

A Rash Man Ahead of His Time: John Laurens

Sons of the American Revolution, George S. and Stella M. Knight Essay Contest Entry

by

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In school, we only graze the basis of figures and historical moments in America. We all know about the cause of the American Revolution; beginning in April of 1775, the American Revolution was a significantly important historical war allowing America to claim its independence. The colonists wanted independence from Britain's strict monarch and harsh laws. Regulations such as Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and the Townshend Acts gave the colonists a much-needed push and desire to change. Because of these desires many colonists banded together to provoke outrage within their towns. Such rebellion against the laws set by England led to the Boston Massacre which then catapulted America into the start of the Revolutionary War. We are also familiar with the results of the revolution. After seven years of fighting, America won the war which gave the colonists their freedom. But, are the people who influenced change from the revolution being known? Historical figure John Laurens was ahead of his time in his pursuit to create an army of only African Americans and win their freedom.

Born to Henry Laurens and Eleanor Ball Laurens, John Laurens was one of 13 children. However, only four survived into adulthood; John Laurens was one of the four. Growing up in South Carolina during the 1750's, Laurens and his family lived a luxurious life due to their father's rice plantation and running one of the "most successful slave markets in the country" (Percoco). Their father was also heavily involved in the political circles, later being named president of the Continental Congress. When Laurens was only 16 his mother passed and his father sent him and his brothers to study in Geneva, Switzerland where he changed his beliefs about slavery, even though his father owned a successful slave trade. Afterwards, he and his brothers then went to England (Pavao) where he learned about the war and wished to join the fight. His father was reluctant to bring him home, wishing to keep him safe. Ignoring his father's wishes, John Laurens attempted to return home by going through France where he met and married the daughter of a mentor and family friend, Martha Manning, who Laurens will never see again along with his small child once he returns home. "Using his influence" (Pavao) Laurens's father was able to provide John with a secretary position for George Washington in their "military family" along with meeting two other significant figures of the war, Alexander Hamilton and Marquis de Lafayette in August 1777. Throughout their time together, Laurens grew a very close bond with Hamilton, so much so that Hamilton had written some letters about John Laurens and his affections towards him. (Dacus) Hamilton was not the only one touched by John. Due to his studies abroad, Laurens was fluent in French and managed to teach Lafayette English allowing them to come together. Throughout his years in Washington's family, Laurens often wrote letters to his father describing his desire to raise a black battalion for the Continental Forces. (nps.gov)

October of 1777 was when John Laurens eagerly engaged himself in battle at the Battle of Germantown where he was credited with being known as a "rash young man" for his quick and

often destructive thinking. (nps.gov.) One example of his “rashness” was in December of 1778; Colonel John Laurens provoked a duel with General Charles Lee. The reasoning for this duel was due to Lee belittling their General, George Washington, “whom he (Lee) believed was his inferior as a general”. (Buchanan p.14) After their duel, Lee was slightly wounded with a gun shot in the right side and Laurens left unharmed. In the spring of 1779 word was brought that the British were heading towards Charleston, South Carolina after already capturing Savannah. Hearing this, Laurens requested to be of use to the state he was born in. Due to his excessive loyalty, Washington allowed Laurens to take a leave of absence until he was able to return after securing South Carolina. (nps.gov) On his way to South Carolina, John Laurens urged members of the Continental Congress to aid his desire in raising 3,000 black soldiers by offering them their freedom. Henry Laurens voted unanimously for the idea for his son who “saw it as a war measure and a step toward the elimination of slavery.” (Fleming p.302,303) Unfortunately, the proposal was rejected. In South Carolina, Laurens was charged with a group of soldiers to take a defensive position in Charleston, instead, Laurens ordered the troops to charge resulting in casualties but because of his actions the citizens considered him a fearless hero.

It wasn't until September of 1781 that John Laurens was welcomed back into Washington's family. From there he helped at the Battle of Yorktown. Laurens was in command of a light infantry battalion along with Alexander Hamilton at the head of an American storming party that captured Redoubt 10 in a night assault. At Yorktown they negotiated the terms of surrender. This marked the end of a journey for Hamilton, who resigned, but just opened another pathway for Laurens who took his next fight to South Carolina to continue fighting for his black battalion and driving British armies farther from his home state. On August 27, 1782, on the Combahee River in South Carolina, John Laurens was killed in a British ambush at the age of 27. He was in charge of a troop who was commanded to stop a British Party along the river by keeping a defensive position. Laurens refused his orders and sought out the British to prepare an ambush. Word spread to the British party allowing them time to prepare for the attack and surprise the advancing troop. “Laurens refused to retreat or surrender, so he instead decided to charge the enemy... Laurens was struck by several musket balls...mortally wounded” his troops waited until the attack was over before retrieving his body and burying it the next day. (nps.gov)

Although we lost 1,200 American soldiers, the Revolutionary War, was “a mild and relatively bloodless revolution.” (Kristol p. 33) The American Revolution brought about many incredible and unforgettable soldiers. Although after the war many black soldiers who fought were forced back to their plantations, many white views were changed and would influence Abraham Lincoln's decision on the Emancipation Proclamation. Without John Laurens, who overcame the prejudice of growing up in a successful plantation family, many views about slavery would not have been changed. John Laurens believed in fighting for what's right, even if others deem it reckless.