

Who Were the Bucks of America?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[Music fades in] It's a busy day at the Massachusetts Historical Society. There's a flurry of activity as MHS staff take down an exhibit that has been in place for several months.

Cassie Cloutier 00:23

One of the objects that requires a lot of care is one of the most memorable artifacts in the MHS collection. The object itself is a flag dated to the 18th century that has been preserved in a sturdy frame.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:40

The flag belonged to a group known as the Bucks of America. Beyond the name of the unit, and the fact that its members were African Americans in Boston, we know next to nothing about the Bucks of America.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:54

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:15

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:31

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

Cassie Cloutier 01:39

We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:45

In this episode, we are taking a look at the Bucks of America flag, one of the most stunning items in the MHS collections.

Cassie Cloutier 01:55

Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley focuses on the flag itself and explains how it came to be part of the MHS collections. Meanwhile, historians J. L. Bell and Benjamin Remillard discuss what we know and what we do not know about the men who made up this unit from the age of the American Revolution.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:29

A few weeks before our staff started to disassemble the exhibit. We sat down with MHS, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley. We asked her to describe the flag to our listeners.

Anne Bentley 02:42

Well to start off with, I'll tell you that a flag has a couple of terms that we should be familiar with. One is the hoist that is the side that is used to attach to the flag to raise it. The other is the fly. That is the long part that that flies in the wind. And the canton is the smaller compartment on the field. The field is the background, and the canton contains the design. So, we've described the flag a little bit. Our particular flag is the flag of the Bucks of America. And the original flag is four feet on the fly and three feet on the hoist or 122 by 91 centimeters for those who don't use inches. It is completely hand stitched, with a buttonhole stitch grommet at each end of the hoist for the hoist rope. The fabric is silk. It is a typical 18th century silk standard that is painted in decoration. Originally it had a white field which has now faded to a soft tanned aged. Light will damage fabric and will change its color, so it is now gone from white to soft tan. The canton is of a faded Prussian

blue, and it has 13 five pointed stars painted onto it in gold. The stars are arranged in a circle with four in the center as a square as it were for the 13 stars. The canton itself is in the upper left corner of the field and on the white field was or is the emblem of the Bucks of America. So, there we have a pine tree, rather sparse branches that is painted in hunters green with a dark brown trunk and under its branches, we have a buck leaping to the right and certain parts of him are painted in a light ochre. His body is painted in a darker ochre so, so it's just very handsome animal very gracefully leaping to the right over a small amount of grass and earth also in hunters green and browns.

Anne Bentley 05:55

Above the pine tree is a scroll in Prussian blue with the darker blue outlines on which are painted the initials J, G, W, H in gold. Below this whole design is a another ribbon scroll on which is the name the Bucks of America. Now, because this was displayed, for quite a while in its lifetime, the front of the flag is somewhat deteriorated, it's faded, some of the letters have gone, and actually some of the fabric has rotted away. So, we had it conserved. And it has been mounted on to appropriate materials with the cellophane tape that had been used to kind of hold it together in the old days removed. And the flag is now appropriately backed and areas of loss, have backing behind them that suggest the colors that were there not to make it look new, but to show that these places are missing and are gone. They are gone forever. This is what happens with silk. But the way that we knew it said it read the Bucks of America is by looking at the back. If you turn the back, the canton is switched. It's no longer in the upper left side, but it's on our right side. And the tree and the leaping buck are facing the other direction. The label under this design are clear. We can read the title there. We can read the Bucks of America. So that's how we knew that from the obverse that that's what it said. So, it's a really handsome thing and it's an amazing survival for a flag that was mostly used outdoors, made of such a delicate material and with an unknown, we haven't been able to identify the paint. So, it's possible that the paint was more acidic than not. And this may have helped the deterioration of the original flag. But as it is enough of it has survived in excellent condition that that it makes a very evocative, very wonderful link to the history of this quite mysterious group. At the close of the Revolutionary War, Governor John Hancock and his son, John, were the ones who presented this flag to the company, he said, calling itself the Bucks of

America. And this would have been during John Hancock's first term as governor, which was 1782 to 1785 because his son who was said to have been with him at the presentation, tragically died in an accident in early February of 1787. So, it's before 1787 that this flag dates. We think it's a Boston manufacture, and it was a very handsome gift. At the time, it was very expensive, of valuable materials. So clearly this was a token of gratitude and of respect and honor to this company.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:56

We asked J. L. Bell, a leading historian of the Revolutionary Era of Boston, what scholars know about this mysterious unit.

J. L. Bell 10:06

Very little. We don't know much about the Bucks of America because there's almost nothing or possibly nothing at all from the period in which they were active. What we have is the information that William Cooper Nell, a leading historian of African American Boston in the mid-1800s, wrote down published in *The Liberator* newspaper wrote and letters wrote in his book about African Americans in the Revolutionary War. And he understood that the Bucks of America were a unit, actual official military unit created during the Revolutionary War to fight on the side of the U.S. of A. However, there's no paperwork and people have looked for decades now about the group from that period. And that has always produced a mystery. People have sought the smallest bit of clues. The one name associated with the Bucks of America in what William Cooper Nell wrote is George Middleton. And so, people have tried to find George Middleton and George Middleton is documented. He is said to have been a coach driver for Dr. James Lloyd, who is a well-respected physician in Boston from Pre-Revolutionary periods up through the late 1700s. Interestingly, Dr. Lloyd was a loyalist. In his politics, he stayed behind after the siege of Boston and because he was a good physician, cared for people apparently pleasant and charming himself. He was reintegrated into American society. It's unclear whether Middleton worked for him enslaved before 1783 or for wages after or both. But that is the one connection we have to George Middleton before during the Revolutionary period before 1783. We also have some real estate records because George Middleton bought a house or bought real estate and built a house I believe, on Beacon Hill with

another African American man Peter Clappian or Cappian or Laffian. His name is spelled many different ways. At that we also have George Middleton's record of his marriage and having a child before buying this house. And then later, he and Clappian make a formal division of the house. They both lived there for decades, and we have Middleton's will. Aside from Middleton, we don't have any names associated as members of the Bucks of America.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:46

We shall delve into the mystery of the unit a little later on. But there was still one more mystery about the flag that had puzzled people, including Nell himself. What did the initials on the flag represent?

Anne Bentley 12:59

Nell when he when he would display it at William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator fairs, had come to the conclusion that the initials J, G, W, H, meant that they were the initials of John Hancock and George Washington. But he was a little bit confused on how 18th century ciphers were formed. One did not put the initials of one person within the initials of a second person, not even in marriage tokens or love tokens, those are intertwined. But these are distinct initials, J, G, W, H, and the fact that the accounts of the gifting of the presentation of the flag include John Hancock's son, John George Washington Hancock, who at the time was a small child leads me to think that perhaps this young boy was the mascot for the troop or served as an honorary officer, so to speak as an honorarium and that he was just included in the in the presentation of the flag, as its honorary head, so to speak.

Cassie Cloutier 14:31

And now, let us attempt to unravel the mystery of the unit itself. Benjamin Remillard, a PhD candidate at the University of New Hampshire who is writing a dissertation about Revolutionary War veterans of color picks up the story.

Benjamin Remillard 14:46

With the Bucks, I mean, we know very little about this group. There are a couple sources going back to the 1850s that referenced them. There's a mention in William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist paper *The Liberator* in 1858. When there's a commemoration of Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre, where one of the speakers specifically references the flag that the MHS now has. It also mentions the Bucks. But it's sort of just a passing reference. The main source that mentions the Bucks is going to be William Cooper Nell's 1855 book, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* where these men, the Bucks were on their way to a neighboring town when they were told to stop at the governor's mansion, that being John Hancock, and Hancock and his son presented this flag to the men. And aside from this, the only other real mention we have of them is of George Middleton, who is otherwise referred to as Colonel George Middleton. And he might be the name of the only Buck that we're ever going to know, just because there are so few sources about them. And in terms of, you know, what role they could have played in the Revolution. This is something that's sort of up for speculation because the references are so scant. One notion is that they were basically hired guns employed to defend the waterfront that they were these protectors hired on behalf of Boston merchants. That's possible. But I think it's also possible that they were a bonafide local militia group. And maybe they were organized by the municipality, maybe they were organized themselves. That part we can't know. But there, what we do know is that there was good reason for them existing. Whether it be the fact that Boston was and is a port town, so they very much had to worry about the British Navy. They also though, and something that I don't think it's talked enough about is the fact that Bostonians also had to worry about British prisoners of war, especially following the Saratoga campaign in 1777 where British General [John] Burgoyne and his army are forced to surrender. Many of them are shipped east, some of them shipped back to England, some of them are remaining in Massachusetts, and some of them stay in Massachusetts, the rest of their lives, some of them end up marrying into Massachusetts families. But before they can have that reconciliation, you know, they are still prisoners of war. And so, the threat they pose is very real. So even before or even after the fighting is shifting into the south in the war. So, there's some good reason for why these men might have existed.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:24

So, we know very little about the unit. We know, we do not know its size. We think we know its composition that is it's made up of African American residents of Boston is that, to the extent of our knowledge?

Benjamin Remillard 17:41

Seems to be about it. And there's a couple of different reasons why I think we know so little about them. One is that sometimes those records, including military records, just didn't survive the test of time. Another reason is that record keeping back then just wasn't nearly as consistent, including in the military. And third is that part of it may come down to who exactly they are, and that it's a group of black men and men who are not going to be talked about or written about in official records nearly as much. And I can give some examples of each of those. So as for the first point, when it comes to the military, sometimes records were lost due to things very much outside those soldier's control. For example, there was a fire at the War Department in 1800, just a decade after it was founded. And while people have done a great job of recreating a lot of those original holdings, you can imagine fire does a lot of damage. Now, I can't tell you the amount of soldiers who I have come across in my research, when looking at, say their pension applications in the 1810s and 1820s, who will say their discharge papers from the military were lost in a fire, specifically, usually when their homes burned down. So, we're never going to have the full picture in some cases. Sometimes, though, to get to my second point, not everything was always properly recorded. I can't tell you the number of soldiers I've come across who they're making these pension applications later in their lives. And there's no record of their service, at least according to Washington. So, they have to go back to find their commanding officers or their brothers in arms. And they have to get them to swear these affidavits proving that they served in the military. And this is especially problematic for men who might have been in the sort of non-traditional lines of service then who were say serving on privateers, as an extension of this very early navy, or men who were serving as waiters or servants to officers. But even the traditional soldiers, the privates in the Continental Army, they're having this issue. And it's something that extends outside of the military too because even things like marriages, deaths, births, the real vital records that capture a lot of the most important parts of

people's lives. They were very inconsistently recorded. I mean, it's at the local level, and especially at the national level. Connecticut, for instance, doesn't have a law on the books, I think till 1820, requiring that marriages be recorded. So, when the widows of these revolutionary soldiers are going up for pension applications in the 1830s, and '40s, part of their pension process requires them showing proof that they were married to these soldiers. And you have these town and church officials who will give affidavit saying, 'We have no record of this marriage.' Now, some of them will follow that up by saying this is due to the fact that these records were not properly recorded back then, you know, so there's a reason for it. And then usually, these women can get some extra form of proof by you know, having some neighbors who are at their wedding or having their children who will say my parents were always married, that should be evidence enough, and that usually works. But you can imagine, if even these most vital parts of people's lives aren't being recorded, then you can imagine like something like a local militia might not be remembered. But then for the last part, part of the reason why we might not know so much about them is because they were black. There's been a lot of scholarship recently talking about how the way race was used to divide people during the American Revolution, or to set white colonists against the British, where Americans didn't always associate black, indigenous people with the patriot cause. And this is despite the fact that there were 8,000 men of color who served alongside the Patriots in the Revolutionary War. Sometimes just people didn't know white people didn't know that they served. And a good example of this is in 1820, during the Missouri crisis, when there's this big federal debate regarding whether or not Missouri should be allowed into the Union as a slave state or a free state, you had at least one southern legislator claiming that black men did not serve in the Revolution. They didn't suffer the same ways as white men did. So how could they be considered citizens? How could they have the same rights as white people within the Republic? But thankfully, there was a Congressman from Massachusetts, William Eustis, who said otherwise, and Eustis actually served as a surgeon at the Battle of Bunker Hill, and he likely would have seen black and indigenous soldiers from the very early parts of the war, the earliest parts of the war. But he also drew attention to groups like the Rhode Island First Regiment, otherwise known as the Black Regiment, which saw a lot of enslaved men joining the ground forces in order to earn their freedom from slavery. But the important part here is just even just 40 years after the American Revolution,

you already have people in power, saying that there's no evidence of black people serving the military during the Revolution. So, you can see how something like this, a local militia group or whatever, the Bucks truly were how they could be forgotten.

Cassie Cloutier 22:54

J. L. Bell is unconvinced that the unit served during the Revolution. Instead, he proposes that they may have served immediately after the war ended and before the adoption of the United States Constitution.

J. L. Bell 23:08

I'm coming from the point of view that if this unit is not mentioned in Revolutionary War records, then we have to look elsewhere. And it's not mentioned in newspapers either. But in the newspapers of the 1780s, we see a lot of stories out of Boston and Massachusetts in general about militia units being created. They are possibly responses from Revolutionary War veterans looking for that camaraderie. They are possibly social climbing. They are often connected with this unrest in the western part of the state, which has become known as Shay's Rebellion and these were the militia units, some of them who responded to that. But we read in newspapers like The Exchange Advertiser of November of 1786. It says, 'A military frenzy seems to influence all ranks of men in this metropolis. A spirit like this will invigorate the languishing constitution and give strength and energy to the legislative and executive branches of government. We are informed that Thomas Russell, Esquire has presented the independent light infantry company with an elegant standard.' So, one part of the creation of these militia companies was a ceremony where they had their first march, and some dignitary or often some dignitaries' child, usually, a girl or young woman presented them with a handsewn banner, which they would use for their parade. And that story matches what more we have about the Bucks of America marching and being presented with a banner by Governor Hancock's child. Now there's, as far as I know no newspaper story about the Bucks of America as an African American company. They may not have been thought to merit that sort of coverage. But there's they nevertheless seem to have been enacting a ritual that many other groups of men were doing in the 1780s in and around Boston, where they would form a militia

company, they would have a parade, they would have a banner, they would continue to drill to have dinner, and the other things militia companies were known for. And this was a way of participating in society and in fact, respectable Republican society. And that's why I see it as part of a civil rights push. The Massachusetts court had made slavery unenforceable in Massachusetts in 1783, there were more and more free blacks already in the citizenry. And yet their status was very tenuous. And I mean, literally, people were being kidnapped off the streets and sold into slavery in the South. They were not being afforded rights. There were things like segregated cemeteries. So, I think people like Prince Hall and possibly George Middleton and other leaders of Boston's African American community at the time, were looking for any ways to show that they were fully participating in society. And one of the ways I posit, is by forming their own militia company. In fact, we know that Prince Hall went to Governor Hancock during the unrest leading up to Shay's Rebellion and offered to form a militia company or offered a militia company of African American citizens of Boston to help keep down the unrest. And Governor Hancock or his successor [James] Bowdoin didn't take advantage of this that we know of. But this was clearly a way of Prince Hall in this case, saying, we are fully invested in this society through our militia company, therefore treat us as full citizens. I think that for all of the efforts of the founders of the Bucks of America that they did not succeed, unfortunately, in using this group, to leverage a recognized place for themselves as African American Americans, as citizens of Massachusetts and the United States of America. And the exclusion of mentions of them in the newspapers and in the state records, reflects the dominant white supremacist feeling that they were not fully citizens, even though yes, they were supposed to participate in militia they weren't supposed to participate in other, do the work of being citizens, but they were not being granted the respect and privileges of citizenship in the same way.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:55

So, you have seen the flag of the Bucks of America on display here at the MHS. What are your impressions of it?

Benjamin Remillard 28:06

I think it's a beautiful piece. I wish I could have seen it back in the day. I know it's some of the color may have faded since then. I'm interested by it. I'm intrigued by it. I think it's so fascinating that this is one of the only pieces of evidence that we have that these Bucks of America existed. Aside from that, if we didn't have the flag, all we would have probably is oral tradition, which is still an important part of the story and is important for my work, especially when we're talking about some of the legacies of these men, of these soldiers. Because you do see some family histories in the early 20th century where these families are referring to their ancestors' service and that's really significant, but having that physical source there is the texticity of it is so important. It's important to be able to show people.

J. L. Bell 28:56

Well, I've been reading about the flag and trying to formulate my thoughts for a number of years. And it wasn't until earlier this year that I got to see it in person going to the MHS for its current exhibit. And I was impressed by how large it is. It is meant to be seen at a distance. It is meant to be on parade. It is also a carefully painted flag. The heraldic device was clearly created by somebody with artistic talent and experience. So even though it hasn't been it's not perfectly preserved, you can tell exactly what it would have looked like when it was first on parade.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:39

How would you use the flag or the story of or the mystery of the Bucks of America in a classroom?

Benjamin Remillard 29:49

So, one of the ways I teach the Revolution is by having students really grapple with primary sources. So sometimes it's transcripts of things that have been rerecorded things like the founding documents they're all familiar with. Sometimes it's the affidavits of the soldiers during their pension applications decades later, which students can sometimes grapple with, because they're not always as familiar with cursive, which can be a struggle. But having those experiences being able to see what this war was like what this period was like through in those individuals' eyes, especially from

these individuals, who a lot of my students didn't know that black, indigenous men served in the Revolution. So being able to hear their stories and read those stories from themselves is really important. So having something like a flag, and like a medallion that you can show students, especially when you throw it up on a big projector screen, and everyone, even the kids in the far back of the room trying to escape your lessons, they can see that and that makes the history a little more alive, more real for them. I think, I think some of the mystery surrounding the flag kind of adds to some of what I try to teach in history classroom is that we can't know everything. That's some of our knowledge of the past, including of this period, which isn't that far in the past. Now, I know some students may consider the American Revolution, ancient history, but I know some of my friends and peers who study ancient history would very much disagree with that. Being able to dive into sources like these, whether they're written, whether they're physical, and being able to show them that this history is not fully written down, it's not fully known, there are holes there are there is room for interpretation. It helps them understand that the story's not all written, and that we can always do more learning.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 31:38

During its lifetime, at the MHS, the Bucks of America flag has been out on display several times and that is why it now needs to be placed in storage.

Anne Bentley 31:57

We've sent it out twice, for major displays. Once to actually both times to the Smithsonian. I'm trying to remember the first time it was maybe in the '60s, 1960s. And then, most recently, for the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. We loaned it to them where it was on display for five years, which is a very long time for fabric. Which is why if you were lucky enough to visit the museum and see it on display, you realize it was in such a very, very dark room with very, very subdued lighting. That was not necessarily to make it more dramatic, but to preserve the life of this fragile fabric. At the moment we have it out again under very subdued light for a very short time. But after that it will then go into storage for many years. Scholars who want to see it can see it, but it will not be on display under lighting conditions

in museum settings for many, many, many years to come. And that is just to not expose it to any more light and any other detrimental issues that can happen to it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:38

Perhaps by the time the flag is out on display again, scholars will have many more details to share with us about this unit, and its remarkable members who supported a young government seeking to make its own destiny among the nations of the earth.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:11

The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. To view the item mentioned in today's episode, and to learn more, please visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. We would like to thank Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Historian J. L. Bell, author of [The Road to Concord: How Four Stolen Cannon Ignited the Revolutionary War](#) and Benjamin Remillard, a PhD candidate at the University of New Hampshire.

Cassie Cloutier 34:55

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.