AMERICA GOES TO WAR
A Social History of the Continental Army
Charles Patrick Neimeyer
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CHAPTER ONE

Few Had the Appearance of Soldiers:
The Social Origins of the Continental Line

In 1776, Captain Alexander Graydon was sent into the Pennsylvania hinterlands on a recruiting trip for the Continental army. Finding no one willing to sign the terms of enlistment, he slipped across the Maryland border, hoping, he stated, "that he might find some seamen or longshoremen there, out of employ." His efforts yielded only one recruit, a man deemed so valueless by his community that a local wag informed Graydon that the recruit "would do to stop a bullet as well as a better man, as he was truly a worthless dog." Graydon later wrote that his problems with recruitment served "in some degree to correct the error of those who seem to conceive the year 1776 to have been a season of almost universal patriotic enthusiasm." Louis Duportail, a French volunteer and chief engineer of the Continental army, noticed the same trend. "There is a hundred times more enthusiasm for this Revolution in any Paris cafe than in all the colonies together." While both officers probably exaggerated the extent of patriotic decline, their assertions run counter to traditional historical accounts concerning the Continental army and those who comprised it.

While patriotism and political activism as motivating forces cannot be rejected in all cases, huge amounts of evidence point to an American long term as soldiers were usually not those best connected to the communities that recruited them. Soldiers were obtained by any means available; their officers certainly did not consider their men to be avenging killer-angels hell-bent on defending liberty for all.

What inspired the Whiggish elite was not always the same as what motivated the average enlisted man. Thus officers like Anthony Wayne sometimes referred to their men as "Food for Worms . . . . miserable sharp looking Caitiffs, hungry lean fac'd Villains." Other officers lamented that their men were "the sweepings of the York streets," or "a wretched motley Crew." Senior officers, including George Washington, feared their own men. Washington was especially wary of foreigners who were attracted (as many were) to the large state and congressional bounties offered for service. He demanded that only natives form his headquarters guard. Joseph Galloway, General William Howe's intelligence chief, once estimated that three-fourths of the Continental deserters who came into British-occupied Philadelphia were foreigners. Henry Lee went so far as to label the Pennsylvania battalions "the Line of Ireland." Southern states used convicts as soldiers and were happy to get them. Prisoners of war were courted by both sides, and Washington unsuccessfully admonished his recruiters to stop accepting them. Nathanael Greene thought that the Carolina militia that opposed Cornwallis "were the worst in the world" and questioned whether the few who did not desert were not more interested in plunder than in what he deemed to be their patriotic duty. These observations were certainly not indicative of a patriot or classical "republican army." Why were these officers so vehement in their condemnation of the men they commanded? If service connoted an implicit patriotism, why were Continental army recruits feared by their own officers? To answer these crucial questions, we must examine the colonial military tradition and the social origins of the American Continental soldier.

The Colonial Military Tradition

Long before the Revolution, the Virginia Assembly used to require that every male who was fit to carry a weapon to bring it to Sunday services so that he could participate afterward in militia drill. This law made sense since a sudden attack from Indians was considered a plausible occurrence. It appeared with the passage of time, however, that growing economic demands and a recession of an active Indian threat caused a distinction to develop between those who served long terms as soldiers and those
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Over time, colonial governments revised the requirements for vested citizens to serve and increased the number of exemptions to “Persons of Estates” so that in practice “no Man of an Estate is under any Obligation to Muster, and even the Overseers of the Rich are likewise exempted; the whole Burthen lies upon the poorest sort of people.” While the number of exemptions varied from time and place according to the military exigencies of each colony, the new system favored the most powerful members of the community and squarely placed the burden of serving on the least powerful.

A comparison between the North Carolina Militia Act of 1774 and the original Carolina militia law (drafted by John Locke in 1669) reveals this transition. Whereas Locke’s original law required “all inhabitants and freemen of Carolina, above 17 years of age and under 60” to bear arms, the 1774 law exempted many categories of freeholders such as clergymen, overseers, millers, judges, commissioners, lawyers, river pilots, constables, and so on (persons deemed necessary to run the community in both war and peace) from service. Furthermore, since Carolina had so few whites compared to blacks, no overseer of more than five taxable slaves was required to perform military service. Indeed, overseers in this category who thought it was their patriotic duty to participate in colonial military affairs were fined 40 shillings.

Exemptions expanded at such a rate that only one-half of the able-bodied white males in a typical North Carolina county attended muster drills in 1772. The well-to-do who declined to serve could afford to pay the militia fine, which was modest in any case. People who fell into the exempted categories were, by no means, always rich or even members of the upper class (overseers, for example, were not particularly well-to-do), but they did have one thing in common: all were connected in some way with the commercial or legal functioning of the community.

Changes in the militia system were, by the latter half of the eighteenth century, inevitable. The colonies had grown too complex for the situation to be otherwise. Because the militias tended to be motivated only when their parochial interests were threatened, and large numbers of citizens were exempted by the community anyway, colonial recruiters turned to those groups of men who “fell outside” the class of people required normally to do a turn or two in the militia. These were Native Americans, mulattoes, African Americans, white indentured servants, and “free white men on the move,” sometimes known as itinerant laborers. These were also men who, if given the opportunity, were most willing to part
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Who were these “loose people” described by Washington and Abercromby? Did the pattern observed in colonial militias also appear when the Continental army was formed? Common soldiers in the eighteenth century, regardless of the army for which they fought, generally came from the lowest strata of society. Descriptions of eighteenth-century soldiers included “the sweeping from jails, ginmills, and poorhouses, oafs from farms beguiled into ‘taking the King’s shilling,’ adventurers and unfortunates who might find a home” in a regiment. While this thesis was supported by the comments of Continental officers, an in-depth analysis by at least one recent scholar revealed that the social structure of some eighteenth-century military organizations was more complex than previously supposed. For instance, new evidence has revealed that “the majority of British conscripts and German mercenaries (who formed the bulk of the British expeditionary force sent to quell the rebellion) did not come from the permanent substratum of the poor, but were members of the working classes who were temporarily unemployed or permanently displaced, and thus represented the less productive, but by no means useless, elements of society.” Was the same true for Continental recruits as well?

Two overarching and interrelated prewar social trends help to explain the origins of the Continental army: an expanding population and immigration. During the eighteenth century, British North America had experienced a tenfold increase in population (from 250,000 in 1700 to 2.5 million in 1775). The colonies, especially the middle and southern regions, had absorbed a great many immigrants after 1700. Some scholars have estimated that from 1720 to 1770, most colonial counties increased their population densities by a factor of three. As the larger and denser population pressed against the local land supply, the result was an exhaustion of available, undivided, cultivatable land. An ensuing land shortage caused an increase in the concentration of wealth as large landowners and speculators sold at high prices. Those who lacked land or the capital to purchase it were denied basic economic opportunities. Thus many a man who came of age in 1770 faced the hard choice of migrating or accepting either a nonagricultural trade or lower standard of living.

Land availability shrank in some older New England towns to extraordinarily low levels. “A degree of social polarization,” noted historian Kenneth Lockridge, “accompanied the concentration of wealth. For a time the proportion of men labeled ‘gentlemen’ increased faster than ever before, as did the proportion of men accepting poor relief, both propor-
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The 55,000 Irish who left Ireland for the colonies accounted for 2.3 percent of their home population. The British and Irish contributions, however, represented only part of the emigration equation from Europe. During the same years, “at least 12,000 German-speaking immigrants entered the port of Philadelphia.” At the same time, more than 84,500 enslaved Africans arrived on North American shores. All told, “an average of 15,000 people were arriving annually, which is triple the average of years before 1760 and close to the total estimated population of the town of Boston in this period.”

In prewar Philadelphia, a considerable degree of geographic mobility was evident in the lives of the city’s laboring immigrant poor. James Cooper, a resident of the city, took in his Scottish-born nephew Tacey, a deserter from the British navy. Tacey, a sailor since the age of eight, “made his escape to the American Army” and later served with the Continental navy. After the war, Tacey worked near the city docks as a mariner and later headed out to newly opened lands in Kentucky. James Brown, a dispossessed Irish weaver, gave further evidence of the great mobility of the “lower sort.” Emigrating to a small town near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after disembarking at Philadelphia during the late 1760s, Brown decided to try his luck in Danbury, Connecticut, in a linen factory. When the British burned the factory at the beginning of the war, he returned to Pennsylvania, out of work, with no prospect of employment in sight. A Continental recruiting officer convinced him that his best employment opportunity lay in the army. Before leaving for service, Brown moved his wife and family to Philadelphia, where they could be near friends while he was away. He eventually came home from the army, moved back to Danbury, and resumed his factory job. He died in Ontario County, New York, in 1815.

Later chapters will examine immigration during the Revolutionary era in greater detail. It is important at this juncture, however, to note how immigrants added to the masses of people in America in search of a living wage.

Social Origins of the Enlisted Men

The best way to determine the social forces that affected the formation of the Continental army is to divide up the states into three distinct geographic regions—New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the South—to determine how each area recruited and organized its potential military
recruiting patterns found in the Fourth and Ninth Massachusetts Regiments. The town of Peterborough, New Hampshire, for instance, had a population of 549 in 1775. Of this number, about 170 men were credited as having served in some capacity in the armed forces. Yet the vast majority did not enlist beyond a single campaign or one year's service. Some men enlisted for three days and never served again. Few of these Peterborough soldiers could be termed "yeomen soldiers"; rather, the large majority were "an unusually poor, obscure group of men, even by the rustic standards of Peterborough." 79

It was not uncommon for more mature and settled well-to-do townsmen who were listed on the militia roles to pool their money to procure a "down-and-outers" for three years' service. This practice served more than one purpose. First, any two militiamen who hired another man for long-term service were usually excused from all military responsibility for as long as their man served in the army. Second, the hometown of the recruit's "employers" received credit for having provided a soldier. Thus, a drifter who heard of someone hiring a substitute in a neighboring town or county might find himself seated at a strange village tavern and "hired" to fulfill a different town's quota or someone else's military obligation. Sometimes men like Samuel Baker of Bolton, Massachusetts, conformed to the time-honored practice of hiring out their sons to the army just as they had hired them out to neighbors to fulfill a debt or social obligation. Others sent servants or black slaves in their stead. 80

The men furnished by the town fathers of Peterborough were not for the most part young, but a few were exceptionally old. The ages of town recruits varied from ten-year-old John Scott, son of Captain William Scott, to the captain's sixty-nine-year-old uncle. The majority of the men, however, averaged about twenty years old. 81 Common soldiers were men like John Alexander, James Gordon, Samuel Lee, and Michael Silk, all of whom represented the town in the enlistment records but left no other documentary trace of their existence. They owned no property, paid no taxes, and did not vote. They served, some deserted, and a few died. Those who did not die in service did not return to Peterborough after the war. 82 If not for their service records, these men would have been unknown to history.

Concord, Massachusetts, sent men like Ezekiel Brown, a former inmate of the debtor's prison, "with little or nothing to lose" according to his own account, into the army. Brown was unable to participate in the fight at Concord Bridge and probably heard the "shot heard round the
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Over “20 percent of the taxable populace was propertyless.” Moreover, New Jersey tax lists of 1778–80, analyzed by age, “show that a significant number of landless or marginal men were young.” An analysis of six New Jersey towns revealed that the “yeoman farmer” of revolutionary yore was largely a myth. The proportion of men who held insufficient land for farming “varied from 55.5 percent in Piscataway to 76.2 percent in Shrewsbury.”

Data on 710 enlisted soldiers of the New Jersey Brigade reveal that its soldiers “reflected the disparities of the civilian world”; a man’s wealth determined the likelihood of his serving as a Continental soldier. Fully “90 percent of the privates and noncommissioned officers came from the poorest two-thirds of the [tax] ratable population (61 percent from the poorest third, 29 percent from the middle third).” Nearly one-half of the brigade owned no taxable property at all. While “some 30 percent of the general taxpayers owned farms of 100 acres or more, only nine percent of the soldiery had similar holdings.” A mere 20 percent of the troops held even modest assets of twenty-five- to thirty-acre farms. Few soldiers came from families that owned slaves (always a good indication of accumulation of capital). None of the soldiers seemed to be involved in manufacture: not one soldier, for instance, listed any holdings in “fishing, iron-working, or other non-agricultural” ventures. More than 146 (34 percent) of the soldiers did not come from the towns in which they were recruited. Only 41 percent of the soldiers within the brigade can be identified as having ever been a resident of the townships they represented in the army. Some were like John Evans, a black soldier who listed Reading, Pennsylvania, as his home of record, though there is no evidence that he ever lived there. Two soldiers, Privates James Sarge and William Gallaspe, were ostensibly recruits from local New Jersey townships, yet the town records contained no tax or genealogical records of them or their families. Like the soldiers from Peterborough, New Hampshire, many soldiers who represented New Jersey in the ranks drifted into the army, served or deserted, or both, and then disappeared quickly from the historical record.

The brigade had other similar social characteristics as well. More than half were under the age of twenty-one at the time of enlistment. The young were recruiting targets because they had little to lose and certainly no wealth, business, or influence that kept them tied to their communities. In fact, one recruiter stated outright that youths were generally sought because “they have little, and some no property.” Their apparent
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It is important to note that all but one of the men aged fifty-seven or older enlisted after 1760, when the shortage of available recruits was greatest.42

Pennsylvania troops differed from New England's in one respect. A substantial portion of the Pennsylvania soldiers were foreign-born. Of the 582 Pennsylvania soldiers who listed their place of birth, two out of three admitted they were not native to the United States. The sample upon which the point is based is small compared to the larger number of soldiers who listed no birthplace at all; nonetheless, the pattern remained consistent for every Pennsylvania unit in which place of birth was recorded.43 Because Pennsylvania had been a major clearinghouse for prewar immigrants, it is not surprising that so many of the foreign-born ended up in its ranks.

Prewar occupations of recruits are available for 273 Pennsylvania enlisted men. Ninety-two men (34 percent) were farmers, the most common category. The next-closest category was shoemaker (19), followed by weaver (19), blacksmith and carpenter (12 apiece), then by various descriptions that included a great number of individual "laborers," one clerk, and a schoolmaster. In all, almost 64 percent of the Pennsylvanians who listed prewar occupations claimed to be tradesmen or laborers of some sort. While an occasional vintner or silk dyer could be found in the lists (skills that paid considerably higher wages), they were the rare exceptions.44 Again, while the sample is not large compared to the number of soldiers recruited, the data remain consistent throughout individual units whenever a significant number of the men listed their occupations.

In sum, the Pennsylvania line also reflected the society that formed it. The typical Pennsylvania soldier was young, although slightly older than his comrades to the north. The average Pennsylvania soldier was probably not born in the state, nor even the United States.45

Passing from the mid-Atlantic states to the Upper South, we find that the social origins of the soldiers were similar, though with a few minor variations. A study of a list of recruits raised by General William Smallwood revealed that the median enlistment age of his Marylanders was younger than the Pennsylvanians and closer to the New Jersey troops at twenty-one years of age. Again, like the soldiers from New Jersey, few of these southern men owned enough wealth to appear on the taxable lists. Many had been unskilled laborers of some sort prior to their enlistment; few had little more than the clothes on their backs. A Baltimore company of 102 men listed "no farmers at all" and 35 percent as laborors.
as indentured servants, served their time, and joined the army at a more advanced age.

An examination of the muster records of the First Company of Matrosses (artillerymen) revealed not only a large foreign-born presence within the unit, but the average native-born Matross, like his comrades in Bowie's Flying Camp and the Prince George's County recruits, was also only about twenty-one years old. The foreign-born, as in other Maryland units, were older by a substantial margin (twenty-seven) than their native comrades. Of the 102 total enlisted in the unit, sixty-four (53 percent) were foreign-born. Moreover, the natives within the unit were a real hodgepodge of American youth. Only eighteen (17 percent) claimed to be from Maryland. Another thirteen claimed Pennsylvania as home. At least two men came from as far away as South Carolina, while five hailed from Nova Scotia. “Laborer” was the most frequently listed occupation, as declared by nearly half (46 percent) of the entire unit. No recruit listed farmer or any other agrarian occupation. Most were apparently urban laborers.49

In sum, Maryland soldiers were like the rest of the army: young, poor, and largely landless. Very few of Smallwood’s men appear on the 1783 Tax Assessment. Most had recently emigrated to the area or were hired laborers in other men’s households. General Smallwood, who knew his base of recruitment, explained to the Maryland General Assembly that he would not be able to raise as many troops as he had hoped because the Assembly had delayed in sending him bounty money. Most free laborers in Maryland had long since committed themselves to local farmers for the year’s work and would not be available for army service until after the fall harvest.50

Maryland counted on the “lower sort” for its soldiers so thoroughly that its legislators wrote laws to require their service. Any able-bodied man who was judged by a court to be a vagabond was forced to serve at least nine months in the Continental army. If these men elected to remain in the army for at least three years or the duration of the war, they received the standard bounty offered to everyone else. And yet the issue provoked a debate within the Assembly; some worried that the law would drive out of Maryland’s able-bodied vagrants who might otherwise become substitutes for drafted militiamen.51

Just over the Potomac River in Virginia, class was also a factor in recruiting. Leven Powell, an unsuccessful aspirant for a commission in the army, remarked that the best offices went to the “best people,” but
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similar in circumstances to the “loose people” described by Washington in 1754. Records that any of these soldiers acquired land were nearly nonexistent. The vast majority claimed to be farmers but were most likely itinerant laborers or tenant farmers on someone else’s estate. Of 658 soldiers surveyed, almost half (325) moved out of the state immediately after the war. The soldiers’ willingness to move (perhaps to bounty lands in the Ohio area) indicates that they did not have much to return to after completing their service.

Virginia veterans returning from the war were highly mobile. Private Martin Amos, for instance, was recruited from his Albemarle County home at the age of sixteen. After his discharge, he moved west into Kanawha County (now West Virginia), then back to Mason County, Virginia (now West Virginia), and finally ended up in Gallia County, Ohio. Another comrade, Daniel Barrow, was recruited in Brunswick County, where he had been born in 1757. After the war, he moved from Virginia to North Carolina, then on to Knox County, Tennessee, then Wayne County, Kentucky, and finally to Jackson County, Illinois. Both Amos and Barrow were young when they marched off to war. As teenagers they had probably led marginal existences as sons of tenant farmers or laborers. They had had little time in their short lives to accumulate wealth and no prospects of an inheritance. Army service probably gave them steady employment. The bounties they earned were likely the largest amount of cash they had ever seen.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the social origins of the majority of men who comprised the Continental army (where records can be found) were lower class. In every geographic area except Virginia, the large number of “out-of-towners” within the ranks testified to the mobility of these “loose people” or “free [and unfree] men on the move.” Looking for work and sustenance and encountering a recruiting party, they found themselves joining the ranks with others unable to resist the demand for their service. The New Jersey regular, for instance, was neither “a yeoman nor a middle class soldier—just as New Jersey was not a predominantly yeoman society.” The same can now be said of Concord, Massachusetts; Peterborough, New Hampshire; and Prince George’s County, Maryland.

Men of means avoided service by hiring replacements such as Joseph Plumb Martin, an out-of-work farm laborer. Martin, having little prospect for work, saw a stint in the army as a logical choice. He “endeav-
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ored," in his words, to get "as much for his skin as he could," willing "to become a scapegoat" to the highest bidder on recruiting day. Compare, for a moment, Private Martin’s comments with those of a true yeoman farmer from New York: “My situation in life was that of a farmer in respectable circumstances and rather above that which furnished the usual recruits for the regular army.”

The high number of racial and ethnic minorities present in the Continental ranks deserves further investigation. The middle colonies in particular seemed to have heavily recruited foreign-born soldiers. Place of birth did not appear to be a factor in recruiting. A New Jersey militia colonel commented in 1777 that he thought the Jersey Brigade was comprised “mostly” of foreigners, who probably were, in turn, either deserters from the British army or immigrants. The colonel’s comment was an exaggeration but nonetheless does shed some light on who ultimately ended up in the ranks. By the end of the war in Maryland, for instance, it is hard to see how the state could have fielded troops for the army without recruiting foreign-born soldiers because they comprised nearly half the men enlisted in the line. The typical foreigners in American service were Irish or German, but occasionally they were Canadian, French, Swiss, and even now and then Scandinavian. Following chapters will develop this hypothesis more fully.

What ultimately sustained the army was the sheer volume of Americans who were temporarily willing, like Joseph Plumb Martin, to become “scapegoats” so others might stay at home. In the New Jersey line, one soldier in five was in the ranks because he had become a substitute for another man of better means. The huge volume of National Pension Files (there were more than 80,000 claims) testified that a substantial portion of American males (both black and white) must have served a term in the army. But only a tiny portion of the population performed truly extended military service. Thus the origins of the army may have been cloaked in idealistic rhetoric because the true facts about the Continental army were perhaps “painful and embarrassing.”

Like their civilian counterparts in the lower classes, the youthful Continental soldiers drank, swore, fought, and gambled in camp and on the march. They were a class apart from their officers and were feared by them nearly as much as the British. They were, however, willing to work for pay as soldiers when others would not, taking their chances, frequently dying in the “glorious cause” of fighting man.