

# FREEDOM FIGHTERS

— By Bill Hudgins —

To many Americans, Daniel Chester French's iconic bronze Minuteman statue in Concord, Mass., embodies the typical Revolutionary War soldier. Cast in 1875 to celebrate the centennial of the battles of Concord and Lexington, the statue depicts a tall, lean figure who has just left his plow and picked up his weapon to confront the advancing British.

While the "Concord Minuteman" captures some essentials of the Everyman Patriot, no single image can encapsulate the complexities of the various forces that fought for independence nor the diversity of the men and women who served in various ways.

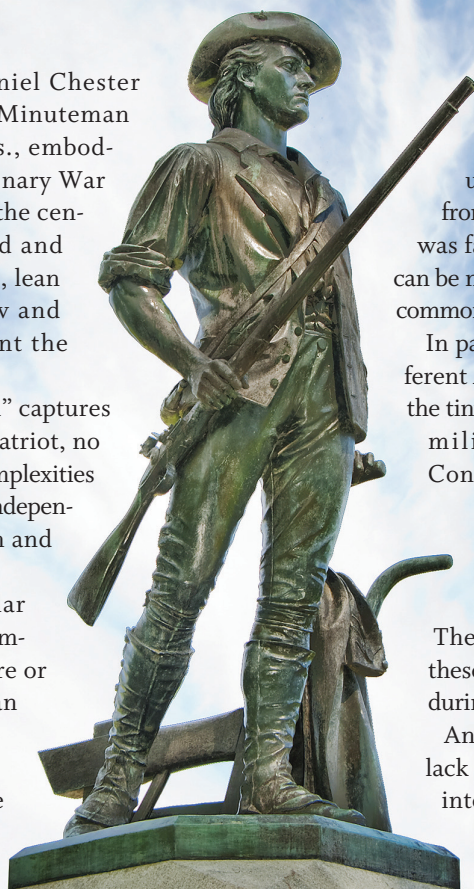
"An emerging American popular culture developed a vision of the common soldier of that war which more or less reflects ours," writes historian Christopher Geist in his essay "A Common American Soldier" for the Autumn 2004 issue of the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*. "Citizen-soldiers—farmers, laborers, men of the

middling sort, young and old—minutemen who picked up their muskets and fell in with their militia units to defend home and community from invading Redcoats." But the reality was far more nuanced, he notes. "There can be no perfect portrait of the Revolution's common soldier."

In part, that's because at least three different American fighting forces (excluding the tiny Navy) battled British troops—local militias, state regiments and the Continental Army, which was drawn from all of the Colonies and even included two Canadian regiments, historian Holly Mayer noted in an interview with *American Spirit*.

The composition and performance of these three separate forces varied widely during the eight years of war.

Another obstacle to such a portrait is lack of data. A contemporary researcher interested in the demographics of our 20th- and 21st-century armed forces can access a wealth of facts about ages, heights, weights, hair



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and eye color, education, work experience, marital status, and so on. But 18th-century armies collected little information on their men aside from names, ages, where they were from, and professions and skills, if any. And recruiters desperate to meet quotas were sometimes less than scrupulous about adhering to official standards.

Furthermore, the struggle for independence was also a political and social revolution, and the combatants didn't always share the same motivations. On the one hand, they were rebelling against Great Britain to protect their homes, livelihoods, way of life and perceived freedoms from tyranny. At the same time, they were attempting to create a revolutionary form of self-government rooted deeply in individual liberty.

And, though many soldiers traveled farther from home than they might ever have in peacetime, the Revolution did not eliminate allegiances to home states nor the sense of identity that imparted. Even if the Revolution was not a melting pot, it was a crucible in which the principles of liberty, self-government and a nascent national identity were tested and purified.

Geist states that at least 175,000 men served in the Patriot cause; the exact figure is uncertain. Casualties ran nearly 20 percent. (By comparison, the Union Army had a casualty rate of roughly 13 percent in the Civil War.) These numbers do not reflect the miseries of hunger, cold, sickness and loss that afflicted so many and who, despite that, soldiered on to win independence. Today as we remember their sacrifice and valor, we're compelled to wonder: Who were these warriors?

### War vs. Idealism

Colonial Americans were familiar with war. They had fought countless skirmishes and several outright wars with American Indians. Many had served in the French and Indian War that ended in 1763, and would serve again in either militia, state regiments or the Continental Army.

Traditionally, militias provided short-term local defense and generally operated close to home, though there were instances of large combined military actions that moved units farther away. Men between 15 or 16 years old and up to 60 years old were required to serve, although clergy, college students, slaves and free blacks were usually exempted, and Virginia banned Catholics, according to Geist. Otherwise, militias represented a fair cross-section of a community's white male population. Collectively, far more men served in militias than in the Continental Army.

Many in the Continental Army disliked the militias. Washington once wrote that "to place any dependence upon militia is assuredly resting upon a broken staff." Nevertheless, as they first proved in 1775 at Concord, Lexington and Bunker Hill, militia fought well if properly led and employed. They

were often deployed to hold fortifications, harass an enemy, or, as at the battles of Guilford Courthouse and Cowpens, to slow an enemy advance and reinforce state regiments and Continental Army units.

Militiamen also sometimes served in state regiments. Occasionally those regiments fought alongside Continental regulars and crossed state lines to take part in campaigns.

Mayer notes that states frequently excused their failure to fill quotas of men for the Continental Army by declaring they needed the men for their militia and state units. State governments were responsible for providing for the state units, and they were also supposed to underwrite the cost for their men serving in the Continental Army. States tended to their home units better than to men serving in a distant theater.

Though fewer men served in the Continental Army than in the combined militia and state units, the Army was nevertheless "the backbone" of the fight for independence, Geist writes. It was not limited to state borders, and it comprised men from all the states, as well as Canada and several European countries.

The Second Continental Congress created the Continental Army on June 14, 1775, and appointed George Washington as commander in chief. Originally, soldiers enlisted for only a year—a relic of the Colonial tradition of short enlistments, according to Geist. This quickly proved to be a mistake as men left never to return, leaving Washington critically short-handed. He realized that enlistments needed to be longer in order to give him time to imbue the army with sufficient discipline and professionalism to stay in the field.

And indeed, as enlistments grew longer and soldiers more professional, the Continental Army started to resemble a European professional "standing army." This alarmed some Patriots who viewed Europe's professional armies as models of corruption, ambition and potential "engine(s) of oppression," writes historian Charles Royster in *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

Patriot men-at-arms, however, were citizen-soldiers fighting for revolutionary ideals such as individual liberty, the rule of law and independence. But many Patriots worried whether the ideals of the Revolution could survive the realities of a protracted war that involved a large army, conscription and lengthy enlistments, according to Royster.

The Revolutionary War "shaped and tested Americans' ideals of national character," Royster writes. "Liberty could survive, many Americans believed, only if the people showed themselves to be worthy defenders of it. To make independence secure, these revolutionaries contended, rigorous ideals of national character and civil polity must be realized in the victory."

Patriot leaders hoped those ideals would inspire thousands of volunteers to fight for them. But idealism failed to fill the ranks with volunteers, and many of them left when their one-year enlistments ended.

In 1776, Washington persuaded Congress to approve three-year enlistments so he could have time to mold raw recruits into disciplined, effective soldiers, according to *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, by John Shy (University of Michigan Press, 1990). And in 1777, Congress changed the enlistment period to “for the duration.” Congress also instituted a draft and set quotas of men for each state, and offered enlistment bounties such as cash and land grants.

On the other hand, there were men such as Continental Army Private Joseph Plumb Martin of Connecticut, who enlisted at 15 and served through the entire war. Like many young men, Martin was eager for adventure and filled with *rage militaire*—that upwelling of pride, defiance, confidence and patriotism that helped fill the ranks early in the war. Later on, though wiser about war, he still proudly described the army’s toughness, noting that the militia “would not have endured the sufferings the army did ... and when the hardships of fatigue, starvation, cold and nakedness ... begun to seize upon them ... they would have instantly quitted the service in disgust.”

“Most demographic information is related in some way or other to the problem of desertion,” because it could help identify and return the runaways.

Despite these problems, his survey offers insights into the Valley Forge army, including the following demographic information.

**Age.** Based on the 1835 Pension Rolls, three-year army soldiers “were collectively the youngest yet seen in the Revolution,” Selesky writes. “The ages of the soldiers at Valley Forge averaged in their early twenties. New York and New England troops were relatively younger, between 20 and 22 years; Pennsylvania and New Jersey troops relatively older, between 23 and 24 years; and the Southern troops in between, at roughly 22.5 years.” But there were privates in their 50s, 60s and 70s, and some boys as young as 10, he adds. And available information suggests that greater numbers of older men enlisted as the war went on.

**Physical Characteristics.** Many Valley Forge troops ranged between 5 feet 6.5 inches tall to 5 feet 8 inches; a number were shorter, but few approached Washington’s height of 6 feet 2 inches. New England and New York troops were generally taller than their compatriots. Foreign-born troops averaged 1.5 inches shorter than those born in America.

“IT MAY NOT BE POSSIBLE TO PERFECTLY DESCRIBE THE COMMON REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIER, BUT ONE THING IS CERTAIN. WE REMAIN IN HIS DEBT.” —CHRISTOPHER GEIST

### Clues From the Valley Forge Army

The army that Washington brought to Valley Forge was the first to be composed mainly of men with lengthy enlistments. Hoping to construct at least a partial profile of that army, historian Harold E. Selesky searched through records of noncommissioned officers and privates of the Valley Forge army. His 1987 monograph, *A Demographic Survey of the Continental Army that Wintered at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1777–1778*, provides a snapshot of the Continental Army at a crucial point in its existence.

Selesky’s task was daunting: Records have been lost, damaged and scattered, and are often incomplete, untrustworthy or inconsistent. For instance, some soldiers didn’t know their birthdates, or reported them incorrectly.

Ironically, Selesky writes, “The best demographic information is contained in the lists of deserters and in the few descriptive muster rolls” scattered among other documents.

Records of soldiers’ physical traits could be deceiving, Selesky wrote: Six men in one Massachusetts unit who were described at one point as having dark complexions were later described as having light complexions. And terms such as “black complexion” did not automatically mean African-American. For example, all the Irish soldiers in one Delaware company were described as having black complexions.

**Literacy.** Apparently no one asked recruits if they could read or write. Selesky examined records such as payroll receipt books to compare the number of those who could sign their names to the total list of soldiers. About 80 percent of Northern troops could sign their names, compared with about 50 percent in the middle states and only 30 percent in Virginia.

**Occupation.** Not surprisingly, many soldiers had agricultural backgrounds, though most trades were represented. Even here, the information is unreliable. For instance, many who claimed to be farmers were probably farmhands or