus, to be motivated to violent resistance by a belief in the necessity of liberty was not considered radical or naïve; it was merely what was expected of virtuous citizens.

Liberty and self-sacrifice: these values, even when abstractly defined, were absolutely central to mainstream Revolutionary ideology. While John Laurens later applied these principles in a way not foreseen by many of his contemporaries, the principles themselves were nonetheless powerful sources of political and social belief among the revolutionaries.

---

24 Bailyn, p. 95.
25 Bailyn, p. 93.
III

John Laurens’s first substantive consideration of slavery’s relationship to the ideals described above took place as the Anglo-American dispute reached a crisis point in early 1776. Independence seemingly imminent, John Laurens and a friend in London (where John was studying) debated the justness of the American cause and the appropriateness of the measures used to pursue it. In claiming that American patriots were motivated by ideals of liberty and freedom, Laurens was confronted with the contradiction of slavery. How could men claiming to act on behalf of such high principles possibly justify the absolute denial of rights to a large portion of society? John’s writing indicates that he considered this question at length. Clearly, he perceived the contradiction inherent in a supposedly free nation that relied so heavily on chattel slavery. He wrote, “I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a good Grace, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our slaves.” To John Laurens, the existence of the institution called into question the degree to which American resistance was truly based on a defense of liberty. Furthermore, with slavery in the background, much of the patriot rhetoric evoking the ideal of liberty was invalidated. As Laurens put it, “How can we whose Jealousy has been alarm’d more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the reality, reconcile to our spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject slavery of our negroes?” Carrying this argument to its logical conclusion, Laurens argued that creating a country truly founded on Revolutionary principles necessitated the abolition of slavery, regardless of the economic imperatives involved: “If, as some pretend, but I am persuaded more through interest, than from Conviction, the Culture of the Ground with us cannot be carried on without African Slaves, Let us fly it as a hateful Country, and say ubi Libertas i[bi] Patria [where Liberty is there is
my Country]. Slavery was not only repugnant to Revolutionary principles; it threatened Laurens’ idealized notions of the American future. Even if one accepted the sincerity of American appeals to liberty, what would the continuation of slavery mean for the new nation? In John’s view, maintaining chattel slavery would be a betrayal of the principles for which his fellow patriots had sacrificed, bled, and died. In this letter, Laurens confronted the seemingly irreconcilable natures of slavery and liberty, and his later efforts would show an attempt to remove the impediment of the former to the latter.

In South Carolina, Henry Laurens was equally concerned about slavery, but for different reasons. The Dunmore Declaration of 1775 and British attempts to recruit slaves into the royal forces incited fears among southern slaveholders. Henry Laurens discussed these worries in an August 1776 letter to John Laurens. In its opening paragraphs, Henry Laurens blamed the existence of the slave trade on the English, citing the fact that “these Negroes were first enslaved by the English,” and also that “Acts of Parliament have established the Slave Trade.” Yet Henry Laurens’s discussion of these aspects of the American slave situation turned to a discussion of the institution as a whole, and its relationship to the Revolution.

Henry Laurens opened this section of the letter by writing, “You know my Dear Sir. I abhor Slavery.” For Laurens, the practice of slavery clashed with the humanitarianism stressed in Christianity; he disliked how he “found the Christian Religion and Slavery growing under the same authority and cultivation.” To Henry, Christian emphasis on kindness and human worth seemed utterly incompatible with the maintenance of an institution based on brutality, coercion, and exploitation. Logically, there seemed to be a

26 JL to Frances Kinloch, April 12, 1776, cited in Massey, John Laurens and the American Revolution, p. 63.
27 HL to JL, August 14, 1776, PHL Volume 11, p. 224.
basic contradiction between the two institutions. Applying the conflict between Christian principles and slavery to contemporary history, Henry saw the same incompatibility between American slavery and American liberty as did his son. Like John, Henry Laurens stressed the hypocrisy of appeals on behalf of high principles by Americans who owned slaves. He wrote, “I am not one of those…who dare trust in Providence for defence and security of their own Liberty while they enslave and wish to continue in Slavery, thousands who are as well intitled to freedom as themselves.” The slavery-liberty problem made more evident by Revolutionary rhetoric thus evoked Laurens’s realization that Revolutionary principles could not be applied selectively. If some humans had a right to liberty, why did not the rest? Again following the same pattern as his son, Henry Laurens carried his indictment of slavery to its limit, saying, “I am devising means for manumitting many of them and for cutting off the entail of slavery.” In short, Henry did not want to pass on slavery’s shameful legacy to his heirs.

But in thinking of freeing his slaves, Laurens was forced to confront two obstacles inherent to any such plan: economics and popular opinion. Laurens wrote of his plan, “Great powers oppose me, the laws and Customs of my Country, my own and the avarice of my Country Men. What will my Children say if I deprive them of so much Estate?”

28 Though Henry Laurens was aware of the problematic implications of slavery for the Revolution, he departed from the views of his son by recognizing that any corrective action was likely to fail. In terms of altering perceptions of slavery, Revolutionary ideology could be quite powerful. In terms of abolishing the institution, these principles could go only so far.

Receiving his father’s letter in London while arranging his affairs before returning to the newly independent states, John Laurens replied two months later. The most notable theme of his answer is the expression of a belief that all humans, regardless of race, were endowed with certain liberties of which they could not be deprived. Slavery, John wrote, had “sunk the Africans and their descendants below the Standard of Humanity, and almost rendered them incapable of that Blessing which equal Heaven bestow’d upon us all.” The influence of Revolutionary ideals concerning basic liberties is palpable in the letter: liberty belongs to all humans, and could not be denied. Yet their very degradation left slaves in poor condition to assume their deserved rights of equal citizenship. Conditioned to accept a state of servitude, former slaves might not be ready to take on the burdens of societal and political participation. “There may be some Inconvenience and even Danger in advancing Men suddenly from a State of Slavery while possess’d of the manners and Principles incident to that State,” Laurens wrote, “There may be danger I say in advancing such men too suddenly to the rights of Freemen—the Example of Rome suffering from Swarms of bad citizens who were freedmen is a warning to us to proceed with Caution.” Slavery was obviously damaging to Revolutionary ideas, as the comparison between the institution and the rhetoric of the Anglo-American struggle made painfully evident to Henry and John Laurens, but its sudden abolition could prove similarly destructive.

Here it seemed that the confluence of Revolutionary ideas might reach an impasse—how could John Laurens contend for manumission when such a measure would infuse his idealized nation with thousands of inferior citizens? What was needed, in short,

---

29 John Laurens had recently married and had a child, and was also charged with looking after his teenage brother. Accordingly, he had to remain in London for some months after the outbreak of war to make arrangements for their upkeep in his absence. See Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution.*

30 JL to HL, October 26, 1776, *PHL* Volume 11, p. 276-77.
was some way of imparting to potential freedmen the values and principles necessary for them to become responsible citizens, something that would instill in slaves the ideas embodied by the Revolution. Only by reconciling the imperatives of liberty and responsible citizenship could the John Laurens’ anti-slavery sentiment avoid a contradiction of Revolutionary ideals.

IV

The solution that John Laurens hit upon was the idea for a slave regiment. Inspired by the presence of a slave militia from Rhode Island, Laurens saw the slave regiment as a means of molding the American situation to conform to the liberal ideals of the Revolution. Discussing the project with his father, John’s side of the conversation was a product of a combination of Revolutionary ideas, his natural distaste for slavery, and the problem of ensuring that the elevation of slaves to freedmen reinforced the common good. Henry, though agreeing on the benefits of the plan and the need to reconcile patriot rhetoric with American reality, attempted to prevent his son from pursuing a course that would likely entail political embarrassment and social ridicule. While Henry Laurens disagreed with his son on the specific case of the slave regiment, many of the same general themes regarding slavery and the Revolution are still present in his response to John’s idea. At the same time, his caution should remind us that, even to relatively enlightened thinkers, the position staked out by John Laurens was a radical departure from what was seen as appropriate.

Having returned to America in late 1776 in order to join the Continental Army, John Laurens was consumed by his military tasks during 1777 and apparently had little time to write. By early 1778, however, Laurens came up with the black regiment idea. John first
mentioned the idea to his father in a letter written on January 14, 1778. Writing of his desire “to augment the Continental forces from an untried source,” Laurens asked his father to supply him with a number of slaves so that he could form a regiment. The plan, wrote John Laurens, “would bring about a two-fold good.” Regarding the incompatibility between slavery and common ideas concerning liberty and rights, the plan “would advance those who are unjustly deprived of the rights of mankind to a state which would be a proper gradation between abject slavery and perfect liberty.” Because slaves were not yet ready for “perfect liberty,” they must spend some time between this ideal and their current state of “abject slavery,” preparing for their eventual elevation to fully responsible citizenship. Here Laurens hit upon the aspect of the slave regiment that would allow liberty and responsible citizenship to co-exist. Advancing slaves gradually would give them incremental degrees of liberty and freedom while instilling in them the virtue necessary for republican citizenship.

The second good mentioned was that of military expediency: the regiment would “reinforce the defenders of liberty with a number of gallant soldiers.” Besides, slaves would make ideal Continentals: “Men, who have the habit or subordination almost indelibly impressed on them, would have one very essential qualification of soldiers.”

A third theme, which Laurens alluded to but did not develop until later, was that having wealthy planters contribute their most valuable resource to the fight against the British would instill the type of self-sacrifice required of men struggling for the highest of principles. Laurens felt that the previous conduct of the war had not lived up to the ideals for which it had been fought, saying, “I am tired of the languor with which so sacred a war as this is carried on.”31 Because John believed so firmly in the necessity of sacrifice to the

---

common good, he was drawn to the slave regiment as a means of bringing the execution of
American resistance into alignment with the goodness of its cause.

Henry Laurens’s immediate responses to the proposal betrayed an understandable
shock and surprise at what must have seemed a foolhardy scheme. In his next three letters to
John, Henry repeatedly urged moderation. On January 22, Henry Laurens wrote, “More time
will be required for me to consider the propriety of your scheme for raising a black
Regiment, than you seem to have taken for concerting the project. There is nothing
reasonable, which you can ask and I refuse. I will not refuse this, if after mature deliberation
you will say it is reasonable, but before you can mature such a plan many considerations are
to be had which I am persuaded have not yet taken place in your mind.”32 This insistence on
cautions illustrated Henry’s practical fear of the scheme—that it would make his son the
subject of scorn and ridicule. On January 28, Henry Laurens wrote that he had “been
cautious of speaking openly of the project,” and urged John to be similarly circumspect.33
Several days later, Henry wrote, “I will undertake to say there is not a Man in America of
your opinion…. Your own good sense will direct you to proceed warily in opposing the
opinions of whole nations, lest without effecting any good, you become a bye word, and be
so transmitted, to Your Children’s Children.”34 Again, in March: “Your scheme, with
respect to your own progress in it would have ended in essay. You would not have heard the
last jeer until the end of your life.”35 Henry Laurens recognized what his son refused
to—that the penetration of Revolutionary ideas into American society was limited by
economics and long-standing prejudice. Though John Laurens might be correct in perceiving

32 HL to JL, January 22, 1778, PHL Volume 12, p. 328.
33 HL to JL, January 28, 1778, PHL Volume 12, p. 368.
35 HL to JL, March 1, 1778, PHL Volume 12, pp. 494.
the incompatibility between slavery and liberty, the force of the argument was not sufficient to make converts of men with a vested stake in the matter.

Yet these concerns about the prudence of the plan made up only half of Henry Laurens’s objection. Laurens had a more fundamental qualm about the project, one that displayed the influence of ideas of liberty and equality on his opinions of slavery. Because, in John’s plan, freedom was contingent upon enlistment in the militia, Henry Laurens was moved to question the degree to which the scheme offered real liberty. Pursuing this issue, the elder Laurens asked his son, “Upon what ground of justice will you insist upon their inlisting for Soldiers, as the condition of their infranchisement[?] If they are free, tell them so, set them at full liberty, and then address them in the Language of a recruiting Officer to any other free Men.”36 In other words, if liberty was a universal right, how could John justify making it contingent on military enlistment?

Due to the slow speed of Revolutionary-era mail delivery, it is difficult to ascertain how many of Henry’s responses John had received when he crafted a second letter on the plan in early February. This letter, even more than the first on the subject, illustrates the influence of Revolutionary and republican ideas on John’s conception of slavery. Laurens opened by addressing his father’s practical concern. He wrote, “I was aware of having that monstrous popular prejudice, open-mouthed against me...of being obliged to combat the arguments, and perhaps the intrigues, of interested persons.” Despite these possibilities, John argued, his determination to enact the plan endured, for four reasons. First, Laurens felt an obligation to put aside his own well-being should it be necessary to further the common good. His refusal to yield, he wrote, was due to “a zeal for the public service.” John Laurens saw in his slave regiment an opportunity to make good on the belief in self-sacrifice of which

he had long been a proponent and had often called for in others. As he conceived it, the plan was not "the chimera of a young mind...but a laudable sacrifice of private interest, to justice and the public good." This theme is also present in John Laurens's later writings on the subject. Having encountered substantial opposition to his plan in the South Carolina legislature, John Laurens lamented the "lethargy" he perceived in the efforts of self-interested patriots. In 1780, after the legislature had overwhelmingly rejected the plan, John Laurens returned to his earlier tendency to criticize those allowing personal interests to supercede their Revolutionary fervor. Responding to the rejection, Laurens wrote, "We shall succeed in spite their languor, and our independence will be established in spite of the avarice [and] the prejudice."38

The second motivation for proceeding was a belief that liberty was not the exclusive property of Englishmen, but rather belonged to all men: "An ardent desire to assert the rights of humanity, determined me to engage in this arduous business." Liberty, perhaps the most sacred principle of the Revolution, must not be denied any man. Additionally, John Laurens rejected arguments that the debasement caused by slavery had made blacks apathetic to the pursuit of freedom and liberty. On the contrary, seeing their owners fight on behalf of these ideals, slaves would be similarly motivated. "Do you think they are so perfectly moulded to their state as to be insensible that a better exists?" he asked. "Will the galling comparison between themselves and their masters leave them unenlightened in this respect?" Applying the liberal rhetoric of the Revolution to slavery, John Laurens saw no inherent difference between slaves and their masters regarding the necessity of liberty. John Laurens combined this line of reasoning with that regarding the pursuit of the common good. "When," he

asked, “can it better be done, than when their enfranchisement may be made conducive to the public good?” In the eyes of John Laurens, enacting his plan would thus reinforce two tenets of Revolutionary thought.

Third, drawing upon the republican tenet that all citizens should contribute to the well-being of society, John Laurens believed that his plan would make freedmen better citizens than they might otherwise be. Though slaves were at present too debased for true citizenship, military service on behalf of their country and the ideas encompassed by the struggle would mold freedmen, making them aware of their civic responsibility. Responding to a question from Henry, John Laurens wrote, “You will ask in this view, how do you consult the benefit of the slaves? I answer, that like other men, they are creatures of habit. Their cowardly ideas will be gradually effaced, and they will be modified anew. Their being rescued from a state of perpetual humiliation, and being advanced, as it were, in the scale of being, will compensate the dangers incident to their new state.”

John Laurens thus saw his plan as a step in the direction of inculcating the type of disinterested virtue necessary for republican participation. Returning to this theme a year later, Laurens wrote, “It will be my duty and my pride, to transform the timid Slave into a firm defender of Liberty and render him worthy to enjoy it himself.” In John Laurens’s idealized nation, liberty was not only to be enjoyed, but also to be earned. Citizenship carried with it substantial responsibility, which could be understood and discharged through public service. By advancing slaves to liberty through a series of steps that would evoke the necessary amount of republican virtue, Laurens resolved his internal conflict of two Revolutionary principles: liberty and responsible citizenship. In this letter, then, Laurens presented the slave regiment as a

---

40 Ibid.
41 JL to HL, February 17, 1779, *PHL Volume 15*, p. 60.
synthesis of Revolutionary ideals. Not only was the regiment influenced by these principles; it was a means of blending them.

The fourth aspect of his argument reiterated his earlier belief that the regiment was a military necessity that would be especially beneficial due to the "habits of subordination, patience under fatigues, [and] sufferings and privations of every kind" possessed by slaves and required of soldiers.\footnote{JL to HL, February 2, 1779, \textit{The Army Correspondence of John Laurens}, pp. 114-17.}

In March 1779, John Laurens gave an apt summary of his arguments for the black regiment. The project interested him "as a soldier, as a Citizen, as a Man."\footnote{JL to HL, March 10, 1779, \textit{PHL} Volume 15, p. 65} From a military perspective, the regiment would further the defense of South Carolina. In terms of citizenship, forming the black regiment would help Laurens discharge his responsibility to the liberty-based polity he envisioned. Enacting the plan might endanger his reputation among his peers, but Laurens's belief in the necessity of selfless public service made this prospect less daunting. Furthermore, it would inspire in freedmen the type of citizenship needed in a republic. As a man, John felt that the state of servitude in which slaves were confined clearly contradicted the Revolutionary stress on individual freedom and liberty. From both the historian's perspective and his own, the slave regiment plan was steeped in Revolutionary and republican ideals.

Despite John Laurens's advocacy, the plan went nowhere. At the urging of Henry (who was himself urged by John), the Continental Congress passed a resolution recommending that individual states arm slaves. But the act was only advisory. Not surprisingly, the South Carolina legislature rejected the plan in a lopsided vote.\footnote{One historian estimates that over eighty percent of the representatives voted against the plan. See \textit{Massey}, \textit{John Laurens and the American Revolution}, p. 141.} When, in
1780, Charleston fell to the British, Henry Laurens chastised the council for its quick rejection of the slave regiment plan. Failing to arm the slaves, Laurens implied, had directly contributed to the loss of the capital: "Had we made a wise disposition of a few of those miserable Creatures to whom we owe some gratitude, we should have saved the whole....Thousands of muskets are lying useless in Charles Town which might have been shouldered in our defense." More interesting than the simple fact of this reproach is the reasoning behind it. Recognizing the stigma attached to the idea of freeing slaves, Henry Laurens did not appeal to the representatives in the same terms that he and John had considered the regiment. Rather, he couched his criticism solely in terms of military necessity. As evidenced in this speech and his countless warnings to John Laurens about the wisdom of broaching the plan publicly, Henry Laurens knew that not all Americans chose to acknowledge the tensions between liberty and slavery. Born of Revolutionary principles John’s plan may have been, but it was still considered a radical proposal in a region economically dependent on slave labor. From a strictly ideological perspective, the slave regiment may have been a perfect fit with Revolutionary ideals, yet on a practical level there were definite limits to the more radical applications of these principles.

V

Though the slave regiment was stillborn, the episode is still an important example of the influence of Revolutionary and republican ideas on other aspects of society; or what Bernard Bailyn terms “the contagion of liberty.” In considering the political and social questions raised by the Anglo-American dispute, John and Henry Laurens realized that the ideas and ideals seemingly embodied by the American cause should apply no less to slaves

than to other men. As Bailyn writes regarding the strained relationship between slavery and Revolutionary principles, “The connection, for those who chose to see it, was obvious.”46 Applying the logic and rhetoric of the Revolution to slavery, the incompatibility between the two was clear. In looking for an answer to the question of how the Laurens became so opposed to slavery during the Revolutionary period, Bailyn’s argument points us in the right direction.

Yet the relationship between slavery and liberty goes only so far in explaining the fervor with which John Laurens pursued the plan. As discussed above, bringing liberty to a large number of slaves was only one of the ways that the slave regiment would further the Revolutionary cause. John Laurens was motivated not only by the pursuit of a universal application of Revolutionary liberty, but also by the strong belief that creating a slave regiment would allow him, and also wealthy men like his father, to fulfill their obligation of sacrifice to the common cause. To Laurens, caught up in the idea of serving the public good, the plan was a perfect opportunity to exhibit the sort of self-sacrifice called for by the Revolution. In this sense, the slave regiment idea can also be considered an example of Gordon Wood’s argument on the components of republicanism. As Wood writes, “The sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of the Revolution.”47 Indeed, as evidenced by his criticism of patriots not subjugating their personal interests to the public good, Laurens took this tenet of republicanism quite seriously, repeatedly stressing its applicability to the slave regiment proposal.

47 Wood, Creation, p. 53.
Similarly, John's stress on making freedmen worthy of citizenship and aware of the responsibilities thus imposed upon them also fits the republican context. When Laurens argued that military service would render slaves worthy of the liberty they would consequently enjoy, he was referring to the commonly held idea that citizenship in a republic required a high moral fiber, or a degree of "public virtue," that was so essential to the workability of a polity completely dependent on its citizens. As Wood writes, "A republic was such a delicate polity precisely because it demanded an extraordinary moral character in the people." To John Laurens, this moral character could be achieved by introducing freemen to the kind of social responsibility represented by military service. Furthermore, the morality instilled by public service would mitigate the danger of adding yet-irresponsible citizens to the polity.

For both Laurens, John especially, the idea of arming and freeing slaves thus encompassed several strong tenets of Revolutionary and republican ideology. Attempting to bridge the gap between slavery and liberty, stressing the need for disinterested self-sacrifice, and emphasizing the responsibility of republican citizens, John Laurens saw the Revolutionary context as making his plan especially appropriate. He repeatedly stressed the republican and Revolutionary aspects of the plan, and, when two of these principles collided, wrestled with the seemingly contradictory relationship of universal liberty and responsible citizenship. That Henry Laurens criticized the plan, and that the scheme proved wildly unsuccessful in practice does not contradict the thesis that Revolutionary ideas could deeply penetrate thoughts on existing social institutions. Financial imperatives did not prevent Revolutionary ideas from influencing other aspects of society, but they did lessen the force of impact. As Bailyn argues, "For while everyone believed in liberty and knew that slavery was
its denial, everyone knew also...that the abolition of slavery would 'complete the ruin of many American provinces.'

Thus, this case is an illustration of not only the degree to which Revolutionary and republican ideas could influence perceptions of slavery, but also the limits of this interplay in effecting actual change.

---