

# The Providence Journal

## Opinion/Brigidi: Soldiers of color who fought for freedom 243 years ago

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Guest columnist

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Patriots Park in Portsmouth is a rather inconspicuous place. Most motorists will speed by, veering off toward Bristol or heading to Route 24 for Fall River.

But Patriots Park has a remarkable memorial well worth stopping for. It is the site where the Battle of Rhode Island was fought during the Revolutionary War, 243 years ago. The colonists engaged the combined British and Hessian troops in a battle toward independence from the Crown. It was not a victory for either side, as the rebel forces held back several assaults, ultimately withdrawing to Tiverton by crossing the Sakonnet River.

The names of the brave rebels who fought are carved into a magnificent granite structure. What is little known is the contingent of Black soldiers and Native Americans who fought alongside the white settlers. These were men of color who were enslaved and oppressed, seeking their reward of freedom in joining the white colonists in a cause they well understood to be about liberty.

Patriots Park is today a memorial to all the brave soldiers of mixed races. Recently, an event was held to commemorate and honor all the people defending freedom. A medallion will join two in Bristol, one in Newport at Bowen's Wharf, and another in Jamestown. These are markings of slave history, important in recognizing the struggles of freedom and equality sought by African Americans and native people of the Narragansett nation.

A medallion is to be placed there, marking the great significance of this historic site. Charles Roberts, founder of the R.I. Slave History Medallions, introduced the program. Thawn Harris of the Narragansett nation spoke eloquently of his people's participation in the historic battle, highlighted with the dancing of his three young children. Sidy Maiga from Mali brought his wonderful music of drumming to the

ceremony, inviting members of the audience to join him in a circle of drums. It became a celebratory event of children of mixed colors joining like adults in the music of healing and reconciliation.

State Rep. Marvin Abney of Newport welcomed a well-attended public gathering, telling of the makeup of soldiers, with historian Fred Zilian citing facts about Patriots Park. The Black Regiment, as it became known, with its survivors went on to fight on the American side throughout the war. Wartime pensions came very late for them, with some thrown into destitute living. Slavery would persist for another 80 years throughout the American colonies.

The Battle of Rhode Island was not the first occasion to find brave Black men fighting America's wars of freedom. Northern armies brought Black soldiers into their ranks during the Civil War. Men of color have fought in all American military campaigns, often met with segregation. During WWI, a contingent of Black soldiers was forced to fight with the allied French army, as white American soldiers would not have them in their camps. Only very recently were these men given a Congressional medal by President Biden, more than 100 years later.

There has been little acknowledgment of the bravery of our brothers of African and indigenous background in their support of America's struggles for liberty. The slavery medallions program tells of the participation of people of color in every aspect of American life. The beauty of the events around slavery history with Charles Roberts and Representative Abney is to celebrate the diversity of who we are, all participants in American life, whether Black, brown, white or otherwise.

Patriots Park is a special place and well worth slowing down for. Consider visiting for a few moments to take in its importance. Here we offer thanks to all the folks who fought for liberty, especially those people of color who joined with us every step of the way.