No Useless Mouth

Herrmann, Rachel B.

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Food is omnipresent in Revolutionary-era stories about bondpeople and free black men and women. In 1781 a cook named Dinah supposedly made such a delicious, slowly served fried chicken breakfast for British officer Banastre Tarleton and his men that it gave a messenger time to ride to the rebels and warn them of the arrival of the British troops. A different Dinah was said to have protected her master’s home in Poughkeepsie, New York, “by ‘softening’ British hearts with her freshly baked bread.” In another tale, George Washington visited Fraunces Tavern in New York City, where someone—sometimes Samuel Fraunces, the free black tavern owner, and sometimes a girl named Phoebe, said to be his daughter—“thwarted an assassination attempt against Washington by throwing a plate of poisoned peas out the window to the chickens.”¹ None of the heroes in these apocryphal stories are depicted eating bread, peas, or chicken themselves. These myths resemble real occurrences during the Revolutionary War when enslaved peoples and self-liberated men and women used food to shape the war in ways that failed to address their own hunger. People of African descent gained only a marginal amount of power during the war itself; they proved themselves to military entities by saving soldiers from deaths by starvation and related diseases, but they often did so while ignoring their own appetites.

Enslaved people could make themselves useful to the British Army because it was the British who first granted them a chance at freedom. In November 1775,
before the colonies declared independence, Virginia governor Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation that offered freedom to slaves of rebel masters, setting the stage for an exodus of thousands of self-liberated men and women from colonists’ homes and plantations to British lines. Dunmore’s Proclamation was also responsible for changing white colonists’ and British officers’ ideas about hunger prevention and just war. Because southern masters conflated the loss of slaves with the loss of other “property,” like domesticated animals, it became easy for colonists to equate “stealing” slaves—or encouraging them to run away—with other acts that decreased their access to foodstuffs and fostered hunger. Rebel Americans, in turn, changed British ideas about victual warfare between members of the same nation. When their slaves ran to British ships, colonists stopped provisioning the British sailors aboard. The British then described the decision to withhold food and the refusal to sell it at a fair price as acts of war. Once these matters were settled, the British had to try to create a coherent military strategy that united former slaves, Loyalists, and Indians against American Patriots.²

Dunmore’s Proclamation affected white colonists and Britons less than it did free black folks, enslaved people, and former bondpeople. People of African descent played various roles in the conflict, though not all documents indicate whether someone was enslaved or free, or whether that person served as a soldier allowed to bear arms, or as a waggoneer, cook, waiter, or camp follower. Dunmore’s offer turned some men into victual warriors capable of creating and preventing white hunger. When food ran short, commanders sent soldiers out of camp on foraging expeditions for the army, which offered the additional strategic benefit of allowing soldiers to feed themselves by pilfering grain and domesticated animals. In the south, black victual raiders often set out first because those men knew where on the plantations of former masters they could find movable, edible goods.

This pillaging approach, which ameliorated British hunger with stolen foodstuffs while simultaneously creating hunger among the American rebels, engendered two results. First, it put free blacks and escaped slaves at great risk of suffering the wrath of white colonists, who now had to deal with a large gap in southern provisioning. Second, it made black men more mobile. Husbands left wives and children to undertake dangerous missions, or took up butchering or marketing work that necessitated living apart from their families. Their responsibilities as thieves, cooks, and waiters forced them to range farther from military forts but also made them privy to meetings of higher-ranking officers when they remained in or returned to camp. By procuring provisions, these ex-bondmen improved their skills in acquiring and sharing information.
Black people’s involvement in the war transformed these men and women from relatively powerless actors in one food system into active creators of a new food system that they were somewhat more capable of using to their advantage. As slaves, bondpeople had labored against white hunger by producing and selling garden produce and by growing cash crops that whites sold for provisions. Their newer hunger-prevention efforts were extralegal; former slaves achieved them through labor, migration, and theft, but not yet by law. Throughout the war, self-liberated men and women did not enjoy the luxury of worrying overmuch about their own appetites—and sometimes, hunger seemed immaterial. But their experiences created the knowledge that would later become necessary to institutionalize a food system that granted black colonists the political authority to fight hunger.

While London ministers weighed the costs and benefits of invading the colonies, British colonial governors considered making appeals to slaves—just as they had to Native Americans—to shore up support in case the British Army arrived. In April 1775 the governor of Virginia, John Murray, third Earl of Dunmore, infuriated colonists with his decision to remove gunpowder from the Williamsburg powder magazine. He claimed that he had moved it to protect white Virginians in the event of a slave rebellion. Skeptical colonial leaders argued that the absence of powder would instead encourage revolt, which southern colonists constantly feared. “Some wicked and designing persons have instilled the most diabolical notions in the minds of our slaves,” they observed that month in the Virginia Gazette newspaper. By May Dunmore was admitting privately that he intended to encourage rebellion. He had claimed, “with a Supply of Arms and Ammunition [he] should be able to collect from amongst Negroes Indians and other persons a force sufficient if not to subdue Rebellion at least to defend Government.”

He put this plan into action in his November 1775 proclamation. He invited “every person capable of bearing arms to resort to his Majesty’s STANDARD,” including “all indentured servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms.” By specifying that he would welcome only slaves belonging to rebels, Dunmore may have hoped to maintain good relationships with Loyalists. Determined enslaved people ran from loyal, neutral, and rebel masters alike. Slaveholders possessed good reasons to be nervous, because Dunmore’s Proclamation produced palpable results—though they were more visible in the long term. At first the proclamation offered self-liberated men only the freedom to die; in December 1775 the “Ethiopian regiment,” as Dunmore called it, had suffered staggering losses at American hands.
By his Excellency the Right Honourable JOHN Earl of DUNMORE, his Majesty’s Lieutenant and Governor-General of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, and Vice-Admiral of the same.

A PROCLAMATION.

As I have ever entertained Hopes that an Accommodation might have taken Place between Great Britain and this Colony, without being compelled, by my Duty, to this most disagreeable, but now absolutely necessary Step, rendered fo by a Body of armed Men, unlawfully assembled, firing on his Majesty’s Tenders, and the Formation of an Army, and that Army now on their March to attack his Majesty’s Troops, and destroy the well-disposed Subjects of this Colony: To defeat such treasonable Purposes, and that all such Traitors, and their Abettors, may be brought to Justice, and that the Peace and good Order of this Colony may be again restored, which the ordinary Course of the civil Law is unable to effect, I have thought fit to issue this my Proclamation, hereby declaring, that until the aforesaid good Purposes can be obtained, I do, in Virtue of the Power and Authority to me given, by his Majesty, determine to execute martial Law, and cause the same to be executed throughout this Colony; and to the End that Peace and good Order may the sooner be restored, I do require every Person capable of bearing Arms to refer to his Majesty’s Standard, or be looked upon as Traitors to his Majesty’s Crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the Penalty the Law inflicts upon such Offences, such as Forfeiture of Life, Confiscation of Lands, &c. &c. And I do hereby farther declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty’s Troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to his Majesty’s Crown and Dignity. I do farther order, and require, all his Majesty’s Liege Subjects to retain their Quitrents, or any other Taxes due, or that may become due, in their own Custody, till such Time as Peace may be again restored to this at present most unhappy Country, or demanded of them for their former salutary Purposes, by Officers properly authorized to receive the same.

GIVEN under my Hand, on Board the Ship William, off Norfolk, the 7th Day of November, in the 16th Year of his Majesty’s Reign.

DUNMORE.

GOD SAVE THE KING.

“By his Excellency the Right Honourable John Earl of Dunmore, his Majesty’s Lieutenant and Governor-General of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, and Vice-admiral of the same. A proclamation,” 7 November 1775. Courtesy of American Memory, the Library of Congress.
Following additional efforts to recruit them, enslaved people ran to the British in unprecedented numbers, and they ran farther and farther afield. By 1777 Virginia planter Robert Carter estimated that fifteen hundred bondpeople had “availed themselves” of Dunmore’s offer. In April 1778 the British in Boston contemplated raising a regiment to welcome runaways. At the Siege of Savannah in 1779, armed slaves “did wonders in the working way and in the fighting.” Henry Clinton’s 1779 Philipsburg Proclamation promised “full Security” and “any Occupation which he shall think proper” to “every Negroe who shall desert the Rebel Standard.” Not all of these efforts worked to Britain’s advantage; Clinton’s decision in particular pushed otherwise loyal white inhabitants into supporting the rebels. Estimates of the number of former slaves who ultimately joined the British cause range from fifteen thousand to twenty thousand. Almost a fourth of the pre-Revolutionary slave population migrated out of South Carolina and Georgia. Men and women also ran from Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia.6

Dunmore’s Proclamation damaged good relations with colonists, but the announcement also altered how Britons and southern colonists thought about food and hunger in two significant ways. Slaves ran, and took refuge onboard British ships. Only after British naval officers ignored colonists’ protests about runaways and continued to harbor escapees did colonists stop supplying provisions, thus curtailing the ease with which British ships and sailors traveled along rivers and coasts. First, therefore, the proclamation led to colonial leaders’ refusal to victual British ships, which in turn prompted British naval leaders to interpret withholding food and setting high prices as acts of war. Second, Dunmore’s Proclamation underscored the crucial role slaves played in the southern food system. White rebel colonists, who were relatively useless at producing food without enslaved labor, conflated voluntary flight with “thefts” of their animals and stored provisions because these episodes threatened food security.

Word of Dunmore’s Proclamation travelled quickly. In December 1775 the South Carolina Council of Safety resolved that if British leaders “continue[d] to receive and detain slaves,” they would order that the supplies of provisions for the British navy “be discontinued.” Mid-December, Henry Laurens, acting as president of the council, revealed to the captain of the British ship the Tamar that South Carolinians saw “less reason . . . for supplying provisions at this time” because of the “robberies and depredations committed” by “white and black armed men, from on board some of the ships under your command.” The decision to shelter runaways encouraged former slaves to plunder southern colonists’ plantations. Colonists were outraged. The Council of Safety resolved that because the British persisted in sheltering runaway
slaves, the colony was justified in its decision “to cut off all communication” with the British. In January 1776 the Cherokee joined the Tamar, the Raven, the Syren, and an unnamed vessel called a sandwich packet, and the ships sailed from South Carolina to Georgia in search of foodstuffs. “Since the practice of harbouring & protecting our Negroes on board the Cherokee,” wrote Henry Laurens, “we have refused to Supply them.” He expected that the British were bound for Georgia “to obtain provisions of Bread.” It was a victory of mixed emotions for South Carolina rebels. They had forced the British to move elsewhere—but also facilitated former slaves’ passage on the departing ships.

By the end of the month the British were interpreting the provisioning issue as an act of revolt. Andrew Barclay, the commodore of those ships, decreed that inhabitants who refused “to Supply provisions or attempt an hostile defence” would “be deemed & treated as Rebels.” He equated fighting with not provisioning his men; the choice to withhold food had in this context become a declaration of war. Barclay warned Governor Wright of Savannah “That if they could not be Supplyd with provisions” they would “if in their power attack” Savannah and “destroy it.” Wright was probably willing to allow the British into Savannah; he remained loyal to Great Britain, and in March he would attack the port with Barclay’s assistance. In January, however, Georgian inhabitants had forced Wright to flee the colony, so even had he wished to do so, Wright could not stop inhabitants from controlling the food supply. In February it became clear that colonists had begun to rethink their responsibility to prevent imperial officials’ hunger during a time of tension between colony and metropole. That month Barclay wrote to Wright and angrily complained that anyone residing in “his Majesty’s Dominions” should be able to obtain provisions at “the Market Price.”

At first it was unclear whether the colonists’ refusal to provision British ships or sell food at lower prices actually constituted rebellion. In times of peace some governments may have let civilians decide local prices, but during previous periods of war and famine governments had intervened to fix prices to prevent hunger. During the Revolutionary War, the rebel government struggled to regulate civilian food prices. June 1777 witnessed “a considerable number” of North Carolina merchants making “it their business To deny up all the necessaries of life in order to fix what price they please.” “If we were as virtuous as we ought to be,” commented Henry Laurens’s son, John, in 1778, “those who are enriching themselves by Commerce, Privateering and Farming” would instead want to supply the army “with every necessary and convenience at a moderate rate.” His father received a letter that begged him “to put a Stop to the practices of those miscreants the Monopolizers of Food.”
Even during the war, when the rebels could not regulate their own prices, they did not accuse these monopolists of rebelling against them.

The question of military purveyance further complicated matters. By the late medieval period, English subjects came to accept that the crown had the right to seize goods and services without paying for them immediately; legislation existed to regulate this practice, but it existed to discourage corruption and ensure timely compensation, not to clarify when seizures were allowable. Military theorist Emer de Vattel said that a nation in want of provisions could compel its neighbors to provide them at a fair price, or that it could take them by force. Neutral nations were not supposed to deprive one nation something provided to another nation. Vattel also wrote that a nation had “no obligation to furnish an ally” with provisions when the first nation required them for its own purposes, and he argued that the nation that was asked for corn could refuse to supply it if so doing would exacerbate its own food shortages. When British ships began welcoming escaped slaves aboard in late 1775 and early 1776, the colonies had not yet declared war on Britain, so it was unclear whether ship captains had the authority to demand certain prices, and unclear whether the law of nations required colonists to provision British ships. Americans who still identified as British subjects could point to their own provisions scarcities to avoid feeding the British navy, or they could imply that Britain was a hostile foreign power whom they were not obligated to supply.

In 1776, the Model Treaty, which John Adams helped to draft, stated that if one party was at war and another party was neutral, the neutral party could trade with the enemies of the party at war, as long as the items traded were noncontraband items (food stores were characterized as noncontraband items; enslaved peoples themselves would be deemed contraband, but not until the Civil War in the mid-nineteenth century). Noncontraband items on neutral vessels could not be seized, but such items on vessels belonging to nations at war could be. This rationalization adjusted expectations again, making it justifiable for both British and American sailors to seize foodstuffs from each other’s ships. Ultimately, rebel politicians chose to suggest that because British officials did not run the colonial government, the Patriots had little motivation to set prices fair enough to prevent British hunger—thereby redefining who was responsible for dealing with it.

As British officials in North America continued to welcome former bondpeople into their ranks, rebel colonists took violent steps to try to stop them, warning that slaves who ran would suffer whipping, transportation out of the colonies, or execution. In July 1775 North Carolinians moved to appoint patrollers to search for people away “from their masters Lands without a pass,” and gave these patrollers the power to administer “thirty nine lashes or less if
they think proper.” An enslaved person “found with any fier arms or amition in his or her possession,” and who did not “willingly surrender their arms,” was liable to be shot. Some of these regulations merely continued longstanding practices from the colonial period—but after Dunmore’s Proclamation, bondpeople with guns, colonists reasoned, could have received them from the British.

In December 1775 the Virginia Committee of Safety decreed that any slave found “in arms against this colony, or in the possession of an enemy, through their own choice” would suffer transportation “to any of the foreign West India islands.” Later that month, an act of the General Assembly proclaimed “that all Negro or other slaves, conspiring to rebel or make insurrection, shall suffer death, and be excluded all benefit of clergy.” As time went on, Virginians, Carolinians, and other southern colonists instituted more and more stringent punishments to deter those eyeing the chance at freedom with the British. These punishments reveal a number of fears: that enslaved people would obtain guns, commit violence, or flee.

As it became clear that assaults on slave labor threatened food production, Britons and colonists started to have trouble separating thefts of slaves from other forms of victual warfare, such as thefts of cattle and horses. Bondpeople who fled forced southern slaveholders to wait on themselves, to grow their own crops, and to cook their own meals. Some slaveholders would have been more helpless than others; Lowcountry slavers did not regulate labor beyond allocating the daily tasks of black men’s and women’s work and thus may have possessed little knowledge about day-to-day rice production. Chesapeake masters worked more closely with enslaved farm laborers and may have been able to manage on their own.

In October 1777 Georgians’ “Domestics” ran to the British while “Their Scouts & Indians . . . carry off our Stock.” When South Carolinian and future governor Arnoldus Vanderhorst reported his damages in the wake of a British attack, he recorded “Stock of Cattle sheep Hogs Horses” and “30 Negroes 2/3 grown.” He valued the animals at £2,000 and the enslaved children and adults at £1,200. Vanderhorst’s claim reveals that some adults fled alongside children and teenagers; these may have been families on the run. Resident Paul Trapier also lost “10 young Negroe men.” Immediately after listing these runaways, he described losing “Almost the whole produce of . . . Rice, Corn, Oates &ca” as well as “Cattle & sheep” and other “Cattle, Hogs & Goats.” Slaveholders’ claims listed various horses, cattle, and bondpeople missing, in addition to bushels of corn burned, liquor stolen, and buildings destroyed. “Thefts” of slaves resulted in further losses of crops, because no enslaved people remained to grow them, and in losses of animals, because no one remained to guard them.
Documents relating to Indian affairs make clear that British-allied Creeks and Cherokees were heavily involved in "stealing" enslaved people (as the Americans might have called it) or encouraging them to run away (as the British likely understood it). These associations between Indians and formerly enslaved peoples worried American rebels who had spent much of the eighteenth century trying to foster antipathy between Natives and slaves—often by employing Indians to catch runaway bondpeople and using enslaved people to defend against Indian attacks. In 1776, for example, the South Carolina Council of Safety asked Catawba Indians to scout for runaways in the parishes of St. George, Dorchester, St. Paul, and St. Bartholomew. In March, South Carolinian Stephen Bull opined that runaway slaves “had better be shot by the Creek Indians, as it . . . will establish a hatred or Aversion between the Indians and Negroes.” Self-liberated men and women defied colonists’ attempts to encourage hostility and banded together with Indians during the Revolutionary War. In August 1776 British and unidentified British-allied southern Natives made “alarming incursions into Georgia, carr[y]ing off a considerable number of Negroes and not less than two thousand head of cattle.” Many of these bondpeople likely chose to ally with the Indians.

British-allied Indians, by facilitating escapes for people whom rebels considered their property, attacked colonists’ day-to-day existence while adding to their own possessions of enslaved people and domesticated animals. Bondpeople likely ran not only because a chance at freedom was more attractive than slavery, but also because there is evidence indicating that Indian slavery offered more autonomy than being a bondperson in a white British colony. David George, a man who eventually made his way to the British lines, was first enslaved during the colonial period before he ran away to Creek country. He was a captive among the Creeks, where he labored as if he were a Creek woman. “I made fences, dug the ground, planted corn, and worked hard,” he recalled, “but the people were kind to me.” When his white master’s son came to reenslave him, George ran. A 1790s account related that in Creek villages on the Flint River, black Creek men owned cattle—sometimes as many as one hundred—and made butter and cheese from cows. Enslaved people in Creek country paid only a small portion of their crops to Indian masters and kept the rest as property to eat or sell. In helping Indians by farming and stealing animals, bondpeople made themselves useful, creating a space for themselves in Native communities. Other black men and women who ran to the Creek nation won freedom for their children, who became property holders of significant stock as well as dairy producers.

As the war continued, and runaway slaves threatened the food system with their physical absence, southerners took steps to protect their access to
foodstuffs. North Carolina placed an embargo on “all Beef Pork Bacon & Common salt” leaving the state in April 1778, excepting supplies sent to the Continental Army or North Carolinian troops. South Carolina placed an embargo on provisions, including rice, in June 1778, extended it in October, and continued it until January 1779. In 1780 a broadside in Thomas Jefferson’s name informed Albemarle, Virginia, residents of a “specific tax” that obliged them to provide “a supply of provisions, and other necessaries for the use of the army.” Jefferson, channeling Vattel, reminded people of the “compulsions of the law” requiring them to provide salted meat and other items, though he also tried to be persuasive by mentioning that “the prices offered are generous.” But Jefferson was in for disappointment; Horatio Gates wrote to him, wishing he “could say the Supplies from Virginia” had arrived, but in fact both Virginia and North Carolina were guilty of “unpardonable Neglect.” They had sent nothing, and Gates urged that “Flour, Rum, and Drovers of Bullocks, should without Delay be forwarded to this Army or the Southern Department will soon want one to defend it.” To be sure, some southern colonists likely managed well during the war, and their failure to send provisions to the army suggests that perhaps their hunger was overexaggerated. Some rebels who refused to provision the Continental Army were keeping some of their produce for themselves—but others were reckoning with food shortages.

It is clear that rebel Americans feared the flight of enslaved peoples from their plantations, even trying to bribe bondpeople to convince them not to run. Before the Revolution, enslaved peoples’ diets were unhealthy and unchanging. Most men and women received a pound of salted fish, preserved beef, or preserved pork, and a pint of cornmeal or rice per day. Sometimes, however, men and women chose to remain in bondage when they could readily obtain meagre sustenance and good treatment. Samuel Massey, a literate man enslaved by Henry Laurens, wrote to Laurens to tell him that his slaves at one plantation “can hardly be purswaided to Stay.” At another plantation called Mepkin, however, people were “all for Staying at home as Both your field and thear oan are in a flurishing way.” Bondpeople sometimes lingered where their gardens and fields yielded produce, but they were motivated by more complicated desires as well. When Henry Laurens’s informers described the connection between hunger prevention and enslaved peoples’ willingness to stay put, they also revealed the other factors at play. Samuel Massey admitted that although the slaves at one plantation enjoyed plentiful crops, “the negroes does not want to Stay with mr camel.” Slaves who disliked a particular overseer may have wanted to run, even if their supplies of provisions seemed secure. Hunger prevention, in other words, was not always the top priority for bondpeople.
In other instances slaveholders tried to retain bondpeople merely by promising them future sustenance. In July 1776, after a British ship appeared on the Potomac River, Robert Carter went to his Cole’s Point plantation and called a meeting. First, he warned the enslaved people there that Dunmore was untrustworthy and planned to reenslave and sell those who ran. He likely pressured them into admitting, “We do not wish to enter into Ld D’s Service . . . but we all fully intend to serve you our master.” After hearing such pleasing declarations of allegiance, Carter told them that if any of Dunmore’s men landed on Cole’s Point, the men should take their “wives, Children, male & female Acquaintances, beding & tools, removing all into private places . . . and send a person off to Nomony Hall . . . to advise me at wt Place ye are gotten too.” If they served him well in this regard, he would “give Directions, tending for [their] immediate relief.” Carter urged these men and women to hide and to secure valuable farm tools, and in return he promised to send them enough to survive.

None of them deserted him, for the moment. Carter attempted to use supplies (which must have included food) as a bargaining tool. Only if his slaves apprised him of their whereabouts would he send them “relief.” Robert Carter’s promise, however, belied his weak position. If people ran, they would of course take food with them. And depart they did: thirty-two men and women in total when the British came close enough to Carter’s plantation. Landon Carter, Robert’s father, was similarly unlucky; eight bondpeople liberated themselves from his plantation, a fact that Landon chronicled in his diary with no small degree of venom.

Some of the enslaved chose to remain on plantations, not because masters fed them well but rather because the location offered opportunities. Some who stayed stole food from absentee or distracted masters. Obviously, historians know more about what happened to those whom authorities caught. One Savannah slave named March was detected stealing rice. The “desperate fellow,” according to Henry Laurens’s friend, John Lewis Gervais, “Cut off his left hand above the Thumb before threatening an overseer with a knife. It is difficult to say why March maimed himself. Perhaps he hoped to avoid being sold, or maybe by “punishing” himself he sought to preclude further reprisals from whites. The Virginia Gazette reported that one slave, who was “tried and found guilty of sheep-stealing,” was “sentenced to be burnt in the hand.” Branding a slave in the hand was permissible in lieu of execution if the person accused could recite a Bible verse, thus claiming benefit of clergy. Perhaps March preferred a quick self-amputation to the prolonged burn of branding. Thus, at times, enslaved peoples lingered on plantations and stole
to prevent hunger, and at other times adequate food supplies were not enough to compete with the powerful lure of freedom among the British.

In the face of mounting runaways, American rebels acknowledged the strategic value of adding enslaved peoples to their own military units. African American veterans, in their postwar pension records, recalled serving with the Patriots most frequently in the Battles of Monmouth, Stony Point, and Yorktown. Typical black soldiers served with the infantry as privates, and sometimes without arms. About 250 slaves bet their lives on the chance for freedom and joined Rhode Island’s black battalion. Connecticut, too, formed an all-black company, the Second Company of the Fourth Regiment. Massachusetts and New Hampshire also sent slaves to war. For the most part, slaves serving in the American military worked in mixed regiments throughout the northern states, and sometimes in tandem with Indians, as they did in Rhode Island and Connecticut.\textsuperscript{21}

The inclusion of black regiments rose and fell with the tides of war. Immediately after Lexington and Concord, the Americans began to accept slaves into military units, but by early 1776 state militias passed acts that excluded blacks, mulattoes, and Indians. By the end of that year, however, Dunmore’s Proclamation had forced Americans to reconsider. By early 1777, even the southern states were partially amenable: Virginians recruited free blacks, and many enslaved people passed themselves off as free in order to join. In 1778 John Laurens proposed taking some of his father’s “able bodied slaves” to form a group he conceived of romantically as “defenders of liberty.” Henry Laurens, himself a prominent slaveholder, initially refused his request, but John Lewis Gervais proposed a similar slave regiment. John Mathews, governor of South Carolina, followed suit with a similar plan in 1782; at least a few white men took the notion seriously.\textsuperscript{24}

The forward-thinking enthusiasm of slaveholders in the southern states should not be overstated. Laurens made public his son’s proposal, but the Continental Congress rejected the plan in 1779. Rather than recruit black men, South Carolina considered bribing potential white enlistees with the promise of giving them one enslaved person (who would be enslaved for life) for each year of the white man’s service, and offering a bondperson to anyone who could “procure Twenty Five Recruits to Inlist.”\textsuperscript{25} Americans’ adoption of slaves as soldiers occurred piecemeal when it happened at all. British numbers were higher because Dunmore acted sooner.

Dunmore’s Proclamation created a world of people on the move. George Galphin, who had taught the Patriots how best to cultivate Creek interests and was labelled “an Antiloyalist” for his efforts, fled his Silver Bluff Plantation when the British approached Savannah. David George, whom Galphin had en-
slaved, chose that moment to strike out for British lines. Dunmore’s offer of freedom was important because it encouraged behavior that bestowed power. American rebels failed to separate thefts of foodstuffs by slaves from thefts of animals and grain. Their anger pushed them to withhold food from British ships, which prompted the British to include American food deprivation and price fixing in their concept of acts of war—which in turn expands this book’s definition of eighteenth-century victual warfare.

By early 1776, victual warfare included not merely the destruction or theft of foodstuffs but also the refusal of purveyance, even to a military entity not yet officially at war with the colonies. The proclamation made colonists more aware of their own hunger when slaves ran, both because of a decline in food production and as a result of increased acts of black victual warfare. It also probably increased Americans’ animosity toward Native Americans. These changes, which paralleled the inclusion of slaves into the British and American militaries, foreshadowed further transformations in the southern food system.

Before the Revolutionary War, enslaved people prepared meals for their own families and for white masters. During the colonial period bondpeople were part of a food system in which they enjoyed little say in their access to provisions. Their responsibilities for stealing food during the war gave them the leverage to help shape a food system of hunger creation and prevention. Before the conflict many slaves traveled from big-house kitchens to southern colonists’ tables to markets and to the open-air religious meetings where black bondpeople worshipped. They could share news over several hundred miles in a week or two. During the war these travel networks expanded because commanders expected the black soldiers in their militaries to absent themselves for longer periods when obtaining provisions for troops. After Dunmore’s Proclamation, self-liberated slaves and free black people became victual warriors who traveled from forts to plantations to raid for food and create white hunger among American rebels. Thereafter they also moved from camp to camp to transport provisions and feed soldiers. Ex-bondpeople leveraged their relationship with provisioning networks to become the butchers who wandered along roads and to and from markets, the waggoneers with easy access to extra flour, and the cooks and waiters who overheard valuable information. As they transformed the food system, former bondpeople maintained an unpredictable relationship with their own hunger—alternately ignoring, dealing with, and preventing it.

Once rebels and Britons incorporated black soldiers into their armies, they needed to decide how to feed them. On the one hand, it could be said that
with the exception of some black soldiers’ rations (such as those of the Black Pioneers—the escapees who formed small groups or companies, were assigned to British and provincial regiments, and then eventually relocated to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone), provisions were inferior to those that white soldiers received. Dunmore reported possessing “four Ovens and pretty good Barracks for our Ethiopian Corps” in 1776. In 1778 when John Lewis Gervais proposed a black Patriot regiment, he suggested that the men could survive on one pound of meat and a quart of rice per day. In 1780 Henry Clinton decreed that “those Negroes who belong to Rebels . . . are to work in the Departments with adequate Pay, Provision, and Cloathing.”

As evidenced by this relatively late assertion from Clinton, people in charge rarely articulated a coherent strategy for feeding these men in the same way that they did for white soldiers (and eventually for Native Americans). Sometimes they continued to refer to black men as property (note Clinton’s use of the term *belong*). Sometimes they figured out how to procure bread but not meat, and when they apportioned rations the meat component was sometimes the same as that provided to white soldiers, but the rations contained no bread, no flour, no alcohol, and less starch than a white soldier’s ration. Black refugees serving in the army found their own food and built their own shelters. Charles Cornwallis’s orderly book shows that freed bondpeople in the southern campaign received peas instead of flour, which, like rice, proved harder to cook without camp kettles; two such kettle shortages occurred in 1779. Although the writing in Cornwallis’s orderly book is at times disorderly, readers can see, scrawled between general orders, an admission that “Grat abuses” were observed “in vitling the Nigroas.”

On the other hand, it could also be said that black participants’ rations improved over time, and that in some instances the men in charge went out of their way to feed black soldiers. British observers might have perceived former slaves as useless mouths—similar to the way they characterized Indians—when in fact the former slaves’ relationships with food and hunger underscored ineffable power dynamics. The Black Pioneers from South Carolina and Georgia received weekly rations and were entitled to shares of plunder taken from rebels, even during the campaigns when they were not paid or provided with provisions. White Loyalists found these rights difficult to accept. In 1779 British brigadier general Augustine Prévost in Savannah felt “obliged to victual almost all of the Loyal Inhabitants and many Negroes,” even though the cost “bore hard upon our Provisions,” given the fact that food stores for the troops stood in a state of “urgent distress.” This report appeared during the same time that Indian affairs were in confusion, in the south because of John Stuart’s death, and in the north because of the Iroquois refugee crisis—so it is
worth pausing to emphasize the significance of British provisioning in this instance.

Former slaves were responsible for obtaining food for the army. Early in the war, bands of Dunmore’s followers—called “Dunmore’s banditti”—descended on the plantations of former masters, carrying off livestock and crops. News of these raids broke about a month before Henry Laurens made the decision to stop supplying British ships with provisions, so Americans likely associated provisions shortages with black soldiers’ raids. Many of the raiders’ names are unrecorded, but some are known. Titus, who was enslaved by a man named John Corlies, ran to Dunmore in 1775, and though he died before the end of the war, in 1778 he became known as Colonel Tye, leading other victual warriors in New Jersey as they searched for food and other necessities. Augustine Prévost, in his 1779 proposal for the Black Pioneers’ responsibilities, made contradictory comments about the usefulness of these men. He wrote that during the Siege of Savannah they had been armed and “very usefull” in “the working way and in the fighting.” He also described them as “an useless burthen upon us or plundering the country.” He characterized black soldiers as useful during the siege when they were working and when they were fighting, but after this event he associated only their violent labor with utility.

Perhaps some Britons, in their decision to harbor and provision former slaves, were driven by an early form of humanitarianism. Maybe some thought them uniformly useless. It seems clear that some observers alternated between perceptions of escaped slaves as useless and views of them as useful to the army’s strategy, particularly when their raiding proved tactically valuable for the psychological and physical challenges it posed to the Patriots.

Black men and women also appear in the records procuring and preparing foodstuffs through nonviolent means. Women worked as cooks, laundresses, and maids, and men cooked, foraged for food, and waited on officers in army camps. Shadrack Furman offered provisions to the British. William Allen, aged twenty-three, a “Stout Man” bound for Halifax in 1783, cooked for them on board the Nancy. After David George made his way to Savannah, he and his wife Phillis took turns supporting their family. Phillis George took in washing for General Henry Clinton, and “out of the little she got maintained” them. Together they raised corn with their compatriot, George Liele, who traveled between the Piedmont and the Lowcountry. After the siege of Savannah, when David George caught smallpox and told his wife to leave him to die, she listened.

He recovered, they reunited, and using money from the sale of a steer that his wife’s part-Indian brother had gifted them, he began buying and
butchering meat for the British. He was able to move again after borrowing money “from some of the Black people to buy hogs,” which he killed and sold to the British to broker safe passage for the family to Charleston. David and Phillis George, like the unnamed families on Robert Carter’s plantation and in Arnoldus Vanderhorst’s claim, separated, worked together, and drew on larger networks with Native Americans to ensure their family’s survival during the war.33

British-allied men were not the only ones to obtain provisions. Boyrereau Brinch (sometimes called Jeffrey Brace or Jeffrey Stiles) detailed his kidnapping in Mali in the 1750s, his enslavement in America, and his Revolutionary War service to the Patriots. He remembered “plundering” a British store before the evacuation of New York and coming away with “seven loads of excellent Provisions.” He also managed to steal a Tory farmer’s hog. Johnson Green, who served the Americans in the northern campaign, recalled stealing butter, cheese, and chocolate near West Point, New York, in 1781. Charles Grandison cooked for the Americans, and Levi Burns and James Coopers waited on American officers and served them food. Scipio Handley sold fish in Charleston.34

Throughout the conflict, escaped slaves did what they could to fill their bellies. By late 1775 there were approximately five hundred black runaways living on Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, where they supplied themselves with crops and stolen cattle. In December Colonel William Moultrie planned “a Secret Expedition” against the island with a detachment of 150 men. Moultrie instructed the major in command to seize everyone, set fire to their buildings, and drive off or destroy all the livestock. The expedition took place later in December. Afterward, Henry Laurens reported “such a check . . . as will serve to humble our negroes in general.” Soldiers “burnt the house in which the banditti were often lodged, brought off four negroes, killed three or four, and also . . . destroyed many things which had been useful to the wretches in the house.” Despite the obvious risks, runaways created temporary communities where they could gather together and supply themselves.35

Black soldiers also found ways to keep themselves from going hungry while serving in the British army. Some of these men in Virginia and North Carolina were responsible for loading wagons and shelling corn. In 1781 British commissaries observed that “by the Carelessness and little Pilferings of Conductors, Waggoners, &c,” “about 600 gallons of Spirits and 7000 Pounds Weight of Flour were lost at different Times.”36 Although they made the connection between the fact that black men loaded wagons and the fact that foodstuffs loaded onto wagons were likely to disappear, there seems to have been little effort to punish these laborers for stealing. In a world where soldiers lived
a few delayed provisions shipments from starving, it seems reasonable to assume that black soldiers took advantage of lapses in surveillance to help themselves to extra provisions, just as white soldiers did during their service.

The rebel army seemed less tolerant of black thievery, whether undertaken to avoid hunger or for other reasons. When Johnson Green stole, he explained, “I only was detected . . . and punished by receiving one hundred stripes.” Green was eventually executed in 1786 after embarking on a post-Revolutionary bender during which he reported taking no less than “near a bushel of meal,” “three or four dozen herrings,” “two cheeses,” “thirty weight of salt pork” (and another twenty or thirty pounds in two other instances), “a quarter of mutton,” and “one case-bottle of rum.” It is unclear whether Green became such an avid thief because he was hungry, or because he enjoyed the subversiveness of stealing so much.

Quests for food, illicit or otherwise, enabled former bondpeople and free black men and women to pick up key bits of intelligence. British-allied Mohawks captured Charles Grandison near Montreal in September 1779. Grandison stated that he was free and had lived with an American rebel named Colonel Warner as his cook. Although “every thing was kept a secret from the Men” in camp, Grandison related that “he heard the Officers talk over at Table” and was thus privy to their plans. By explaining that he was a cook who also waited tables, Grandison could reasonably claim to possess privileged knowledge. Loyalists in the mid-Hudson Valley in 1777 knew enough about black information networks to warn fellow Loyalists that they should hold their tongues while around “Blacks in the Kitchen.”

Perhaps the men to whom Grandison spoke remembered previous meals, during which they too had blabbed while waiters brought food to the table. Whereas middling white soldiers ate their meals crouched outside of tents and around campfires, Charles Grandison ventured into officers’ tents and overheard their mealtime conversations. Black cooks and table waiters could use their invisibility to consume and then circulate news. Grandison’s information garnered credibility because the British were already aware of American John Sullivan’s punitive 1779 campaign against the Iroquois. His report on Sullivan’s expedition “against the Indians” established his credibility, which made believable his warning about “an Expedition intended this Winter against Canada.” Daniel Claus, the British Indian agent who examined him, concluded that he was “most Intelligent.” The word conveyed a double meaning in this instance: Grandison was smart, but he also used his wits to convey actual intelligence to those who mattered. Given the hunger that the 1779 campaign created in Iroquoia, the British would likely have welcomed advance warning—or confirmation—of any additional attack. Black allies’ mobility
as waiters, conveyors of food to the troops, and buskers at various markets allowed them to travel through friendly and enemy territory with ears and eyes usefully open.

After the War for Independence some escapees remained unaffiliated victual warriors. In 1787 South Carolinians and Georgians found themselves inundated by attacks from a group of escaped slaves—or “the daring banditti,” as one brigadier general called them—who ensconced themselves on an island on the Savannah River. The raiders had been known to “carry off whole stacks of rice at a time” from Georgia and South Carolina. Southerners worried about “The free booty they reap” as well as the fact that “their numbers” were “daily increasing.” This was an extralegal community of hunger preventers, perhaps even extant since the war. Because the possibility of such a lawless body was too terrifying for any southerner to imagine, Georgia and South Carolina acted quickly to stamp out the black settlement once they learned about it. An early May expedition comprised of whites and Catawba Indians “left six of their head men, dead on the ground.” The expedition wounded several others and removed all “Their baggage & provisions.”

For self-liberated men and women—as for Native Americans—the War for Independence continued beyond its formal conclusion in 1783. The journey from bondpeople to formerly enslaved men and women to hunger-preventing and hunger-creating victual warriors had taken nearly a decade.

When Dunmore’s 1775 proclamation enticed enslaved peoples away from plantations, colonists interpreted British actions as a two-pronged assault on the established colonial food system: one strike that deprived colonists of producers, and another that made those formerly enslaved producers into food destroyers. Both aspects created white rebel hunger while offering strategies for the British to better supply themselves. Ultimately, it was this attack on American slavery that prompted the colonists to withhold food from British ships and that helped tip the balance toward war. Rebels refused to supply the British with provisions after Dunmore’s proclamation not simply because they were angry but also because the proclamation was something they viewed as an act of victual warfare. The British, in turn, examined the Americans’ decisions to charge high prices for food and then withhold it, and called these choices acts of war, perhaps because contemporary theorists such as Vattel could not help observers clarify the foreign-policy relationship between colonists and Britons.

Black soldiers who survived on irregular rations, butchers who needed to obtain hogs, waggoneers who transported provisions, and black waiters in camp tents shared something: they were real people with families whose pres-
ence in the archival record shows them traveling between and beyond liminal spaces. During the American Revolution useful black food networks encouraged the growth of parallel information networks. Former bondpeople depended on black and Native communities to obtain food and information, and pursued roles that retained and strengthened those connections. They received provisions in return for their service, but so too did they obtain, produce, prepare, and do without various types of foodstuffs.

Black soldiers, like Iroquois, Cherokee, and Creek Indians, attacked white farms and plantations and stole food for the British. Unlike Indians, however, black men and women may not have had to use hunger for protest because during much of the war they could provision themselves. Sometimes former slaves benefitted when Britons went out of their way to feed them, and sometimes they ate poorer provisions than white combatants. Useful black mouths helped hungry British soldiers to stave off starvation. Although Americans may have watched for escaped slaves so that they could capture them, black victual warriors became adept at obtaining provisions while avoiding reenslavement.

There is also evidence suggesting that black hunger, like Indian hunger, was different from white soldiers’ hunger—at times black hunger did not matter. When South Carolina–born Boston King heard of a “dreadful rumour” from New York stating “that all the slaves, in number 2000, were to be delivered up to their masters” in light of the peace between Britain and the United States in 1783, he could not have eaten even had he wanted to. “We lost our appetite for food,” he remembered, “and sleep departed from our eyes.”

Black soldiers avoided hunger through labor, theft, or migration, but they also at times placed hunger prevention much lower on their scale of human requirements. They were not yet capable of fighting for a coherent, formal, legal food system to prevent hunger; that would come later, at the end of the Revolution, when the vicissitudes of war took them far away from the original thirteen colonies.

In April 1783 Frederick Haldimand wrote that the United States and Great Britain had agreed to the terms of peace that would cause Boston King so much distress. Haldimand was also worried, because of the rumor that the Indians “are not considered in the treaty.” Ex-slaves, it turned out, would be considered, but for the moment the British worried more about their Native American allies. One brigadier general understood the implications almost instantly. When he wrote to Haldimand after seeing the peace terms, he predicted, “the Indians will be outrageous.” Officials in the new United States assumed that they had won a transfer of all lands stretching to the Mississippi River—lands occupied and claimed by British-allied Natives who were unlikely
to recognize such a cession.\textsuperscript{42} Such land transfers were complicated. The transfer of food diplomacy from the British to the Americans occurred only haphazardly, when it happened at all. In the 1780s and 1790s, Americans would have to negotiate with Indians. They had their work cut out for them as they set about trying to prevent useful mouths from becoming hungry, vengeful enemies.