

# Interpreter

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## JOHN MONTOUR: LIFE OF A CULTURAL GO-BETWEEN

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In the stories of Indian-white relations in the colonial era, the Indian headmen and the colonial governors are given a prominent role. And they were key figures. They were the players who signed the treaties, and they were the people who had to persuade their communities to abide by the agreements reached.

But in the shadows behind these chiefs and governors were other individuals who were equally essential to the success of the relationship between these two very different peoples. In eighteenth-century documents, they are called interpreters because they literally translated the speeches of each into the language of the other. But they did much more. They guided colonists to Indian villages and escorted Indian delegations to colonial capitals such as Williamsburg. They carried news from place to place. They would advise both sides of the cultural divide on what would be acceptable to the other. In other words, they were cultural go-betweens, brokers, mediators, and negotiators.<sup>1</sup>

In the best of times, the cultural go-between was a true bridge between the Indian and colonial worlds. But tension between the two mounted during the 1750s, 1760s, and 1770s.

As attitudes of distrust and contempt hardened, the role of the cultural go-between who hoped to keep a foot in both camps grew problematic and perhaps, in the end, even impossible. This is the story of one such go-between. His name was John Montour.

He was born in 1744. His father was Andrew Montour, a well-known métis who had Iroquois and French ancestors. His mother was a Delaware, the granddaughter of Sassoonam.<sup>2</sup> Andrew Montour married twice and possibly three times. His was a large family. Late in the Revolutionary War, reports indicated that John



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John Murray, earl of Dunmore by Charles Harris. Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.

was one of seven brothers or half-brothers.<sup>3</sup> The English names of two are known: Debby, who was schooled in Philadelphia, and Thomas, who was killed during the Revolution. John Montour also had at least two sisters. Kayodaghscroony, or Madelina, was living with the Delaware in 1756, and Polly was cared for in Philadelphia in the late 1750s and early 1760s.<sup>4</sup>

John's father, Andrew Montour, was one of the most important interpreters and negotiators in the Virginia and Pennsylvania backcountry in the 1750s and 1760s. Authorities in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia employed his services. In the 1750s, Andrew Montour believed it was possible for go-betweens such as himself to truly live in both the Indian and white worlds, and he hoped that his children could too.<sup>5</sup> To



## African Virginians and the Colonial Virginia Militia

by Noel B. Poirier

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The first permanent English settlers in Virginia brought with them a militia heritage dating back hundreds of years. Within decades of their arrival, however, Virginia's colonial government was forced to make decisions affecting that heritage as they attempted to meet situations unknown to their English predecessors. An influx of African labor, eventually in the form of slaves, forced the government to determine how these individuals would fit into the traditional English militia system. Adding to this complex situation was the continuing presence of small numbers of subjugated, and sometimes hostile, native tribes within the boundaries of the colony. Through a brief examination of the militia tradition in Britain and Virginia and an investigation of Virginia's colonial militia laws before the Revolution one can explore more completely the role played by African Virginians in the colonial militia.

When John Smith and his colleagues dropped anchor at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the societal baggage they carried included the long-standing English tradition of military obligation to one's community. This tradition, in one form or another, dates back to the founding of the English state. King Alfred the Great (A.D. 871–99), in his effort to reform the Anglo-Saxon system of defense, divided various counties into military districts called *fyrds*. Within these *fyrds*, each landholder who owned more than six hundred acres was required to provide an armed man for the king. Occasionally, even the landholder himself was required to provide service. King Alfred's reforms became the foundation of later English militia systems.<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary and royal decrees like the *Assize of Arms* (1181), the *Statute of Westminster* (1285), and the *Instructions for General Musters* (1572) codified this obligation for the male citizens of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> This martial tradition eventually provided the foundation for colonial Virginia's militia system. The aforementioned mandates, while providing some of the legal framework for a militia within a free



society, failed to address some of the major concerns for the Virginia colonial government.

As the colonists gained a foothold in the New World, Virginia's farmers came to rely on income generated primarily from the cultivation of labor-intensive tobacco. By the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century, Virginia colonists began to import African labor, not always in a state of slavery,<sup>3</sup> to work on their ever-expanding tobacco plantations.<sup>4</sup> Euro-Americans were not the only settlers to bring a military tradition to the New World. The newly arrived Africans also hailed from long traditions of military service in their ancestral homelands. For centuries, Africans had been used as soldiers to supplement the armies of their Mediterranean neighbors, and the tradition of performing as a warrior for one's own tribe was a role familiar to virtually every African male.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest Europeans to visit Africa recorded their views on the military ability of the populations there. One traveler wrote that West African soldiers were "bold and fierce" and would rather die than surrender in battle. As the numbers of Europeans trading with Africans along the west coast increased, so too did the ability of African tribal soldiers to become familiar with the weapons of their European counterparts. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, this trade brought with it the latest military weaponry, and firearms became increasingly present on the tribal battlefields of West Africa.<sup>6</sup>

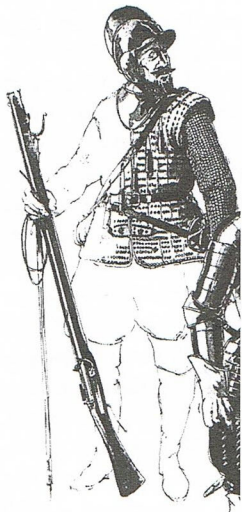
The introduction of Africans to Virginia required local authorities to confront the challenges of a racially mixed society. The colonists were compelled to develop a legal mechanism, in the form of servitude, to use and control their ever-increasing African-Virginian workforce. As the need for cheap labor continued to increase, Virginia began to legalize the practice of enslaving Africans.<sup>7</sup> The established British militia





system, transplanted to Virginia, was obliged to adjust to this slaveholding society.

At the beginning of Virginia's settlement, the colonists required all the martial manpower they could muster. In March 1622, the colony was nearly wiped out in a surprise attack by the native inhabitants. The First Tidewater War, led by Opechancanough, struck settlements throughout the colony and killed more than three hundred settlers. In the years following this setback, Virginia's records are interestingly silent about any prohibition against free or enslaved African Virginians serving in the colony's militia. On the contrary, during the first two decades of African presence, masters were permitted to defend their far-flung plantations by providing weapons to their slaves if they chose. Free African Virginians, during the same period, were required to provide identical military service to the colony as that of their European counterparts.<sup>8</sup>



When the General Assembly of Virginia passed an act in 1624 stating that all able-bodied men were "not to worke in the ground without their arms (and a centinell upon them.))" and that "no man go . . . abroad without a sufficient partie will [well] armed" without specifically mentioning race, they were including European and African-Virginian men.<sup>9</sup> The threat of more native uprisings and the lim-

ited number of European settlers required that Virginia open the ranks of its militia to all those able to serve. The colony waited twenty years after the arrival of the first Africans to pass militia legislation limiting the involvement of Africans in its defense.

An increase in Virginia's European population continued during the same period, allowing the government to begin to limit its reliance on non-European manpower for its defense. In January 1640, the first statute limiting African Virginians' right to bear arms appeared. The law required that all individuals required to perform militia service in the colony were to be issued arms and ammunition, Africans excepted.<sup>10</sup> Historians have argued over the meaning and effect of this particular act on the African-Virginian community. There is some question as to whether or not African Virginians already owning firearms were disarmed, and nothing in the act specifically prohibited them from taking part in military activities. Therefore, it seems likely that the 1640 act little altered the role of African Virginians already active in the militia system.<sup>11</sup>

While those of African descent began to have limitations placed on them that might have excluded them from militia service, they nonetheless continued to play a part in seventeenth-century colonial military events. In the middle of the 1670s, Virginia suffered through what has become known as Bacon's Rebellion. This contest between Governor Berkeley and a hotheaded, Indian-hating colonist named Nathaniel Bacon, brought the African-Virginian colonial soldier to the forefront again. Bacon and his followers, primarily small planters from Virginia's frontier, wanted to usurp the lands of the native inhabitants and protect themselves from future Indian raids. Unfortunately for Bacon, his heavy-handed tactics, which included burning the capital at Jamestown, shocked many Virginians. Bacon, in recruiting his small army, opened enlistment to hundreds of indentured servants and slaves. Bacon's army, it was reported, consisted of "250, sum'd up in freemen, servants and slaves."<sup>12</sup> Enough servants and slaves flocked to Bacon's banner to acutely alarm the colony's European population and erode much of the popular support for his cause.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, attitudes among the growing white population about the arming of blacks had dramatically changed in the fifty years after the First Tidewater War of 1622.



The trend of colonial conflict affecting the role of the African Virginian in the colony's militia became apparent at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Following the outbreak of King William's War (1689–97), Virginia authorities once more considered whether to allow African Virginians to play a part in the colony's militia system. In 1690, with the war being fought primarily in Canada, Virginia's leaders again determined that militia officers should not attempt to enlist freemen of African descent into the militia. Similar laws enacted during King William's War also forbade free African Virginians from holding any militia office and prohibited slaves from taking any part in the defense of Virginia.<sup>14</sup> After the war, Virginia's Act for Settling the Militia (1705) continued to forbid the use of slaves or servants in the militia.

For much of the first one hundred years of the colony's existence, with the exception of the years 1619–75, Virginia had managed to keep its free and enslaved African-Virginian population from taking a meaningful part in the colony's militia system. Concerns over the threat of attack from Native Americans in the early half of the eighteenth century again caused the colony to lessen those restrictions temporarily.

Subsequent to the Tuscarora (1711–12) and Yamasee (1715–21) Wars in the Carolinas, Virginia diluted the restrictions placed on free blacks by previous militia legislation. While the colonial Assembly was still unwilling to arm free African Virginians who wished to take part in the defense of Virginia, the Act for Settling and Better Regulating of the Militia (1723) did allow them to serve as trumpeters, drummers, and laborers.<sup>15</sup> The law also required that, if the colony were invaded, African Virginians would be compelled to join the militia and serve as pioneers and laborers. As the fear of native uprisings along the coast subsided and the number of enslaved blacks continued to increase, African Virginians' role in the militia was once again minimized by the Assembly. The Virginian of African descent, free or enslaved, gradually became more a target of the militia than a functioning component of it.

The government had excluded free blacks and slaves from military service because of the growing need for labor in the tobacco fields of Virginia, as well as the fear of arming an enslaved population whose numbers were beginning to mirror that of Europeans in the colony. There was considerable anxiety over where the loyalties of these potential soldiers would lie on the battlefield: with their masters or their masters' enemies. The leadership of the colony also

cited their concern about armed slave insurrection as a legitimate excuse for excluding African Virginians from the militia and withholding military training from them. Oddly enough, while expressing fears of slave uprisings, Virginians never made provisions to prevent such an occurrence during the seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup> They remained inactive despite a number of near insurrections during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In 1687, people in the Northern Neck of Virginia avoided an insurrection by detecting a conspiracy. Surry County was spared in 1710, when a participant revealed the plans. Eight years later a number of fugitive slaves, some recently imported, occasioned havoc in Caroline County.<sup>17</sup> Virginia leaders saw these acts of disobedience as reason enough to continue their policy of racial exclusion in the colony's militia, yet took no active measure to use the militia to hamper further occurrences until the end of the 1720s.

The years between 1723 and the onset of the American Revolution saw little change in the role of African Virginians in the militia. The Act for Better Regulating of the Militia (1738) decreed that African Virginians, free or enslaved, were exempt from militia duties. Another act went so far as to fine any exempted African Virginian one hundred pounds of tobacco if he appeared at a militia muster.<sup>18</sup> During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the militia began to place more serious attention on the continued concern over the internal security of the colony. To this end, the General Assembly passed acts exempting overseers of four or more slaves from militia duty. While enforcing laws against the possession of arms and military training of African Virginians in the Piedmont and Tidewater, the General Assembly did allow African Virginians on the frontier to be armed for the safety of the plantations on which they worked. African Virginians also unwillingly and unwittingly assisted in the maintenance of Virginia's militia system through a tax on the purchasers of slaves.

Not until 1726 was the first act authorizing the patrolling of slave quarters passed. This law allowed the county militia commander to patrol and disperse any suspicious gatherings of blacks on holidays like Easter, Christmas, and Whitsuntide. It was modified in 1754 to permit patrols of slave quarters by the militia once a month, if necessary.<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of the Revolutionary period, the African Virginian played little or no role in the activities of the Virginia militia. The militia laws passed during



the middle of the eighteenth century provided the framework upon which Virginia's Revolutionary militia was built.

The initial settlement of the colony and the challenge of conflict with hostile native inhabitants and traditional European foes forced the early colonial government to include all able-bodied men in the muster rolls of the militia, including those of African descent. However, as the number of plantations increased, so did the demand for slave labor. The fear of European plantation owners that their servile labor might rise up against them motivated the Virginia legislature to exclude the African Virginians, free or otherwise, from learning martial skills and from serving in the colony's militia.



Beginning a trend that has continued throughout America's history, colonial leaders were unwilling to exclude African Virginians from service, whenever a crisis arose that required military manpower (like the period following the Tuscarora and Yamasee Wars). When the colonial authorities determined to raise troops for the defense of Virginia's liberty



in 1775, manpower needs were foremost in their minds. The act passed in July 1775, months before Dunmore's Proclamation, opened the ranks of the Virginia militia to all "free male persons, hired servants, and apprentices, above the age of sixteen" regardless of race.<sup>20</sup> Manpower demands at the beginning of the American Revolution prevented the exclusion of African Virginians from service in the state's militia. Efforts to limit African-Virginian militia service later in the war should not diminish the memory of those who willingly served in the Virginia militia during the Revolution. The pattern of including African-American soldiers, based only on the manpower needs of the nation, dominated military recruitment until President Harry Truman's Executive Order finally began to integrate America's armed forces in the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Stokes Aldridge, *Organization and Administration of the Militia System of Colonial Virginia* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1992), 13–14.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," *Military Affairs* 22 (1958): 76.

<sup>3</sup> For information on the status of Virginia's earliest African Virginians, see Junius P. Rodriguez, ed. *The Historical Encyclopedia of Slavery* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Cary Carson, ed., *Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to be Both Free and Equal* (Williamsburg, Va.: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Peter M. Voel, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 289.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 289–291.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.

<sup>8</sup> William L. Shea, *The Virginia Militia in the Seventeenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 25–27, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Aldridge, *Militia System of Virginia*, 49; William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 1: 127.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Quarles, "The Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (1945): 644; Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large*, 1: 226.

<sup>11</sup> T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, "Myne Owne Ground": *Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1670* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 25–27.

<sup>12</sup> Charles M. Andrews, *Narratives of the Insurrections 1675–1690* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Shea, *Virginia Militia*, 113–114.

<sup>14</sup> Quarles, *Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower*, 644.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Aldridge, *Militia System of Virginia*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–117.

<sup>18</sup> Quarles, *Colonial Militia and Negro Manpower*, 645.

<sup>19</sup> Aldridge, *Militia System of Virginia*, 117–122.

<sup>20</sup> Hening, ed., *Statutes at Large* (Richmond: J. & G. Cochran, 1821), 9: 27.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this pattern, see Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).