

Sayer, *An accurate map of North America . . .*, 1763, detail; oval marks area of Brinch's military action in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey; dot marks area of Brinch's postwar homes in Vermont, which became a separate state in 1791.

“Poor African Slave, to liberate freemen, my tyrants.”

Narrative of Boyrereau Brinch An Enslaved African American in the Revolutionary Army, 1777-1783

1810 — EXCERPTS

Born in west Africa around 1742, Boyrereau Brinch was captured at age sixteen and taken to the Caribbean island of Barbados and sold. After fighting as an enslaved sailor on a British ship during the French and Indian War (1756-1763), he was taken by his owner to Connecticut and sold again. In 1777 he enlisted in the Connecticut militia and served in an infantry regiment until the end of the war. In 1783 he was honorably discharged and, due to his military service, emancipated from slavery. In the early 1800s Brinch narrated his memoirs to Benjamin Prentiss, an anti-slavery journalist, who published *The Blind African Slave* in 1810. We enter his narrative in the early 1770s with the death of his slaveholder, a widow in Connecticut.

When this lady died I descended like real estate in fee simple to her son Benjamin Stiles, Esq[ui]re. About four years after her death, her two sons, Benjamin and David, were drafted to fight in the revolution. I also entered the banners of freedom. Alas! Poor African Slave, to liberate freemen, my tyrants. I had contemplated going to Barbados to avenge myself and my country, in which I justified myself by Sampson's prayer, when he prayed God to give him strength that he might avenge himself upon the Philistines, and God gave him the strength he prayed for.

I descended like real estate in fee simple, i.e., I became the property of her son. Brinch had been owned by a widow, Mary Stiles, who taught him how to read.

entered the banners of freedom, i.e., joined the American army to fight for the colonists' freedom from Britain (Brinch is not saying that he had been freed from slavery.)

going to Barbados to avenge myself, i.e., joining the British army to fight the Americans who had continued to enslave him in Connecticut

I went into Capt. [Samuel] Granger's company, from hence I was drafted into Capt. [Samuel] Barker's company of light infantry, as they wanted [lacked] six-foot men. I then wanted but a quarter of an inch of being 6 feet 3 inches. We marched to Frog Plain, from there to Second Hill between Reading and Ridgold. On the Spring we came to Pauncludg, there to Salem. General Worcester commanded the British under the command of General Howe, who attacked us. We beat them back; the fight was continued all day, and the victory was sometime doubtful. From thence we marched to White Plains [New York], I devoted myself to study, making some philosophical observations on vegetation &c. [etc.]

1777,
Connecticut

1778,
Connecticut
& New York

From White Plains, we marched to Fort Montgomery [New York, on the Hudson River north of White Plains] at which place we remained until June. From thence we proceeded to Mud-Fort [perhaps near Fort Ann, further north on the Hudson River], where we encamped until August.

In the latter part of the month of August [1777] the Fort was attacked, and after every exertion we could possibly make, we were obliged to surrender to superior force; and we retreated to Kingsbridge. Soon after our arrival at Kingsbridge, New York [City] was evacuated [by the American army], and we entered the city [Kingsbridge] under the command of Col. Owin from Rhode Island.

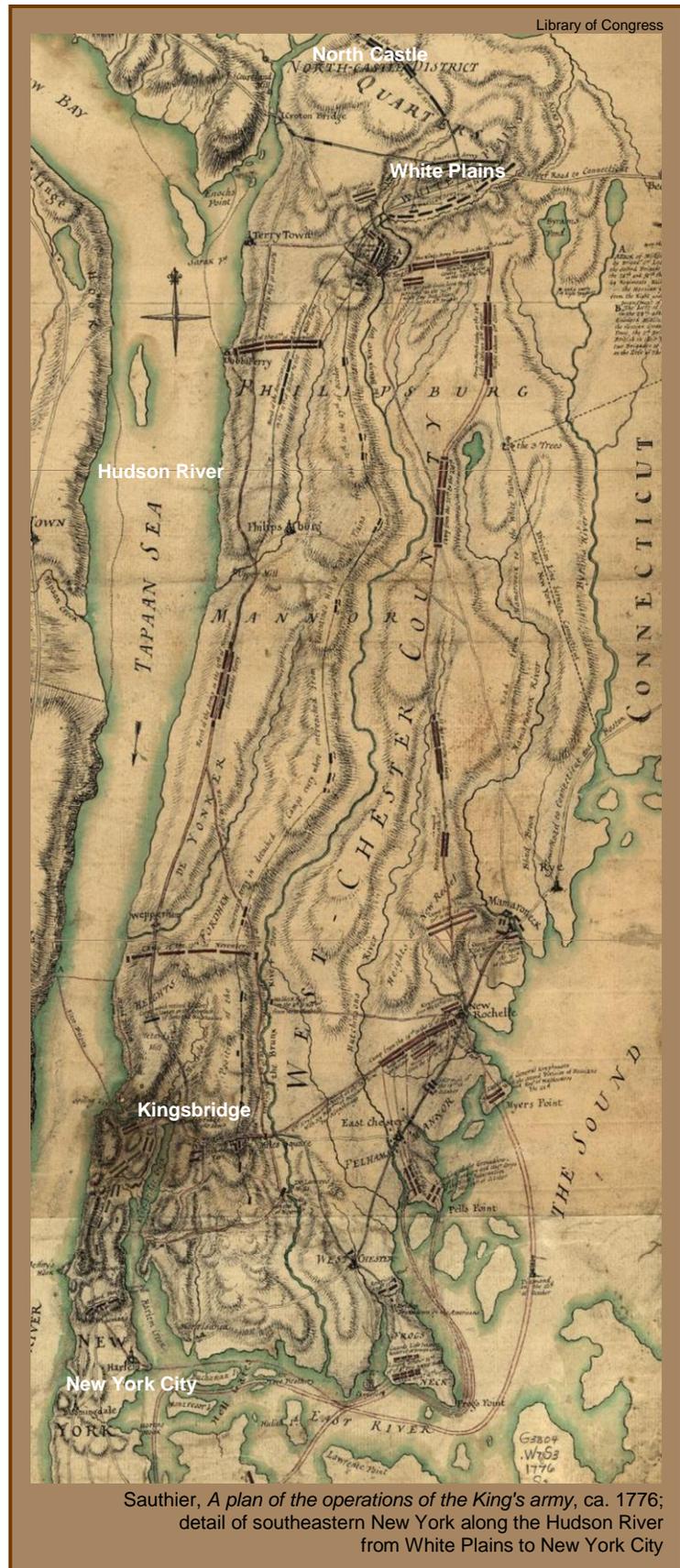
However, previous to the evacuation of New York, I was one of a hundred selected for the purpose of plundering a certain British Store [storage facility], which was completed without the loss of a single man — but with the gain of seven loads of excellent Provisions.

We were overtaken by the British after we had marched about a mile towards North Castle. The party that pursued us were 60 light dragoons [soldiers on horseback], whom we saluted so warmly with a well aimed fire that they were obliged to return for additional force. They again overtook us about 3 miles from New York, but as we had also some new forces, they thought most proper to return without an engagement.

We then proceeded to North Castle uninterrupted, where we continued about 2 months. From thence we marched to New Windsor [New York], where we spent the remainder of the season. From thence we marched to West Point [New York] and took up winter quarters. . . .

Nothing of consequence took place that related to me till spring, when we moved to Hackensack in the Jerseys [see map, p. 4]. Soon after our arrival there, the enemy stole some cattle from our lines. Capt. Granger with twenty chosen men was sent in pursuit of them, with orders to go about two miles to a place called Hackensack-four-corners. I was one of the number, but when we arrived at the destined place, we discovered that they had passed with the cattle. One Ahiel Bradley, a sergeant in the company, said if myself and one Adam Waggonor would accompany him, he would go and find them, as he believed that they were driven to a certain meadow back from the road, which meadow he was acquainted with.

The captain consented and we pursued our course upon the track to a pasture fronting the meadow into which we discovered they had been driven. We



Sauthier, *A plan of the operations of the King's army, ca. 1776; detail of southeastern New York along the Hudson River from White Plains to New York City*

came to a small hill or rise of land over which they must have passed. This rise being covered with bushes, it was thought prudent that I should wait upon the hither side of the hill while they went over and examined into the fact whether the cattle were actually in the meadow or not, and at the same time to keep a look out for the enemy.

While I stood there anxiously waiting for their return, I suddenly discovered a man riding up to me not more than eight rods distant on full speed with a pistol in his hand and ordered me to lay down my arms [weapons]. But not being so instructed by my officers you may well suppose that I did not. At first I thought he was a Jerseyman and was attempting to fool me, as they had played some such pranks before upon some of the soldiers belonging to our line — therefore in return I demanded to whom I was to surrender and by what authority he demanded it. He said I must surrender to him who demanded me in the name of the King his majesty of Great Britain. I then plainly told him that neither him or his King's majesty would get my arms unless he took them by force. He immediately cocked his pistol and fired. I fell flat upon the ground in order to dodge his ball and did so effectually do it that he missed me. I rose; he drew his sword and rode up to me so quick that I had no time to take aim before he struck my gun barrel with his cutlass and cut it almost one third off — also cut off the bone of my middle finger on my hand. As he struck the horse jumped before he could wheel upon me again. Altho' my gun barrel was cut, I fired and killed him; as he fell I caught his horse and sword. He was a British light horseman in disguise. I mounted immediately and that instant discovered four men on horseback approaching me from different directions. I fled, passed one man just before I came to a stone wall. Both of our horses were upon the full run. He fired and missed me. My horse leaped the wall like a deer; they all pursued me.

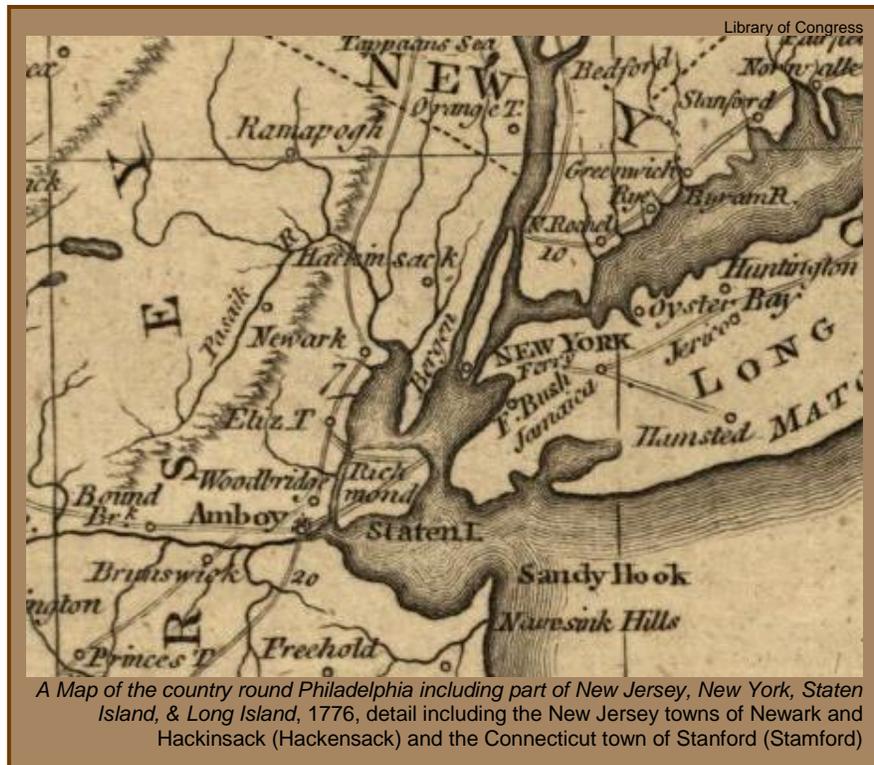
one rod =
5.5 yards

When we got into the road, they were joined by many more, and all with swords in hand pursued me in full career. I drove my horse as fast as possible, stabbed him with my sword and gun, kicked my heels in his side, but having no spurs and not being so good a horseman they gained upon me. I looked forward and saw my Capt. in full view, almost a mile distant. This encouraged me, and the long shanked negro soldier with a leather cap mounted on an elegant English gelding light horse, made all whistle again. When I came in about twenty or thirty rods, I heard the Captain say, “there come one of our leather caps,

and it is Jeffrey. Reserve your fire so as not to kill him. However the men fired and three balls cut my garments, one struck my coat sleeve, the next hit my bayonet belt, and the third went through the back side of my leather-cap. They were so close upon me, that the same fire killed four of the British and five horses and wounded some more. I did not stop for this salute but pulled on for head quarters. When our men fired, the enemy were within two or three jumps of me, but being so handsomely saluted upon surprise, as our men were concealed from their view, they made the best retreat possible.



I made no halt until I arrived within our Camp. When I dismounted, tied my horse and went to set up my gun, I found I could not open my hand which was the first time that I discovered that I was wounded. As slight fear and precipitation had turned me almost as white as my fellow soldiers. In consequence of my wounds, I was unfit for duty again for almost three months. But after all the poor simple Negro was cheated out of his horse, as I sold horse, saddle and bridle, holsters, pistols and sword, to Col. Roger Sherman for his contract of two hundred and fifty dollars, who thought proper never to pay the same. Yet I felt more gratitude towards the horse than regret for the loss of him, as he with the assistance of divine providence saved my life.



And here I will observe, that I can give no other reason why the enemy did not fire upon me, only I presume they chose to take me alive, which they had full faith in, as they when our men fired upon them were fast approaching me — and what caused me to form this opinion, I had been one of the standing sentry [guard] upon the outposts for some time, therefore I presume they concluded that I would acquaint them with the state of our army. Perhaps the soldiers thought I might be sold by them and enrich their coffers, as these mercenary beings seem rather more inclined to deal in human flesh and blood than in fighting.

I belonged to one Capt. Baker's company when the attack was made upon us at Hackensack [New Jersey]. I was on the flank and the charge was made there; we gave them a warmer salute and lost many brave Yankee-boys. Our Battalion was charged by their light horse [lightly armed soldiers on horseback], and we beat them off with our bayonets.

After this battle, we heard that the enemy were making their way to Stamford [Stamford, Connecticut]. We marched there immediately and arrived before them. A party marched down into some meadows to watch their motion; on discovering their superior force, we fired upon them and ran off fully believing,

“That he who fights and runs away,
May live to fight another day—¹

We concealed ourselves behind a stone wall for some minutes. They lost sight of us but continued firing for some time. As we were passing over a small rise of ground, several balls whistled by us, and what was peculiarly diverting to us, one Calob Nicholas dodged a bullet after it had passed us for above 5 seconds. We ran to the fort at Stamford but the enemy had gotten possession; we then took again to our heels. We then retreated to Salem; from thence we marched to West Point [New York], where we remained until September. From thence we went to Horseneck [New York] — where we remained until

¹ Old maxim dating from medieval England, often repeated in various forms.

winter, frequently searching about the adjacent country. Finally, I was in the battles at Cambridge, White Plains, Monmouth, Princeton, Newark, Frog's Point, Horseneck where I had a ball pass through my knapsack. All which battles the reader can obtain a more perfect account of in history than I can give. At last we returned to West Point and were discharged [1783], as the war was over. Thus was I, a slave for five years fighting for liberty.

After we were disbanded, I returned to my old master at Woodbury [Connecticut], with whom I lived one year, my services in the American war having emancipated me from further slavery and from being bartered or sold. My master consented that I might go where I pleased and seek my fortune. Hearing flattering accounts of the new state of Vermont, I left Woodbury and travelled as far as the town of Lenox in Massachusetts, where for the first time I made a bargain as a freeman for labor. I let [hired] myself to a Mr. Elisha Orsborn for one month at the price of five dollars. When I had fulfilled this contract, I travelled to the town of Poltney in Vermont. There again I let myself to a Mr. Abiel Parker for the sum of thirteen pounds ten shillings, for six months. Here I enjoyed the pleasures of a freeman; my food was sweet, my labor pleasure: and one bright gleam of life seemed to shine upon me.

When the American Revolution ended in 1783, Brinch was honorably discharged with a badge of merit. For his military service he was also emancipated, as were most enslaved African Americans in the revolutionary forces. He moved to Vermont, bought land, married, and had several children.

When Congress authorized pensions for war veterans in 1818, Brace applied for his pension of eight dollars a month. Because he had enlisted under the name of Jeffrey Stiles, it took three years to validate his claim. Brinch won his pension in 1821, which helped him live a less impoverished life until his death six years later in April 1827. In the obituary printed in the Poultney, Vermont, newspaper, "Old Jeff" was honored for his revolutionary service and his ability to recite entire chapters of the Bible from memory. "He had for many years been totally blind," the paper added, "yet his mental powers appeared to be hardly impaired."²

In 1810 Brinch had narrated his life experiences to a local lawyer and abolitionist, Benjamin Prentiss, who wrote and published *The Blind African Slave*. Little note was made of Brinch's narrative until it was published online in 2001 by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library (see Documenting the American South at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/menu.html). Three years later an extensively annotated edition of Brinch's narrative was published by Kari J. Winter, a professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Here I enjoyed the pleasures of a freeman; my food was sweet, my labor pleasure: and one bright gleam of life seemed to shine upon me.

² Kari J. Winter, ed., *The Blind African Slave, Or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), pp. 67-69, including the quotation from the *Northern Spectator*, Poultney, Vermont, 9 May 1827.