

Judith L. Van Buskirk. *Standing in Their Own Light: African-American Patriots in the American Revolution*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Abigail S. Gruber (PhD Student, Department of History, Temple University).

During the American War of Independence, revolutionaries touted rhetoric that likened colonial rule to slavery. Soldiers of the Continental Army were passionate about these ideals, but there were “higher stakes experienced by men who had been enslaved for life” (69). Until recently, historians have sidelined the stories of black soldiers with little more than a passing reference. However, Judith Van Buskirk studies these men – African Americans who enlisted with the Continental Army – to highlight their often-disregarded significance in the war and, in turn, the war’s significance in the lives of the soldiers and their descendants. Indeed, she argues that the American Revolution inspired African Americans to claim their due after the war’s end despite the government’s efforts to ensure inequality.

In order to trace the story of these black soldiers, the author begins with an analysis of their pre-war environments. From South Carolina to Massachusetts, she notes regional differences in the treatment of slavery. While the South restricted the economic autonomy and mobility of their slaves to reinforce a patriarchal planter society, northern society did not rely as heavily on slave labor and there was some degree of contestation about the institution. Despite this contestation in the North, the author rightly points out that slavery “went

unquestioned by all but a few before the Revolution” (24).

As the Continental Army grappled with the enlistment of black soldiers, these regional differences appeared again when Rhode Island and South Carolina proposed the creation of all-black units. Rhode Island negotiated successfully for the creation of the First Rhode Island Regiment, despite the state’s complicated ties to slavery in Newport. However, John Lauren’s attempts to sway his father and other elites to act in favor of such a regiment in South Carolina were unsuccessful due to the perceived threats to white planter dominance and the plantation economy. Van Buskirk argues that, despite the conflicts surrounding their inclusion, African Americans’ war experiences allowed them “to prove one’s competence and assert oneself in way unheard of for black men in peacetime” (92).

After the war, African Americans continued asserting themselves. Van Buskirk notes that the early abolition movement was infused with the emancipatory rhetoric of the Revolution, but also invigorated by “the example of their fathers and grandfathers who had fought to create the Republic” (5). With clever turns of phrase like “No Taxation without Representation” and “Death or Liberty,” African Americans petitioned the government for freedom and suffrage or attempted an armed revolt (186).

Veterans also petitioned the government for their pensions in 1818 and 1832. Often calling on the references of white veterans or close personal connections, black veterans circumvented issues in the application process in 1818

and submitted their request to a relatively impartial bureaucracy. However, many veterans were unable to successfully navigate their way to pension acceptance in 1832, due to increasing bureaucratic inequality, which eliminated applicants based on enslaved status at time of enlistment. Nonetheless, the author reinforces that, although imperfect, the American Revolution had a “liberating potential” which spurred black veterans to action (25).

True to its word, Van Buskirk’s work is an effort to let African Americans – a demographic that Gary Nash famously called *The Forgotten Fifth* – stand in their own light. She does so using five-hundred pension records, written either by the veterans themselves or by someone close to them. While historians such as Alan Gilbert have noted the significance of African American soldiers on both sides of the conflict, Van Buskirk’s work provides a focused view of the Continental soldiers and their stories.¹

Van Buskirk deftly explains the limitations of her source base, yet one wonders how she might have employed different popular publications to supplement the military sources. Was there a public discourse on military masculinity, especially within civilian circles? Did the racial dynamics of an integrated military complicate views of that masculinity?

Despite the lack of an in-depth analysis of the larger gender discourse of the period, *Standing in Their Own Light* is

an intriguing and well-researched monograph. Clear in her tone and transparent in her evidentiary limitations, Van Buskirk’s most recent work is an engaging read for anyone interested in the period. Indeed, this book clearly presents the American Revolution as a war that “spawned a language that ended up with a power all its own” (233).

¹ Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

