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Slavery & The American Revolution

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Hello, my name is Luke Kosowatz and welcome to my final podcast project. My title is Slavery & The American Revolution, and during this podcast I will be exploring the institution of slavery as it existed prior to, during, and after the American Revolutionary War. I will also discuss the role African-Americans played during the Revolutionary War and the reasons as to why they were included in the conflict. In the end, I hope it is made clear that even though the United States was founded upon the principles of freedom and equal opportunity, slavery still existed as an institution well beyond the founding of the country.

However before we explore the American Revolution, lets begin with some background information on the institution of slavery. As soon as the new world began to be colonized, settlers figured out that both the Southeast portion of North America and certain islands in the Caribbean (Also known as the West Indies), were ideal areas for the planting and growing of certain cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. However in order to produce these crops on a large-scale basis, the settlers required a cheap source of labor. Initially, indentured servants and Native Americans slaves were used to harvest and tend to the massive fields of crops, but it soon became apparent to the plantation owners that a new form of cheap, manual labor was needed. Indentured servants were often unreliable,
as they often ran away or simply slacked off, and their numbers began to dwindle as more and more plantations arose. Native Americans also proved to be poor workers, as the harsh conditions, countless hours of work, and introduced diseases all hampered their ability to be an effective source of slave labor. This lead to the importation of African slaves to the new world. While the trade remained relatively moderate during the early colonial stages, the trans-Atlantic slave trade increased dramatically during the end of the 18th century. More and more plantations arose, which required a larger workforce of slaves, and African slaves proved to be ideal workers due to their higher levels of endurance and work ethic in the hot and humid climate of the south. However, this work was still incredibly strenuous and inhumane. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass recounts slavery as “convincing the wicked, cruel, and hardened slave-holder; and of befriending generally the cause of oppressed humanity.” This describes the harsh realities and lifestyles slaves were forced to deal with on an everyday basis. By 1860, 89% of African-Americans were enslaved. They also eventually maintained 13% of the Nation’s population after independence was declared, and maintained roughly 1/3 of the southern population. However unlike any other slave society in history, the U.S had a self-sustaining population of African slaves, meaning that the slaves were able to reproduce and raise their offspring. This is one of, if not the only, documented example of this in history, and is one of the man reasons as to why the institution of slavery lasted for so long in the U.S.

This brings us to the Declaration of Independence. After finally having enough of Great Britain’s oppressions, subjugating taxes and military occupations, the colonies drafted the Declaration of Independence, which as we all know, declared independence
and sovereignty from Great Britain. The declaration was drafted towards the beginning of the Revolutionary War, which would be, obviously, a decisive moment in American history. However an overlooked aspect of the war was the role African-Americans would play in the conflict. Throughout the colonies, slaves saw the war as an opportunity to obtain freedom from their masters, as many ran away from their masters in an attempt to find freedom. However an even larger number of slaves saw the war in a different light. By choosing to join either the revolutionary or loyalist causes, many slaves were promised freedom if they gave their service to a given side. For instance, Lord Dunmore (the governor of Virginia) promised freedom to any slave who left his patriot master to join and support the loyalist cause. This was because slavery had been abolished in Great Britain for some time now, and the governor promised to bring back the slaves who served to a life of freedom in England. Countless slaves from all around the colonies joined either side in the pursuit of freedom, but as we all know, that promise of freedom was never fulfilled on a large-scale premise.

While the Declaration of Independence clearly states that, “all men are created equal”, the fact of the matter is that this was simply not the case during the Colonial/Revolutionary War Period. Slavery was a dominating force throughout the era that enslaved millions of individuals and denied them the basic rights that all human being are born with. Although the United States was founded upon the principles of freedom and equal opportunity for all individuals, slavery remained a focal point of society for almost a century after American independence. This proves that although America claimed to be the land of the free; this was actually not the case at all. America
was founded off of the denial of human rights, which shows the main paradox of the American Revolution.

Sources:


