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OUR  
PATRIOTS

REMEMBERING  
WINDSOR FRY

*Former Slave Fought for America's Freedom*

{ By Lena Anthony }



THINKSTOCK

**At the outset of the Revolutionary War,** soldiers signed up for 90-day enlistments. As the war progressed, enlistments stretched out to three years. For Windsor Fry (also spelled Winsor or Winzor), a former slave and laborer from East Greenwich, R.I., his Revolutionary War story starts and ends with the war itself. Fry enlisted in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment in 1775, at a time when most states prohibited the enlistment of free blacks and slaves. Over the course of his eight-year service in the Continental Army, he participated in at least 10 battles, his final being the Siege of Yorktown in 1781. In 1820, he was granted a federal pension for his service.

man,” “a man of Colour” or “mustee,” a term used to describe a person of mixed racial or ethnic descent.

These descriptions, combined with the fact that he was free several years before Thomas Fry died, have led some to speculate that Windsor was Thomas Fry’s son.

“The way that Thomas Fry referred to him as ‘my negro man’ suggests that he may have lived in the house,” said Bette Koger, a descendant of Windsor Fry and member of the General Nathanael Greene-Pettaquamscutt DAR Chapter, East Greenwich, R.I. “He was also light-skinned. We don’t have the evidence, but I suspect that Windsor might have been his son.”

### The Path to Patriot

Most of what is known about Fry can be gleaned from enlistment records, muster rolls and the pension applications he made in 1818 and 1820. But even those have discrepancies that make details about his life hard to pin down. His death on February 1, 1823, was documented; his birth was not. Enlistment and pension records, although contradictory, suggest a birthdate of sometime in the 1750s, which would have made him around 20 years old when he enlisted.

**Windsor Fry was one of among at least 5,000 African-American Patriots, from all 13 Colonies, thought to have served in the Revolutionary War.**

The earliest mention of Fry appeared in the 1773 will of Thomas Fry of East Greenwich, R.I.: “I also give unto my son Joseph my negro man named Windsor.”

Thomas Fry didn’t die until 1782, but two years after the will was written, Windsor Fry was a free man. “No record of his manumission has been found,” explained Bruce MacGunnigle, town historian for East Greenwich, R.I., in a March 2015 article in *Rhode Island Roots*, the journal of the Rhode Island Genealogy Society. “(But) to enlist as he did ... he had to be free. Although slaves had served in Colonial militias in Rhode Island, General Washington had prohibited slaves from serving in the Continental Army.”

Primary documents also raise questions about Windsor Fry’s ancestry, which is unknown. The will describes him as a “negro man,” but future documents label him an “Indian



Jerome Bridges, a park ranger at Colonial National Historical Park in Yorktown, Va., portrays Windsor Fry.

### A Lengthy Service Record

News of the battles of Lexington and Concord had reached East Greenwich by the time Windsor Fry enlisted as private in Captain Thomas Holden’s Company of Varnum’s 1st Regiment of the Rhode Island Army of Observation in May 1775, according to MacGunnigle.

Less than two months after enlisting, Fry was at the Siege of Boston, from July through December 1775. In 1776, Fry served again under Colonel James Mitchell Varnum in two different enlistments, participating in the Battle of Long Island, the Battle of Harlem Heights and the Battle of White Plains. In 1777, he fought in the Second Battle of Trenton, the Battle of Princeton and the Battle of Red Bank. The following year—alongside former slaves freed in exchange for their service—he



saw action at the Battle of Monmouth and the Battle of Rhode Island and spent time in camp at Valley Forge.

His role in this enlistment and future ones was that of a foot soldier, according to Jerome Bridges, a park ranger at Colonial National Historical Park in Yorktown, Va., and re-enactor who portrays Fry at Yorktown Battlefield. “When they weren’t fighting or drilling, he would have served as a sentry a lot of times,” he said. At Yorktown, Bridges said, Fry likely helped dig the trench line that would help enable America’s victory over the British.

After 1778, there’s a lengthy gap in Fry’s service, but that hardly reflects a period of inactivity. During that time he married Lucy Davis and had a son, Solomon. He was also caught stealing from the army. In 1780, Fry pled guilty to “Entering the Commissary’s store, stealing from thence a quantity of Beef, Candles and Rum; also for breaking open two Wind Mills and Stealing a Quantity of Meal,” according to the “General Orders of May 28, 1780,” found among the papers of George Washington.

Fry was not unique in his theft from the army. While the Continental Army promised to pay its soldiers, there wasn’t always the means to do so, and desperate men sometimes stole what they needed.

After being sentenced to death, Fry fled and was subsequently captured. Before his sentencing went through, he was pardoned by George Washington in an October 1780 letter to Colonel Christopher Greene, commander of Fry’s regiment:

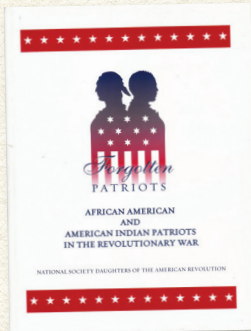
“As I never wish to inflict a punishment, especially capital, but for the sake of example, and as you seem to think the execution of Windsor Fry not so necessary upon that account . . . you have my consent to pardon him.”

While Fry’s last battle was the Siege of Yorktown in 1781, his enlistment didn’t officially end until 1783. He and Lucy lived out the rest of their years in various places in Rhode Island, including East Greenwich, where he was born, North Kingstown and Exeter.

“He did move around quite a bit, but that would have been common for a laborer,” Bridges said. “He had to go wherever the next job was, whether that was building a home, working on a farm or unloading ships.”

By the time he applied for a pension in 1818 and again in 1820, he was broke. “A laborer with no property whatsoever, Windsor testified that he was ‘much out of health & broken down with infirmities’ and that he would be dependent on charity without his pension,” MacGunnigle wrote. In 1820, he received a pension, valued at about \$8 per month.

Among the questions surrounding Fry is why he served—and why for so long? Former slaves who were freed in



Fry is one of 6,600 minority patriots included in *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War*, published by DAR.

**“In my family, we’ve always valued our strength. And I feel that strength may have come from Windsor, who fought for the entire war and lived to tell about it. I joined DAR to honor him, his strength and what he must have gone through to secure our freedom.”** – BETTE KOGER, DAR MEMBER

exchange for their service were required to serve the entire war, but as a free black man, Fry was not subject to that rule. For some reason, he chose to enlist and re-enlist numerous times.

Historian Gary Nash offers one explanation for this in *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2006): “... after the first flush of patriotism the Revolution turned into a poor man’s war. Since most black New Englanders were poor, they became targets for recruiting sergeants.”

### Honoring Their Service

Windsor Fry was one of at least 5,000 African-American Patriots, from all 13 Colonies, who are thought to have served in the Revolutionary War. On the British side, that number was closer to 100,000, after the Crown offered freedom in exchange for loyalty and service.

His name is one of 6,600 included in *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War*, a DAR guide first released as a 200-page publication in 2001 and expanded by 874 pages in 2008. The information was subsequently updated in a supplement; both are available as a free PDF download at [www.dar.org](http://www.dar.org).

The book was published primarily as a guide for historians and scholars, but it also encourages descendants of those Patriots to join the important volunteer and educational work of the DAR. The book was a starting point for Ms. Koger, who began researching Fry three years ago, with the help of MacGunnigle.

“In my family, we’ve always valued our strength,” Ms. Koger said. “And I feel that strength may have come from Windsor, who fought for the entire war and lived to tell about it. I joined DAR to honor him, his strength and what he must have gone through to secure our freedom.”