

January 30, 2010

I want to thank the Coweta Falls Chapter, the Georgia Society of the SAR and all the sponsors of today's event for inviting me to speak. I am humbled by this invitation.

It is always good and important to recognize a patriot of the Revolution by marking his (or her) grave, and placing a wreath on it. It's important to stop and consider a patriot's sacrifice, and to remember all that he did to achieve our Nation's independence, so that we might be free and our civil liberties might be secured.

Because so few black patriots have been honored as we honor Austin Dabney today, I think today's grave-marking and wreath-laying is even more special than that for other patriots. I commend the Coweta Falls Chapter and the Georgia Society for honoring Austin Dabney.

At SAR functions, we often quote Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, and rightly so. But today, I'd like to quote Whoopi Goldberg:

"Call me a jerk, call me a blowhard, but don't call me an African American. It divides us, as a nation and as a people, and it kind of annoys me. It diminishes everything I've accomplished and everything every other black person has accomplished on American soil. It means I'm not entitled to everything plain old regular Americans are entitled to.

". . . [T]he Bill of Rights is my Bill of Rights, same as anyone else's. It's my flag. It's my Constitution. It doesn't talk about some people. It talks about all people – black, white. You. Me.

". . . [S]o, no, I'm not an African American. I'm not from Africa. I'm from New York.

". . . [G]eorge Washington belongs to me. Lou Gehrig belongs to me. Jackie Robinson belongs to me. . . . [T]he amber waves of grain? Mine. I'm as American as Chevrolet.

“For centuries now, people have come to America from all over the world. We were here. . . . [W]e worked the land. We had jobs. We had property. We had families.”

Whoopi makes a very strong statement. But one thing she overlooks is that many of the black folks who were here not only had land, jobs and families, they were also patriots who helped achieve our Nation’s independence.

How many of you are familiar with Harriet Beecher Stowe? You probably know her as the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. But I’d like to tell you about something else she wrote. In 1855, William Cooper Nell wrote *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote an introduction for this history of black patriots. She wrote:

“It was not for their own land they fought, nor even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. . . . Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit.”

That was in 1855. There was not another serious, scholarly work written on the subject of black patriots in the American Revolution until 1961, more than a hundred years later, when Benjamin Quarles wrote *The Negro in the American Revolution*.

Today, we honor what Harriet Beecher Stowe described as that bravery which had peculiar beauty and merit.

Imagine for a moment that you are the commander of a company of soldiers. Now imagine that your force is arbitrarily reduced by 10%. By some accounts, perhaps 10% of the total number men who fought in the American forces – both in the Continental Army and in the various state militias – was black.

Could we have won our Revolution with 10% fewer soldiers? Could we have achieved our Independence without the effort and sacrifices of black patriots? If you want to take a hill or hold a field, you don't care what color your soldiers are, as long as they can shoot, and shoot well.

In 1961, Benjamin Quarles estimated that the total number of black patriots was about 5,000. More recent research suggests that the number could be as high as 20,000.

How many Americans know that so many black Americans fought in our Revolution? Very few. This is sad. Americans of all colors don't know their own history.

Many high school and college textbooks on the American Revolution have pictures and drawings of scenes from the Revolution. Why do we not see black faces in the crowd as General Washington addresses his troops? They were there. They served. They fought, bled and died.

This brings me to this print that I brought with me today. You probably recognize this picture of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, and you might have asked yourself, why is this picture here? It depicts an event that happened in New Jersey, and today we honor a patriot from Georgia. Let me explain.

This particular picture is an icon of the American Revolution. A minute ago, I asked why do we not see black faces in textbook pictures of the Revolution. Some of you may already know what I'm about to tell you, but I only just discovered this myself a little while ago: look at the man, sitting right in front of General Washington – he's black. Here we have the image of a black man right in the middle of an icon of the American Revolution. I believe this is as it should be.

We in the SAR, and the DAR, seek to remember and honor all those brave men and women, regardless of color, who fought and won our freedom. We seek to educate all Americans about the glorious American Revolution.

If all you know about George Washington is that he owned slaves, then I submit to you that don't know the man. He accomplished so many great and heroic things. His is a life worth studying. His is a life you can get excited about.

But in the same vein, if all you know about black Americans in the 18th century is that they were slaves, then you don't know the American people. Black Americans were not just slaves, although sadly, most of them were enslaved, including Austin Dabney. Black Americans, like white Americans, were farmers, merchants, craftsmen, shipbuilders and clergymen. Most importantly for us here today, black Americans, like white Americans, were freedom fighters. Austin Dabney was a freedom fighter.

Martin Luther King once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I would like to modify this statement somewhat: failure to honor all Americans who fought in our Revolution is a failure to really honor any of them.

American heroes come in all colors. As a people – an American people – we must all honor heroes like George Washington, and heroes like Austin Dabney.

Thank you.