

OPINION

Virginia's Black patriots uplift the spirit of 1776

There's a proposal to build a memorial dedicated to Black Americans who fought in the American Revolution.



by **Maurice Barboza**

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Virginia General Assembly Ties to African American Revolutionary War Service



National Mall Liberty Fund DC - www.libertyfunddc.com

Virginia State Senate Districts Enacted 12/21/21

This map shows which parts of the state had Black soldiers fighting in the American Revolution, based on current state Senate districts. Courtesy of Maurice Barboza.

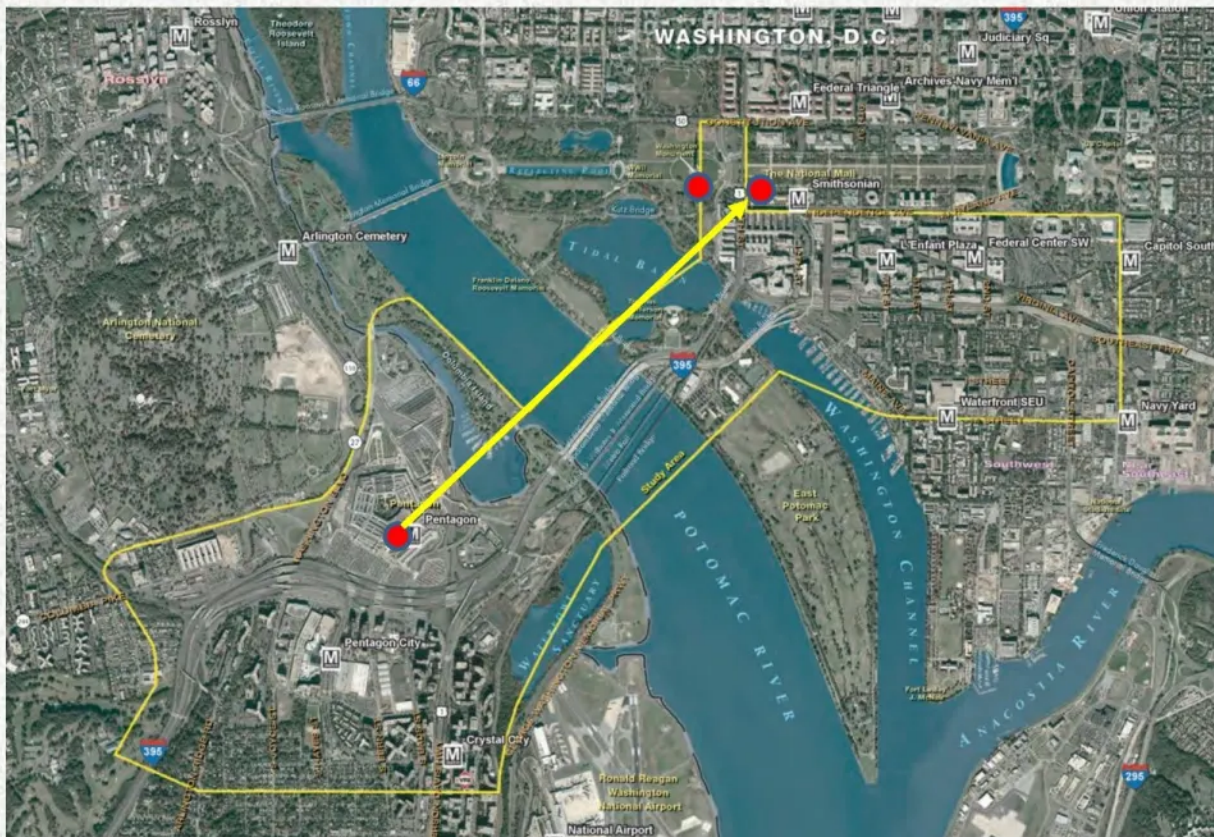
For more on Virginia's role in the American Revolution, see [our Cardinal 250 project](#), where we tell the little-known stories of that era leading up to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. You can [sign up for our free monthly Cardinal 250 newsletter](#) to be the first to read these stories.

Nearly 600 African American Revolutionary War combatants and patriots from Virginia are represented by stars on the accompanying maps of the state's school districts and General Assembly districts. This corresponds to about 10% of the 6,000 currently known to be associated with the 13 original states. They are

connected to all eight school districts, 138 General Assembly districts, and 75 counties, cities and towns.

We intend to build them a voice across the Rochambeau Bridge connecting Arlington County, Alexandria and Fairfax County to the Mall at 14th Street. This is between Independence Avenue and Jefferson Drive. It will create at least the perception of a gateway entrance from the Pentagon across the Rochambeau Bridge to the anticipated site. Depending on a person's imagination, it could extend even as far as the historic Jim Crow refuge at 14th and U streets.

14th Street Bridge Corridor Draft Environmental Impact Statement: The 14th Street Bridge Corridor is "a vital link between the transportation system of northern Virginia and the District of Columbia. As the main gateway to the Nation's capital, any action in the Corridor could potentially have an impact on the visual and cultural experience as one enters the Capital."



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The proposed connection between Virginia and the proposed Liberty Memorial in Washington, D.C. Courtesy of Maurice Barboza.

Tapping into the sightlines of the Washington Monument to the west, the National Liberty Memorial will explain how persons without rights and in the most desperate of circumstances found inspiration in the writings of the founders while resisting doubt that one day their descendants would be full citizens in the enterprise they launched.

The way these symbols interact will clarify to visitors and the tens of thousands of Virginians who commute past this location every year that African Americans served honorably under General Washington and initiated centuries of struggle that benefit all Americans.

We are not proposing a war memorial. It will speak of the struggle for principles, the resurrection of a disparaged people and the hope of authoring in the landscape a common origin story. To make this a reality, either by completion or groundbreaking on July 4, 2026, the project will require tangible resources to bolster nearly 20 years of volunteer and pro bono assistance.

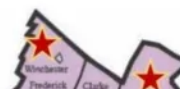
We'll know soon if either is reasonable as the General Assembly deliberates on Sen. Adam Ebbin's budget amendment to authorize a significant portion of the cost of the next stages. This would trigger final site approval and an idea forum, so every American has a chance to consider what it could become.

Between 1776 and 1790, the complexion of the United States appeared somewhat like this: Whites numbered 2.8 million in the first census. There were 58,000 free Blacks, compared to 682,000 enslaved. Virginia was the oldest and most populous colony, with 442,000 whites and 293,000 slaves. At least 13,000 Blacks had become free through their own devices.

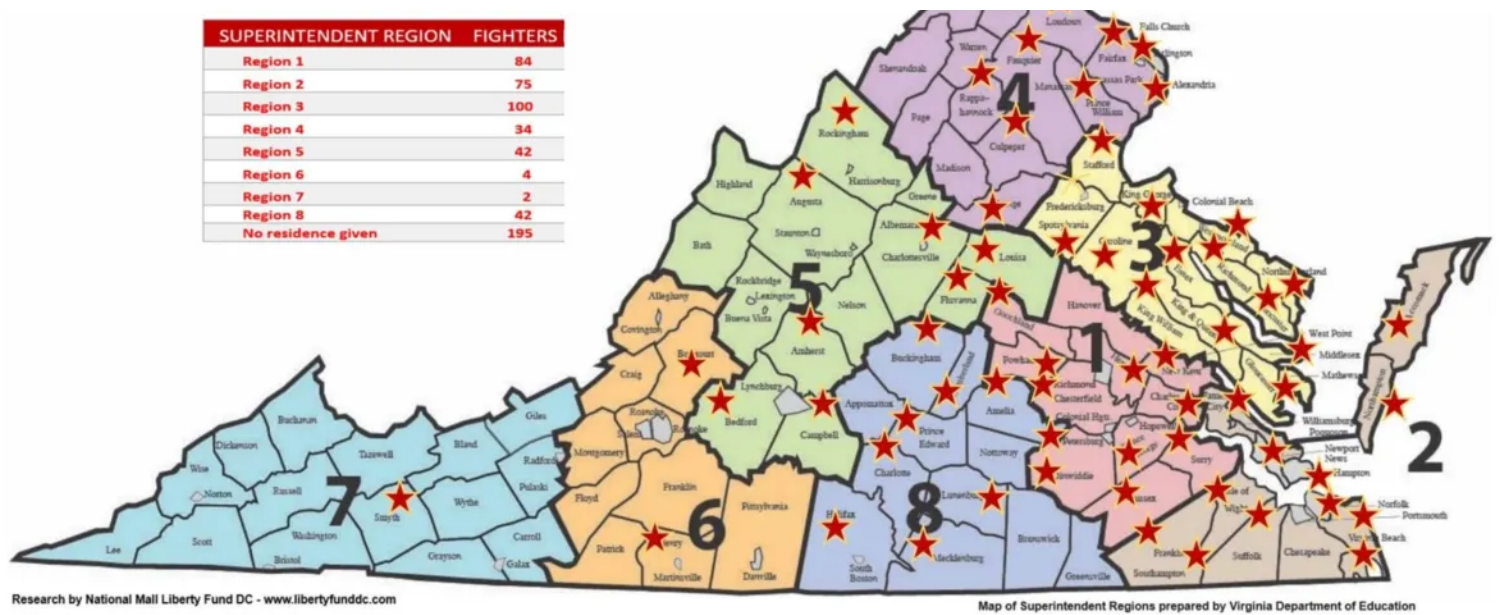
Virginia's white population surpassed the second-most populous state, Massachusetts, by 70,000 people. Virginia's slave population surpassed the combined totals of the other 12 states, excluding one. Four of the first five presidents were Virginians who derived their wealth from slave labor. Virginia's leaders would write the founding documents and direct "who gets to do what, when and how."



This is a tiny model of about 6 inches tall done by the sculptor David Newton. This is not necessarily the final design. Courtesy of Maurice Barboza.



Virginia County Ties to African American
Revolutionary War Service



This map shows which parts of the state had Black soldiers fighting in the American Revolution, based on school superintendent regions. Courtesy of Maurice Barboza.

School District Regions 1, 2, and 3 have ties to 84, 75 and 100 patriots, respectively. At 259, this is the highest concentration in the state. Accomack, Northampton, Lancaster, Gloucester and Norfolk are a few of the jurisdictions sharing this history. Senate Districts 17–26 cover Southampton and Caroline counties and represent these 25 communities.

At least 118 men are listed as seamen, sailors, state navy, pilots, captains, boatswains and naval personnel. They served on galleys, sloops, ships and brigs, including the Protector, Liberty and Accomac. Richard Nickens served on the Tempest and, later, the Hero. He was discharged at the Chickahominy Shipyard and later received a Virginia state pension. Several family members also joined the Navy.

Aaron Weaver was aboard the ship Tartar. Charles and Ambrose Lewis, brothers, spent two years on the Dragon. Charles Lucas, aboard the galley Henry, received a certificate of freedom from a Loudon County court in 1816 to prove his freedom. Despite his achievements, African-born Capt. Mark Starlins was reassigned to slavery at the end of the war. Capt. Barron wrote that Starlins was “brought up as a pilot, and proved a skillful one, as well as a devoted patriot.”

Many people enlisted; a few were drafted. William Flora spent the entire war with the 15th and 16th Virginia Regiments. He participated in Norfolk County’s Battle of Great Bridge. His actions destroyed the bridge, preventing the British from advancing while the others retreated. In 1806, as a free man in Portsmouth, he was given bounty land in exchange for his services. He was a free landowner in Portsmouth for at least 50 years prior to the Emancipation Proclamation.

John Broddy, a member of the Overmountain Men, survived the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780 and later fought with the Continental Army. Freedom, however, did not come until 15 years later, when Francis Preston, Broddy's former master's son-in-law, executed a deed for "the gratification of being instrumental in prompting the participation of liberty to a fellow creature, who by nature is entitled thereto." His name appears on a monument at the Smyth County Courthouse. He lived to be around 109 and is buried in a Saltville cemetery in Senate District 6.

Anthony Roberts drove a wagon for the First State Regiment. Six generations later, his family created a living memorial in the form of a sixth great-granddaughter who lives nearby (Senate District 24). She went on to say, "God knows how many Patriots of color there are in the Williamsburg, York County, and James City County areas; if you don't do the research, you'll never know."

A German officer in a French Royal Regiment estimated that roughly one quarter of the troops at Yorktown were black. James McKoy, a "free Molatto" who lived on his own land in Westmoreland County, was drafted in 1781 "to go down to Yorktown." George Kendall, 93, told a Prince William County court that he enlisted in Stafford County and was stationed at Guilford and Yorktown.

Years ago, the descendants of Charles City County patriots testified in support of the National Liberty Memorial at a federal commission hearing. Two local students discovered their ancestors, Sgt. Isaac Brown, Joseph Wallace and William Timothy, as part of a school genealogy project. A memorial is now located at the Old Elam Cemetery in Senate District 13.

In 2011, Alexandria recognized John Pipsico, Benjamin Whitmore, Joseph Longdon and William Lee. Prince William and Fairfax counties honored John Sidebottom, who assisted in transporting the wounded 18-year-old James Monroe from the battlefield at Trenton. After being wounded and hospitalized for six months, Fairfax County's Robert Randall was captured and brought to Yorktown by the British, where he escaped and reenlisted. At least one jurisdiction in [17 Senate districts](#) approved a similar resolution since 2006, including five in Senate District 10. Nine counties there are tied to at least 62 patriots.

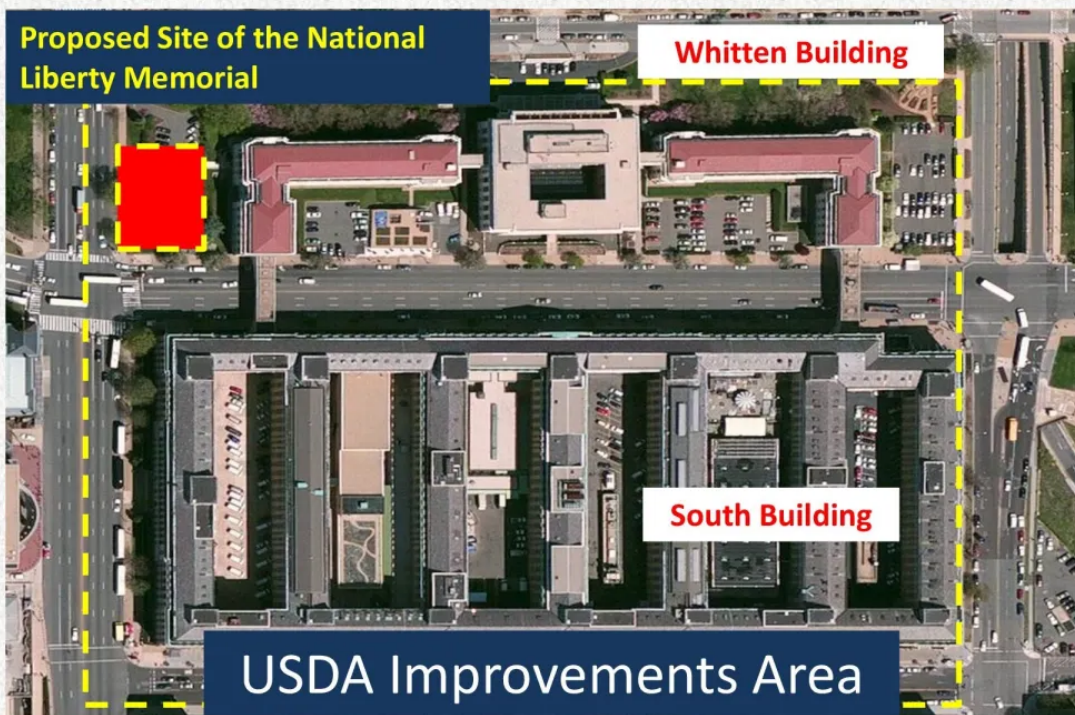
Aside from soldiers, sailors and marines, thousands of Blacks worked in the salt and lead mines, drove wagons, baked bread, felled trees, built defenses and spied on the British. They were killed, captured and injured. Many applied for pensions, got married and started families. Some received bounty land and accolades from Gen. Washington, state legislatures and officers.

The Virginia General Assembly actively sought enslaved workers for hazardous duty, issued bounty land, determined the fate of the enslaved and authorized shipbuilding. Saul Matthews, an enslaved man and an effective spy, was re-enslaved for 10 years before petitioning legislators for freedom again. William O. Goode, a former Mecklenburg County (Senate District 9) member, supported a petition for bounty land for

John Chavis' services on behalf of his three sons.

Blacks by the thousands ran away to freedom. Some fled to the British after the royal governor of Virginia offered freedom to any slave who stood with him. Cesar Tarrant, an enslaved pilot, decided to stand with the possibilities of America, although it meant remaining unfree for years after America was itself freed by Tarrant's actions. The General Assembly eventually bought his freedom in 1789. Since 2018, his name has adorned a middle school in Hampton whose previous name stood for everlasting servitude.

The favored site for the National Liberty Memorial (red) is on the west side of the Jamie L. Whitten Building, headquarters of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The only cabinet level department on the Mall, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



This is part of the slideshow that shows where the Liberty Memorial would be. Courtesy of Liberty Fund.

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Examine closely the Civil Rights Memorial at the Capitol and the spark in 16-year-old Barbara Johns for equal education. Leaders didn't simply materialize in the 1950s; they were rooted in institutions and collective memory going back to Jamestown. Virginia has it all: slavery, secession, segregation, massive resistance and, now, building memorials, preserving historic sites, renaming schools and dismantling its dark past.

Virginia is the commonsense choice to lead this multistate campaign.

Maurice A. Barboza, a resident of Alexandria, is the founder and CEO of the National Mall Liberty

Fund, DC. This 501(c)(3) is authorized to build a memorial in Washington to the participation of African Americans in the Revolutionary War. His white ancestors, who served, hail from Maine. His Black ancestors had resided at Bermuda Hundred in Chesterfield County since before the Civil War. His mixed-race grandmother was born there in 1898. The picture she preserved of her grandfather dressed in a Union Civil War uniform inspired him to research his ancestors. Pvt. John Curtis Gay died from wounds inflicted at Cold Harbor near Richmond and sparked the identification of at least 6,000 forgotten Black Revolutionary War patriots, including 600 Virginia soldiers.

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