

Judith Van Buskirk. *Standing in their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution.* Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2017. 312 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-5635-4.

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There he was, Peter Adams, African American Revolutionary War veteran, bathed in the light of the cabin he built and owned, staring at the daughter he had barely seen in three years. He had finally come home, Judith Van Buskirk tells us in *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution*. The story of Adams serves, as many others in this fine work do, not only to introduce us to the black participants of this epoch, but also to demonstrate the emblematic problems faced by those who, like Van Buskirk, ply their trade in the historical records of the eighteenth century—namely, readily available access to a trove of documents detailing the trials and tribulations of African American personnel, free or slave, in the American Revolution.

Van Buskirk's charge, then, is to combat the myths, rumors, and half-truths, and when necessary, follow frustratingly futile rabbit holes that lead to, well, nowhere, and in doing so to ensure that she is telling the most accurate story possible about the black veteran under examination in that moment. For those of us who have dabbled in this era, or for that matter, have done any basic genealogical work, this is the norm for this type of study. At the risk of making her narrative sound like a redemption story, there is a methodology in place that she cleverly employs that cuts through

the historical kudzu to get at the heart of her subject: the mining of pension records, or perhaps properly stated, the records of those who sought a pension for their service in one of the most critical, if not *the* most critical, wars in the Republic's history.

The use of pension files allows her to submerge herself into the social constructs of the turbulent era to see, as best as any of us can, why African Americans of the era—and it should be noted not all did so right away or frankly had a choice in the matter—served. Instead of a larger study of the era, something that Benjamin Quarles completed four decades ago, Van Buskirk has brought us a microstudy that, among other things, probes the development of a sense of Americanism within the black community, whether slave or free. The act of filing for a war pension, she contends, demonstrated the value they placed on their service, and that they believed that they deserved this recognition from their nation. That in itself represents the development of an American identity of sorts, and helps us understand the long-standing tradition of the African American community when it came to their continued service to the United States of America, which was often rendered, as many of this era and the ones that followed would discover, with little reward or gratitude from their white brethren.

Standing in Their Own Light is divided in such a way that it tells the story from Thomas Jefferson's pessimistic view on the relations of white and black to the social realities throughout the colonies of South Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts, among others; it also includes an examination of why some chose to serve—including the tale of a couple of George Washington's former slaves who were among those deliberating over the issue. Moving from there, Van Buskirk marches towards their service with an interesting comparison of the colonies-turned-states that sought to deploy all-black outfits, Rhode Island and South Carolina; the later third of the book, and paramount to the study, is an illuminating discussion over the politics, ramifications, and the personal stories of those who sought pensions as a result of the passage of the first and second pension acts.

Questions certainly remain to be answered about this important era in American history—for example, about the character of Crispus Attucks, whose story during the Boston Massacre is skillfully retold here, but in a way that adds very little new information or interpretation. Generally speaking, Van Buskirk's desire is to understand why African American men fought. To do so, she uses a little over five hundred pension records. Through her creative use of these records, Van Buskirk is able to offer a far more nuanced portrait of African American veterans in this era, and for my money, the development of a sense of American self-identity.

With so many new studies coming out that investigate African American military history, not to mention minority service more generally, of all these, Van Buskirk's is arguably one of the most well researched. It is an exciting time for the field and those who work in it. In sum, though her work builds on research by those who came before—namely, Benjamin Quarles, whose seminal treatment, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961), remains the standard, but also John Hope

Franklin, Gary Nash, Douglas Egerton, and Alan Gilbert, who have collectively shaped our understanding of the field—it stands in its own light as it returns the story from the politics and warfare of the era to the men who fought for something far greater: yes, an America free from the British, but also their freedom and equitable treatment as American citizens.[1]

Note

[1]. The aforementioned authors have helped shape our understanding of African American military activities during and after the Revolutionary War. See Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961); John Hope Franklin's quintessential study of African American history that contains an outstanding overview of black military service throughout the history of the Republic, a work now in its tenth edition: *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1947); Gary Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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