

Remarks by Denise Dennis
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Founding Fathers: From Revolution to Republic
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My remarks today describe the Revolutionary War experiences of two African-American patriots who were members of my family, Gershom Prince and Bristol Budd Sampson. Fortunately, their service in the War for Independence is well documented. Indeed, much of what I am about to share with you is taken from the Revolutionary War Pension Files. Both men enlisted in the Connecticut Line of the Continental Army in 1777 and both died and are interred in northeastern Pennsylvania, where I grew up, although their deaths occurred 70 years apart. One lost his life in the Battle of Wyoming, a brutal attack known as the Wyoming Massacre. The other passed away, a very old man, surrounded by his family on his Pennsylvania farm. I've known their stories all my life and it has been exciting, over the years, to find that our family's oral history is substantiated by documentation.

Gershom Prince

Gershom Prince was born in Connecticut in 1733. Prior to the Revolutionary War, he served under Captain Robert Durkee of Connecticut in the French and Indian War (1756-1763). It is important to note that, when he served in both wars, northeastern Pennsylvania was a part of Connecticut. In 1662, under the Connecticut Charter, Great Britain's King Charles II granted land, Wyoming Valley, in what is now Pennsylvania to the colony of Connecticut. Six years later, in 1768, the Susquehanna Company met at Hartford to make arrangements for Connecticut settlements in Wyoming Valley, which led in, 1769, to the first permanent settlement there by non-indigenous Americans. However, Charles II had granted the same land to the Pennsylvania colony, not because he was duplicitous, but because the maps of America were not accurate. Between 1769-1771, colonists from Connecticut and Pennsylvania fought over their claims to Wyoming Valley in the First Yankee-Pennamite War. In 1774, Connecticut established the town of Westmoreland in the Valley and as such, sent representatives to the Connecticut legislature. When the fight for American Independence began, the colonists put aside their dispute to participate in the war. After the Revolution, though, the dispute resumed; this time, a Continental Congress Court of Arbitration intervened and decided in Pennsylvania's favor. Not pleased with this outcome, Connecticut settlers continued to come to Wyoming Valley and those already there refused to leave their homes, culminating in the Second Yankee-Pennamite War in 1784. Finally, the Pennsylvania legislature settled with the Connecticut claimants in the Compromise Act of 1799.

Gershom Prince was among the first of the Connecticut settlers to come to Wyoming Valley and help build the fort near what is now Wilkes-Barre, PA, my hometown. Wilkes-Barre was named for two members of the British Parliament who spoke on behalf of the American colonists, John Wilkes and Isaac Barré the latter of whom was severely wounded in the French and Indian War. The 4th Connecticut Line from Wyoming Valley, Westmoreland County, CT, commanded by Colonel John Durkee, contributed two independent companies and smaller detachments to the Continental Army under Captains Robert Durkee and Samuel Ransom. Gershom Prince was an aide to Captain Durkee and accompanied him on all his campaigns. The 4th Connecticut was organized at Norwich and, in January 1777, joined Washington's Army in New Jersey where they were engaged at Milstone and Bound Brook. After facing the enemy in an unsuccessful defense of Philadelphia at the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, the 4th CT spent a gruesome winter with the Connecticut regiments at Valley Forge. The conditions at Valley Forge were so dismal and horrendous that the Marquis de Lafayette was moved to write, "The unfortunate soldiers were in want of everything; they had neither coats, not hats, nor shirts, nor shoes. Their feet and legs froze until they were black and some had to be amputated." Yet, many survived the brutal elements, illness and deprivations of Valley Forge, including Captain Robert Durkee and Gershom Prince.

Having survived Valley Forge, though, they faced another deadly challenge. When, in the spring of 1778, rumors of a threatened attack on Wyoming Valley reached the camp at Valley Forge, Captains Durkee and Ransom resigned their commands in order to return to the Valley to protect their families and homes. Gershom Prince was one of a few men to accompany them as they hastened north, on horseback, to

alert the fort of the impending attack. Wyoming Valley was vulnerable because all the able-bodied men were in the Continental Army at Valley Forge. A couple months later, under an Act of Congress, June 23, 1778, Durkee and Ransom's two companies were consolidated to form one and placed under command of Lieutenant Simon Spalding. When Washington broke camp at Valley Forge in June, Spalding's company was ordered to help defend Wyoming Valley. Unfortunately, Spalding and his troops did not arrive in time.

On July 3, 1778, 360 Americans under command of Colonel Zebulon Butler faced an attack by a combined 900 enemy combatants that included 400 British and Loyalists and 500 Iroquois warriors, all under command of British Colonel John Butler. Outnumbered three-to-one, more than 227 Americans were horrifically killed, compared to only one killed and two wounded on the British side. Two-hundred Wyoming Valley Americans were scalped, others were thrown on beds of coal, and others burned alive when the fort was set ablaze. Gershom Prince, Robert Durkee and Samuel Ransom who'd traveled from Valley Forge to defend their homes, were among those killed.

On the Centennial of the Battle of Wyoming, a monument was erected on the site of the battlefield for those who lost their lives and are buried there. The inscription on the front of the Monument says,

Near this spot was fought, on the afternoon of Friday, the third day of July 1778, The Battle of Wyoming, in which a small body of patriotic Americans, chiefly the undisciplined, the youthful and the aged, spared by inefficiency from the distant ranks of the Republic, led by Col. Zebulon Butler and Col. Nathan Denison, with a courage that deserved success, boldly met and bravely fought a combined British, Tory and Indian force of thrice their number. Numerical superiority alone gave success to the invader, and widespread havoc, desolation and ruin, marked his savage and bloody footsteps through the Valley.

The inscription on the right and left side of the monument begins, "*Dulce and Decorum est Patri Mori,*" and lists the names of the slain by rank. The last name listed under the rank "Privates" is "Gershom Prince, colored."

Prince left behind a treasure, though, one that was removed from his lifeless body after the battle and preserved. When he was in the French and Indian War, Gershom Prince carved his name on the powder horn he wore around his neck. Prince was the uncle of my great-great-great-grandfather, Prince Perkins, also originally from Connecticut, and I learned about him from my father when I was a child. My father repeated our family history to me, including Gershom Prince's story, throughout the years. My great aunt told me about the powder horn and that, years before, she'd given it to the local historical society. One summer when I was home (Wilkes-Barre) from college, I decided to look for more information about Prince and went to the local library. Coincidentally, a high school classmate of mine was working at the library and recognizing him, I told him about Prince and asked for his help. He disappeared for a while and then excitedly returned with a massive, hardback volume, one of several volumes chronicling the history of Wyoming Valley. He showed me a page with a footnote about Gershom Prince at the bottom. The text on the page described Prince riding with Captains Durkee and Ransom to warn of the Tory and Iroquois attack in 1778. The footnote explained that Prince was "a Negro" and an "aide" to Durkee and included a sketch of Prince's powder horn. I immediately xeroxed the page, in case anyone doubted the veracity of Prince's service in both wars, and still have the now-faded copy.

Years later, in 1996, I was visiting Wilkes-Barre and, on impulse, decided to find out whether my aunt, who had passed away in 1980, had actually given the powder horn to the historical society. The historical society museum was directly behind the library and I'd spent many Saturday afternoons of my childhood looking at Native American arrowheads and other artifacts in the museum, but I'd never seen the powder horn. So, that April day in 1996, I was suddenly inspired to see whether or not it was there. The door to the museum was closed when I tried to enter, so I knocked on the door. A woman answered and I told her who I was and what I hoped to see. Explaining that they were closed, the woman nonetheless invited me to enter and wait for the curator who would soon return. When the curator returned, I told her everything my father and aunt had told me about Gershom Prince and asked whether the museum had

the powder horn. She nodded, a barely visible smile on her lips, and left the room. When she returned, she was wearing white gloves and carrying a box and another pair of soft, white cotton gloves, which she handed me. I put the gloves on—and she gently lifted from the box Gerhson Prince's powder horn and placed it in my hands. Although I'd known that he'd carved his name on it, I was deeply moved to see that he had also carved exquisite artwork, beautifully detailed images of trees, forts and scenes from everyday life on the white bone of the horn. His inscription, also carved on the horn, reads, **GARSHOM PRINCE HIS HORN MADE AT CROWNPOINT SEPTM. YE 3RD DAY, 1761 PRINCE+ NEGRO HIS HORN.**

I'd never doubted what my father and aunt told me about our family relative, but it was thrilling to hold the concrete evidence in my hands. When I was growing up, African Americans were less than one percent of the population of Wyoming Valley and the surrounding counties in northeastern Pennsylvania. Often, people have asked me how our family came to live there. My reply was—and is—that we were there before Wilkes-Barre (founded in 1805) was even a town. So, in spite of being in a minority position numerically, I grew up with an unshakable sense of belonging, so much so that I took it for granted. I didn't feel like a "minority" at all.

Bristol Budd Sampson

Bristol Budd Sampson enlisted in the Connecticut Line in March 1777, to serve for the duration of the war. (Many soldiers enlisted for only three years.) He was placed in Connecticut's 2nd Regiment, commanded by Colonel Charles Webb, which reported to Peekskill, New York in the summer of 1777. The 2nd Regiment left Peekskill for Whitmarsh, Pennsylvania when Washington requested more troops from his northern camps. On December 8, they met the British at Whitmarsh, 20 miles from Philadelphia, along high hills that offered an effective, natural defense. Although General Howe tried to lure Washington from this impenetrable position, he failed to do so. Instead, realizing that they were outnumbered, Washington's troops fell back from the skirmish, leaving Whitmarsh to the British. After Whitmarsh, the 2nd Regiment was detached from the 1st Brigade and attached to the 2nd Brigade under Huntington, which meant it was part of McDougall's Division, directly under Washington's command, when they entered winter quarters at Valley Forge. On December 12, the 2nd CT began the 13-mile march from Whitmarsh to Valley Forge on the west bank of the Schuylkill River. The march was delayed, however, and ended up taking nine days. After observing a day of Thanksgiving on December 18, the troops arrived in Valley Forge on December 19 unaware of the devastating winter before them.

A secret supply of goods had been stored in the village of Valley Forge, in preparation for the army's winter stay. However, the British discovered the cache of goods after the Battle of Brandywine and raided the village stealing all they could carry and burning the rest. By the time the Continental troops arrived, virtually nothing but trees and scorched earth remained. The American soldiers had nothing to eat and drink but firecakes (flour and water batter cooked on a griddle) and water, and no winter garments to cover their bodies. Temperatures that winter dropped to 20-30 degrees; and during the first six weeks, it rained or snowed for thirteen days. Anguished by the plight of his soldiers, Washington accused Congress of "little feeling for the naked and distressed soldiers. I feel superabundantly for them, and from my soul pity those miseries, which it is neither within my power to relieve or prevent."

The situation did not improve until March when General Nathanael Greene, Washington's trusted Rhode Island general, was appointed quartermaster. Through Greene's efforts, bridges and roads were improved making it possible for food and clothing to reach the needy troops. In spite of the hardships they endured, the estimated 3,000 men who perished, and although they had arrived at Valley Forge a ragged, untrained army—the troops who survived that winter emerged a well-trained army prepared to wage war against the British.

The arrival in February of Baron von Steuben, who created a system of training appropriate for the Americans, led to the transformation of the army. The first test of Washington's Von Steuben trained army came in June 1778, when they broke camp at Valley Forge. Still under Huntington's command, Bristol Budd Sampson's regiment followed the British, who had left Philadelphia on June 18, from Philadelphia to Monmouth, New Jersey. Ten days later, on June 28, the Continental Army defeated the British at Monmouth, a timely and emotionally gratifying victory for the Americans. From Monmouth, the 2nd Regiment marched with Washington to White Plains, New York. Washington called all the Continental

regiments stationed up and down the Hudson to come to White Plains, which proved to be the largest encampment of the regular troops during the war. Bristol Budd Sampson was a young man at the time and one can only imagine how he felt—looking about and knowing that he was a part of this enormous army gathered together. At White Plains, Washington assigned his regiments to winter quarters and the 2nd CT was assigned to Redding, Connecticut. From Redding, the regiment was ordered to the Highlands on the east side of the Hudson, opposite West Point.

In July 1779, Washington selected 40 to 60 men from each of his regiments to serve in the elite Light Infantry Corp. Washington placed General Anthony Wayne in command of the Light Infantry Corp, with instructions to recapture Stony Point. In the spring, the British had captured the forts at Stony Point and Verplanck's Point across from each other on the Hudson River, near West Point. These two points formed the "gateway to the Hudson."

Jutting out into the Hudson, more than a half a mile and rising 150 feet from the water, Stony Point was a formidable promontory and its having been taken by the British posed a possible threat to West Point, considered "the key to the Continent." The Light Infantry Corp was comprised of "handy and active veterans chosen for alertness, daring and military efficiency" and was composed of four regiments. Bristol Budd Sampson served in the 3rd Regiment, all Connecticut men, under Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs. Surprising the British with a bayonet attack, under cover of darkness, the Light Infantry recaptured Stony Point with barely a shot having been fired. The victory at Stony Point was significant because it demonstrated that the Americans could prevail against the vaunted British Army, which inspired the Continental Army and the American people. Historian Christopher Ward writes, "A successful attack upon British regulars in a fortified position with bayonets alone, was an achievement unparalleled up to that time."

After Stony Point, as part of the Connecticut Division, Bristol Budd Sampson spent the winter of 1779-1780 in quarters at Morristown, New Jersey, which proved to be even more severe and lacking in provisions than Valley Forge. Between February and September 1780, Sampson's Division marched from Westfield, NJ north to West Point, NY, across the Hudson to the Highlands, south to Peekskill and King's Bridge across the Hudson, south to Fort Lee, NJ and north again to Orangetown, NJ, near West Point. They were in Orangetown when they heard about Benedict Arnold's betrayal. Bristol Budd Sampson served in the Connecticut Line until it was dissolved in the summer of 1783.

In 1814, Sampson lost his sight and unable to work, petitioned for his war pension in 1818. His commanding officers and fellow soldiers from other regiments in the Connecticut Line wrote affidavits confirming Sampson's service including that in the Light Infantry Corp. Bristol Budd Sampson himself signed an affidavit in which he named the officers under whom he served in the Light Infantry Corp, including Col. Meigs. In 1821, he received his first pension payment, plus a sum payment for the years 1818-1821 when his claim was being decided. Bristol Budd Sampson married Phebe [sic] Perkins, the daughter of my great-great-great-great grandparents, Judith and Prince Perkins, free African Americans who came to Pennsylvania from Connecticut in 1793 and purchased land. He and Phebe lived with her family until, with the additional pension funds, he was able to purchase land next to his in-laws. This region of northeastern Pennsylvania, also claimed by Connecticut and about forty miles from the site of the Wyoming Massacre, wasn't settled until after the Revolutionary War and the Prince Perkins family was one of the first families to build homes there. Consequently, Bristol Budd and Phebe Perkins Sampson, like Judith and Prince Perkins, were a part of the first post-Revolution westward homesteaders.

Every six months, the Revolutionary War pensioners in Sampson's county would go to the courthouse in Montrose, Pennsylvania to receive their pensions. Then, they would gather on the lawn in front of the courthouse and reminisce about the war. A letter, written in 1869 by the son of one of the pensioners describes these gatherings and offers a brief portrait of Bristol Budd Sampson.

Among those who met at these semi-annual gathering was one Sampson, a full-blooded African who had served through the war. The silly prejudice against color found no place among these heroes. It was sufficient for them to know that a man had served under Washington to entitle him a place in their hearts. Sampson was treated as a perfect equal. His misfortune, for he was blind, increased their interest in him...

Prior to the adoption of the present Constitution of Penna [sic] in 1838, colored men were voters, a privilege that Sampson usually availed himself of. How bitter & mean that prejudice that would deprive a revolutionary veteran of the dearest privilege of freemen—the right to vote.

Often I have heard my father (Revolutionary veteran Josiah Mills)... speak of the three African Regiments in the revolutionary war ...and of the gallant & effective service they render[ed]. And in connection with this he would denounce the system of American Slavery as something abhorrent, utterly at variance with the principles he had shed his blood to maintain.

Revolutionary War veteran, Bristol Budd Sampson passed away in 1848, surrounded by his wife and children. His remains rest in the Perkins-Dennis Cemetery on the Dennis Farm in Brooklyn Township, Pennsylvania.

Knowing the stories of Gershom Prince, Bristol Budd Sampson and other African American Revolutionary War patriots benefits all Americans by reminding us of our shared heritage. Their stories tell black Americans that even during a time when black people were held in slavery, there were free African American men, true sons of liberty who, as they fought for the nation's independence, were fighting also for the freedom of their enslaved brethren. The stories of African-American patriots tell non-black Americans that African Americans contributed to achieving the freedom and way of life Americans enjoy today. Knowing my family's history has given me strength and a sense of being connected to the past and the future. It has enabled me to know my place in time. There is a ravine on the Dennis Farm that is surrounded by a grove of trees, old trees with roots deep in the earth. Knowing my family's history makes me think of those trees; I, too, have deep roots in this American land.

Denise Dennis is Founding President of *The Dennis Farm Charitable Land Trust*, which was established in 2001, for the preservation of the two-hundred year old Dennis Farm in Pennsylvania's Endless Mountains including the Prince Perkins Archeological Site, Perkins-Dennis Cemetery where Revolutionary and Civil War veterans are buried, stone walls dating back to the early 19th Century, farm house, and forest. The DFCLT mission is to develop an educational and research center on the 100 + acre site where scholars, school groups, researchers and cultural heritage tourists can visit and learn about this little-known chapter in American history, the story of several generations of a free African-American family who have been landowners in the north for two centuries and their role in American, Pennsylvania and agricultural history.