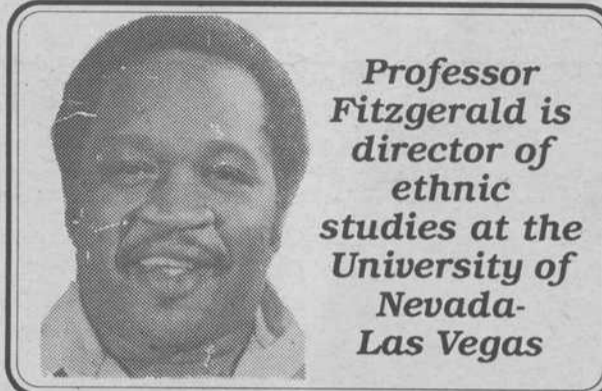


Before Montezuma

He didn't have a uniform and had to borrow a musket. A white broadcloth shirt, woolen pants with holes in the knees and a black woolen vest was what Pater Salem wore on June 17, 1775, the date that the Battle of Bunker Hill took place. He had worn the same two months earlier on April 19 at the Battle of Concord. Salem had been a slave in Massachusetts but had been set free in order that he might enlist in the state militia. Even though those had been among the first three out-and-out battles, with Lexington being the third, of the American Revolution, the first fatalities had occurred in Boston five years earlier on the occasion of the Boston Massacre in which Crispus Attucks and two others were slain.

Salem and Attucks had a lot in common. They were contemporaries even though there is no record of their having known each other. They both, for whatever reasons, risked their lives in the cause of independence. In the case of Attucks, he became the war's first fatality. More than that, they were both, to varying measures, descendants of Africans.

Once hostilities had broken out between England and her American colonies, others like Attucks and Salem presented themselves to take the step forward to support the aims of the Continental Congress. Initially, at least on local and state levels in the northernmost colonies, their offers were accepted into that body. There were several reasons for this, not the least of which was the fear of putting guns into the hands of slaves; who could tell, they wondered, in which direction slaves would point their muskets. Further, in those



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by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

places where slavery had gained a much stronger foothold and the debasement of slaves was more complete, the society which that hierarchy produced was intolerant of any suggestion of equality of the races. Allowing blacks and whites to fight in the same army for the same goals was tantamount to an admission that slaves/blacks were either not as inferior as thought or whites were not as superior as imagined.

It was because of the agreement entered into by the several states in the formation of the Continental Army that it became impossible to enlist blacks they slave or free.

That rejection created some contradictions in the philosophical intent of the Founding Fathers. As you recall, that intent was articulated in the Declaration of Independence but, seemingly, the founders failed to recognize the dual position they occupied on the matter of oppression. While it is true that they were indeed oppressed by England in the guise of the numerous oppressive laws and taxes which had been enacted by British Parliament in the years immediately following the end of hostilities in the French and Indian War and the adoption of the Proclamation of 1763 which was the treaty which officially ended that war, they simultaneously occupied the position of oppressor.

The majority of the colonial leadership was involved, to one degree or another, in slavery. Patrick Henry, a slave holder, failed to recognize the contradiction on the occasion of making his most well known and quoted speech;

"Gentlemen may cry peace, peace, but there is no peace. The war is actually begun. The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms. What is it the gentlemen wish? What would they have: Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at a price of chains and slavery: Forbid it

almighty God. I know not what course others may take but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."

On the heels of commenting on "chains and slavery," "Marsh" Henry owned slaves. There can be no clearer example of the duality of the position occupied by the Founding Fathers that that illustrated by this episode.

Black men were not always privy to the sentiments of the colonial leaders. On its face, there was no reason for them to imagine that the colonials were not interested in all the help they could get. Operating in the dark, so to speak, blacks continued in their efforts to mobilize. From among the thousands of free black men in the colonies, several attempts were made to organize fighting units but their efforts to participate in the efforts at independence were thwarted at every turn. They did not, however, give up the fight to get into the fight. They well realized that their future and their status in that future would hinge on their contribution to the effort. Also, even though they were free people of color, they were prevented from participating even in the limited rights which other Americans had under the British crown. They had much at stake.

Slaves had an even greater interest in the Revolution. While others were interested in independence they were interested in something much more important; freedom. They saw the war as an opportunity to gain that freedom and throw off the shackles of their bondage and they were willing to risk their lives for that but the colonials, as we've seen, were not interested. After all, they already had their freedom. What they were now interested in was independence.

England had quite a lot at stake. They had colonies in places other than America and they were cognizant of the ramifications a successful rebellion would have on their other world-wide interests. The American Revolution had to be suppressed at all costs so as to off-set any notions any of their other colonies might have in that direction. An example had to be made of America.

The British, with Lord Dunmore taking the point, issued a Proclamation encouraging slaves to run away and join with the British in suppressing the rebellion. The carrot was that every slave who did so would be given his freedom upon the successful completion of the war. Many slaves did just that. They fought with the British and that is what ultimately caused the Americans to allow them to enlist with the same promise.

Why do I mention this at this time? We've just celebrated Veterans Day. We've all seen how often we are shown in the parades or at the memorial services presented several days ago on local and national television. We've been in this veterans business from the very beginning. We even fought to fight. We fought in America's first war and fought for something more important than independence; freedom.

The lyrics of one of my favorite songs includes the following: "From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli. We will fight our country's battles on the land and on the sea. First the fight for right and freedom..." Right and freedom. Listen to those words. We were America's first freedom fighters. Montezuma didn't happen until 1848 and Tripoli* did not happen until the Tripolitan War of 1801-1805.

Yeah, We were before Montezuma and it's about time America recognized that.

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