



Historic Flags Issue - 1775 Rhode Island Flag
This is the Actual Flag carried by the
"1st Rhode Island Regiment"
during the Revolutionary War
Scott #1349
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During the early stages of the Revolutionary war, General Washington was against using African Americans and in November 1775 he issued an order barring black enlistment in the Continental Army. The British were under no such delusions and Lord Dunmore of Virginia issued a proclamation offering freedom to any indentured servants or slaves who volunteered their service; within a month over 300 had volunteered. General Washington fearing that the discharged African Americans from the Continental Army would join the British began urging congress to enroll free Blacks.

In addition most states found it difficult to meet the recruiting quotas set by the Continental Congress. Rhode Island was in desperate straits. The British blockade was strangling their commerce, (of which the slave trade was an important part) and Newport was occupied by British troops. In 1776 Newport was the largest slaving port in the colonies and Rhode island had the largest population of African Americans in New England .

Rhode Island had been ordered to supply an additional regiment and most of their available men were already involved in fighting the British within their own borders. General James Varnum, in command of the remnants of the two Rhode Island regiments already in service with the Continental Army advised Washington to merge the two regiments and send the officers of the *1st* to Rhode Island to recruit African Americans for a new regiment.

Washington agreed and the legislation was quickly passed by the Rhode Island General Assembly on February 23, 1778. It stated that each individual slave enrolled in the regiment *"upon his passing muster, he is absolutely made free, and entitled to all the wages, bounties, and encouragements given by Congress to any soldier enlisting."*

Provision was also made by the State Legislature to provide compensation to slave owners of up to \$400.00. The slaves were purchased by the state and after service in the army for the duration of the war or until discharged would be freed.

Colonel Christopher Greene (a distant relative of Nathaniel Greene), along with his two senior officers; Lt. Colonel Jeremiah Olney and Major Sam Ward were chosen by General Washington to lead the *1st Rhode Island*, the first all-black American regiment.

During the Battle of Rhode Island in August 1778, Hessian troops directed their main assault

against the **1st Rhode Island**. “They experienced a more obstinate resistance than they had expected,” finding “large bodies of troops ...chiefly wild looking men in their shirt sleeves, and among them many Negroes.” A Rhode Island history of 1860 reported that Colonel Greene’s regiment “distinguished itself by deeds of desperate valor.” Dr Harris, a veteran of the **1st** recalled the battle in an address to a New Hampshire antislavery society in 1842: “When stationed in the State of Rhode Island, the regiment to which I belonged was once ordered to what was called a flanking position ...it was a post of imminent danger. They attacked us again, with more vigor and determination, and again were repulsed. Again they reinforced, and attacked us the third time, with the most desperate courage and resolution, but a third time were repulsed. The contest was fearful. Our position was hotly disputed and as hotly maintained.”

The Americans lost the **Battle of Rhode Island**, however, the British lost 5 times as many troops. The **1st Rhode Island** held the line for over four hours against the British assault and it was largely due to their efforts that the American Army was able to escape. General Lafayette called it, “the best-fought action of the war.” The **1st Rhode Island** went on to fight at **Points Bridge, Fort Oswego, Saratoga, Red Bank, and Yorktown**.

During the spring of 1781 the **1st Rhode Island** was stationed north of Manhattan along the Croton River. On May 14th a raiding party of Tories surprised the Rhode Islanders at two points. Both Greene and Flagg were killed and Lt. Colonel Jeremiah Olney assumed command.

William Cooper Nell in describing the death of Colonel Greene at Points Bridge wrote, “Colonel Greene, the commander of the regiment, was cut down and mortally wounded; but the sabers of the enemy only reached him through the bodies of his faithful guard of Blacks, who hovered over him to protect him and **every one of whom was killed.**”

The **1st Rhode Island** was demobilized at Saratoga in June of 1783 after having fought valiantly as a part of the Continental Army for over 5 years. The troops were left to find their own way home and in later years often had to resist efforts to re-enslave them. Colonel Olney assisted his former troops in their efforts to remain free and also supported their claims for pensions from the U.S. government.

Sources:

[American Patriots by Gail Buckley](#)

[Gretchen A. Adams - University of New Hampshire](#)

[American Revolution.org](#)

[The African American Registry](#)