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14 of 39: Born in Maryland, Private James Robinson (1753–1868) was an African American soldier who served in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, enduring 115 years of broken promises and a complex quest for freedom. He is the Rosetta Stone for understanding liberty, an unachievable aim if intended just for the privileged few.

The Declaration of Independence and genius Constitution were bought with the blood of Americans and foreigners of many backgrounds, creating an unbreakable bond if only we recognize it. But African Americans' contributions extend far beyond battlefield heroism. Their fight for liberty didn't end with Yorktown; it stretched through generations. Achieving liberty is never as simple as an eight-year war and 25,000 deaths.

The battlefield of African Americans extended beyond Yorktown, spanning generations. The 'slings and arrows' sustained by Robinson and the generations that followed were as lethal as any bullet or bayonet. Robinson fought under Capt. Francis Shields during the Revolution and later under Gen. Jackson in the War of 1812. Both promised him freedom for his service, luring him with the scent of liberty.

After Shields' death, his family reneged on the promise, even though Robinson had traveled distances to return the captain's property. Instead, he was sold to a plantation owner in Natchez, Mississippi.

Robinson was awarded a gold medal by Gen. Lafayette for his contributions at Brandywine and Yorktown. But upon arriving at Calvin Smith's plantation, he was stripped of his medals, uniform, and subjected to 'nine-and-thirty lashes' as part of the brutal process of 'seasoning' enslaved people.

During the War of 1812, Robinson and other enslaved men were promised freedom for their service, but Jackson dismissed their demands after the Battle of New Orleans. Robinson would remain enslaved in the Deep South until, at 87, he was freed—no longer deemed valuable to his tormentors.

At 103, Robinson traveled to Washington D.C. to request a military pension from President Pierce, who dismissed his claim, stating it was better for his master's children to receive the pension since Robinson was "goods and chattels." Despite these setbacks, Robinson settled in Detroit, where he became a preacher and respected community member.

In 1858, under the name "James Roberts," Robinson wrote his life story, "A Soldier Under Gen. Washington in the Revolutionary War, and Under Gen. Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, in the War of 1812: A Battle Which Cost Me a Limb, Some Blood, and Almost My Life." Robinson died in 1868, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation. He outlived the founding fathers. President Pierce, who died the following year, did not have the last word.

Robinson is buried in Detroit's Elmwood Cemetery. In 2018, he was honored with a ceremony and permanent emblems commemorating his service in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The bronze glows in the sunlight and especially in darkness.