

Dabney, Austin (1760s-1830), a Georgia Revolutionary War hero born in Wake County, North Carolina, became an important symbol for a number of causes in Georgia and African-American history. While nothing is known of his early life and education, a great deal about the environment that created him as a hero and a legend merits study.

Several factors made slavery and freedom for Afro-Americans especially "peculiar" institutions in Revolutionary War Georgia. Slaves were initially prohibited when it was founded in 1733. Ethnic groups such as the European Protestants at Ebenezer, known as Salzburgers, and the Highland Scots at Darien supported this prohibition until Georgia's trustees, under extreme public pressure, finally allowed slavery in 1749. The Quakers at Wrightsborough never allowed slavery among their membership. The supporters of the American Revolution in Darien issued a declaration against slavery in 1775, although this effort was not continued after the war.

Georgia's state military had no qualms about enlisting free persons of color from outside of the state. Nathan Fry would draw a federal pension for his service first in the Georgia State Minutemen and later in the Georgia Continentals. He served under Georgia Gen. Lachlan McIntosh at Valley Forge and Yorktown. A Joseph Scipio was a private in the Fourth Georgia Continental Battalion and at least one of the Georgia Continentals killed at the Battle of Thomas Creek, Florida, in 1777 were black. Both slaves and freed men served on Georgia's continental galleys.

Efforts by the Continental Congress to encourage Georgia and South Carolina to enlist slaves in their troops, however, came to nothing. Although no offer of freedom was made to slaves as an inducement to enlist in the Georgia forces, the state of Georgia would eventually grant freedom to a slave named Harry for picking up a musket during an Indian attack against Sherrill's Fort in 1773. Harry inspired the white defenders not to give up and he shot one of the Indian leaders in the eye. David Monday was granted his freedom for his services as a drummer and lived in Savannah after the War, where he served as the same for city functions.

Opportunities for emancipation were hardly greater in the British camp. Some 200 to 300 slaves escaped from Georgia with the colonial government in 1776. Savannah fell to British forces in December 1778 due in part to help purchased from former colonial Governor Sir James Wright's slave Quamino Dolly. He did not receive emancipation for his service, however, and slaves found in the town after it fell were subsequently sold as booty. Governor Wright armed his slaves in response to a raid on his plantations in the summer of 1779. Slaves also built the fortifications that defended Savannah from a siege by French and American armies the following September and October; some of their number temporarily received arms. Blacks, Indians, and Whites who lived like Indians reportedly served among the pro British partisans such as Daniel McGirth's band but only in the last days of the Revolution did the British in Georgia create a special unit of

African-American Loyalists, the "King of England's Soldiers." They were left behind when the British evacuated Georgia in 1782. These black man and their families formed a colony in the swamps of Effingham County that was destroyed in 1787 by the Georgia militia. Similar colonies of escaped slaves would be broken up in the years that followed, including the "Negro Fort" on the Appalachicola River in 1816. Tory leader Henry Sharp of Burke County emancipated his slave George Liele (q.v.) on 12 August 1777. George founded the first black Baptist churches and would evacuate Georgia with the British army, to take his ministry to Jamaica. Disciples of Liele made this movement even more international.

Austin Dabney was a true product of these times although that fact has only been fully appreciated in modern scholarship. As a mulatto belonging to Richard Aycock, he was wounded and permanently disabled fighting for the American cause in Augusta on 25 May 1782 under a Captain Barber and Col. Elijah Clarke. With Clarke's support, the state of Georgia purchased Dabney and emancipated him in 1786. The state also, uniquely for an African-American, bestowed upon him land grants in 1784 and 1821, as well as a state pension. The United States government later took over the disability pension. Dabney attached himself to Giles Harris and later to Giles' son William in Wilkes, Elbert, Oglethorpe, and Madison counties. Austin Dabney supported himself as a small farmer, slave owner, race horse owner, and businessman before his death, by September 1830 in Pike County.

The story of Austin Dabney became notable, however, not because of his success as a freedman decades before the Civil War but because of attitudes of a later era. Former Georgia Governor George Rockingham Gilmer filled his memoirs with often unreliable tales and gossip he had heard during his long public career. In this version of Dabney's life, first given in 1851, Gilmer describes Dabney as born in Virginia, the son of a juvenile white female who was either raped by the elderly white man she lived with or by a slave. The man took her and her child, Austin Dabney, to a man named Aycock in North Carolina who later took Dabney to Georgia as a slave. Gilmer claimed that Austin, by then a brave and "stout" lad, went into the legendary battle of Kettle Creek, Georgia, on 14 February 1779, as a substitute for his owner. He was severely wounded but a white Harris family nursed him back to health. Austin Dabney remained with them. In this tale, Austin appears as a subservient member of the household and model for a patriotic, humble and grateful inferior who recognizes the obvious superiority of his white hosts. (Dabney actually supported the Harris family at least as much as they patronized him; William Harris even named a son for him.) Gilmer did mention Dabney's sacrifices to send William Harris to law school and his respectful fellowship with such legendary Georgia white leaders as Colonel Wylie Pope, Governor James Jackson and Judge John Mitchell Dooly. Gilmer also wrote of how one of the Madison County politicians who voted to grant Dabney land in 1821, at his next election, had to answer to racist voters who resented

equal treatment of a black man. Unlike many of the white heroic figures made public in Gilmer's book, however, no town or county was named for Austin Dabney. Gilmer's patronizing version of the white ideal of a loyal black man who still knew his "place" in the South's slave society and as an exception in the stereotype of African Americans in slavery Georgia would be repeated in numerous works of Georgia history. It went unchallenged until the serious documentary research by Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr. in the 1970s revealed a credible historical Austin Dabney.

Bibliography

The story of Austin Dabney as person and legend must be pieced together from the Wilkes County, Georgia, court and deed records used in conjunction with Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., "Georgia Family Lines: Harris," *Georgia Life Magazine* 2 (Winter 1975-1976): 48-49; Lizzie R. Mitchell, *History of Pike County, Georgia* (1932); George R. Gilmer, *Georgians Sketches of Some of the First Settlers of Upper Georgia* (1855); *Final Revolutionary War Pension Payment Vouchers: Georgia* (National Archives microfilm M1746, roll 2); and Austin Dabney File, File II Names, Georgia Archives, Morrow. For information on African-Americans in Revolutionary War Georgia see Kenneth Coleman, *The American Revolution in Georgia, 1763-1789* (1958); Alton Hornsby, Jr., *The Negro in Revolutionary War Georgia* (1977); Harvey H. Jackson, "'American Slavery, American Freedom' and the Revolution in the Lower South: The Case of Lachlan McIntosh," *Southern Studies* 19 (1980): 81-93.

Robert Scott Davis