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THE BLACK HESSIANS: NEGROES RECRUITED BY THE HESSIANS IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND OTHER COLONIES

GEORGE FENWICK JONES*

While investigating the military records of the Hessian State Archives in Marburg¹ for information concerning Col. Friedrich von Porbeck, the victor at Springhill Redoubt in the Battle of Savannah on 9 October 1779,² I was struck by the name Bossum, one of the colonel's Hessian soldiers. The name stood out oddly against the many Johann Müllers and Heinrich Schmidts, being but a single name and certainly not a German one. However, because the Hessians seem genetically unable to distinguish between *p* and *b* (Porbeck's name often appears as Borbeck, and he wrote of General Bulasky's attack near Gibb's blanton), I soon surmised that the soldier in question might have been named Possum. This assumption was justified when it was revealed that Bossum was recruited at Ogeechee, Georgia; and it was fully confirmed when the spelling appeared as Possum in an entry which will be discussed later. Why this man was called Possum we do not know. Did he squint? Did he steal chicken eggs? Or did he "play possum" when work was to be done? It was soon disclosed that Possum was not the only black to serve with the Hessians, even though, to my knowledge, this fact has been ignored by most if not all American historians.³

In the Marburg records alone I found some hundred and fifteen servicemen designated as Neegers, Negroes, or Moors; and it is evident

*Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Maryland.

¹ I am indebted to Dr. Hans Philippi and the other officials of the Hessian State Archives. My research there was generously supported by the German Academic Exchange Service, and my trip to Europe was covered by a grant from the U. S. National Endowment for the Humanities.

² See George F. Jones "A Note on the Victor at Springhill Redoubt," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 44 (1979): 377-379.

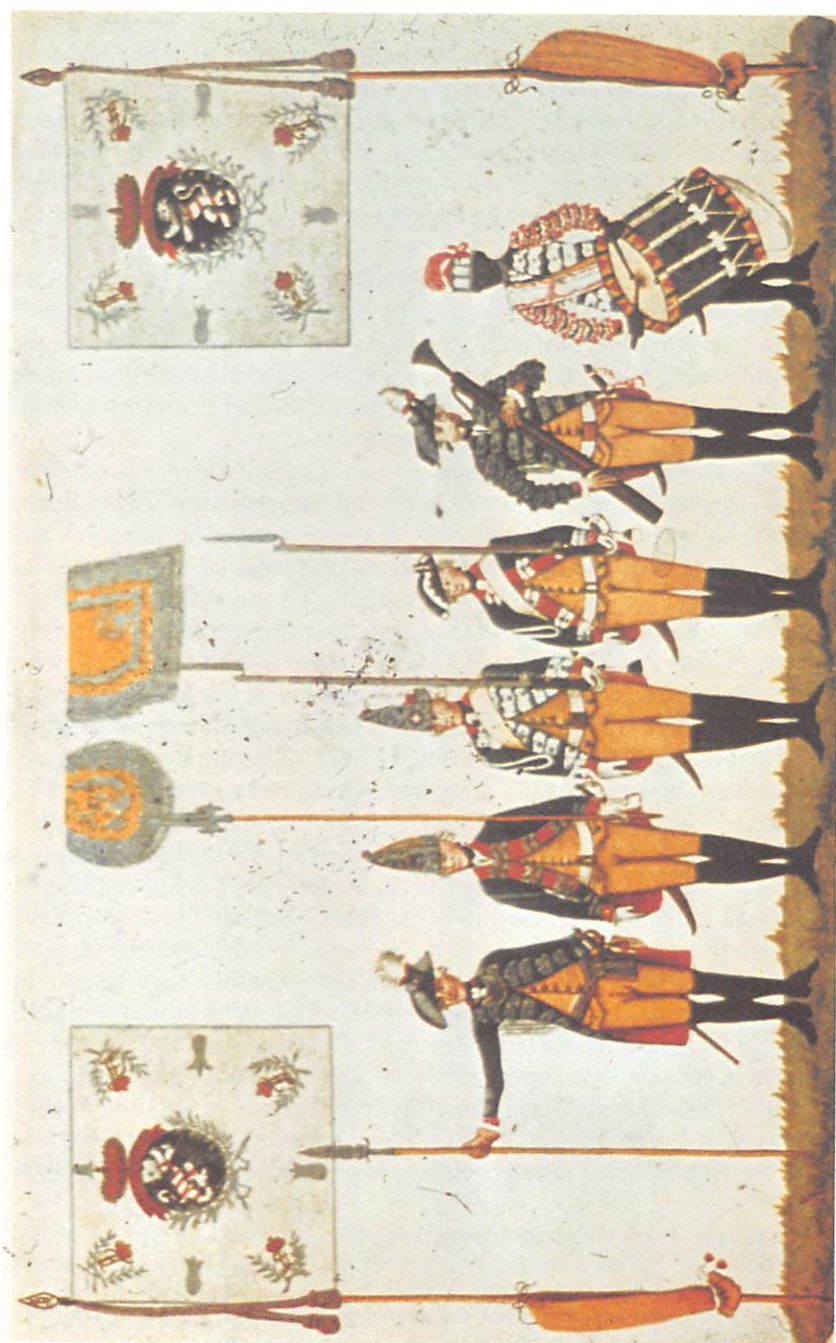
³ No mention is made of Black Hessians in Rodney Atwood, *The Hessians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961) had devoted only seven lines to the subject (p. 147). The present article was written in Marburg during July-August 1980. Since then a brief article, also using the term "Black Hessian" but based only on printed English-language sources, has appeared: Elliott W. Hoffman, "Black Hessians: American Blacks as German Soldiers," *Negro History Bulletin* 44 (1981): 81-82, 91.

not only that many company clerks were color blind but also that many records have been lost. Nothing is said about the color of the fifer William Rockwell, who enlisted in 1777, but this becomes obvious when we learn that he came from Guinea in Africa. It is difficult to identify many blacks serving with the Hessians because their names are often replaced by their German equivalents, especially in the case of Christian names, the only names borne by many of these blacks. This was then the normal practice, just as it is still permissible for us to turn the names of German rulers such as Friedrich, Heinrich, and Wilhelm into Frederick, Henry, and William. The Christian names of the blacks in Hessian lists can usually, but not always, be recognized: those recorded as Johann, Ludwig, Printz, Wilhelm, and Karl were nearly always John, Lewis, Prince, William, and Charles;⁴ but this does not tell us precisely what the individual called himself. Heinrich could have been Henry or Harry, Jacob and Jacques could have been Jack, Jacob, Jake, James, or Jim, and Jean and Jann could have been either John or Jean. Semm and Scheck are attempts to render Sam and Jack (or Jacques). On the other hand, one can only guess at names like Debbenje and Heggen.

Family names too are sometimes nebulous. Kuppert is probably Cooper, and Hemton is probably Hampton. It is hard to recognize the English names lurking behind Deutes and Suesser, both of which are Germanized beyond recognition, unless the latter is a translation of the name Sweet. The name Hunden also sounds suspect, as do the names Prontorf and Cochvil, the latter of which could have been Coqueville, since the first name, Hector, was more popular among French-speaking than among English-speaking colonists. Goethe seems a most unlikely name for an American black, unless some Hessian officer had already read Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which had been the rage since its publication in 1774. It is most likely that many blacks had no last names until the recruiting officers assigned them for the sake of convenience. The name Richard Dick suggests that the bearer was sometimes called Dick and sometimes Richard, thereby leading the recruiters to think he had two names; and the same was probably true of John Jack.

Confusion as to first names also occurred in the case of Hessian troops: the Hessian drummer Geis was recorded as Philip Geis on 24 June 1780, yet one month later he was recorded as Wilhelm Geis. Perhaps

⁴ Whereas Karl Thomas of Charleston had probably been called Charles, Carl James of Ebenezer may really have been baptized Carl, since Ebenezer was a purely German-speaking community in which masters stood as godparents to their slaves, who had to learn German if they wished to enter the kingdom of heaven, the means to salvation being dispensed only in Luther's language.



Private Archives of Dr. Hans Blackwenn

A Black Hessian serving in Hesse after the Revolution (1789)

he had several Christian names, as many Germans did then and still do. If his name was, say, Philip Georg Wilhelm Heinrich Geis, he may well have forgotten which Christian name he had used when first enlisting. This was especially true of the old nobility, who sported many names;⁵ and it could have held of a black who was not quite sure whether his real name was Dick or Richard. Phonetic spellings like Scheck and Tschu resulted from the illiteracy of the bearers, who has to leave the spelling to the German scribe. Caesar Tschu, who appears elsewhere as Caesar Jews, owes his peculiar spelling to the Germans' inability to pronounce an English "j" sound.⁶ Perhaps we see the beginnings of "black English" when the scribes write Steeban, Deban, and Mostown for Stephen, Devon, and Morristown. We should remember that most of these black recruits were slaves who had never been baptized and therefore had no real legal names, being considered mere chattel.

Sometimes a conjectured identity can be confirmed by another entry. Drummer Pappe must have been the same man as Peter Pope, since both were listed as drummer in the Second Company of the Landgrave Regiment. It is even possible that George of Ogeechee, who enlisted as a private in the Second Company of the Wissenbach Regiment on 26 June 1780 and was reassigned as drummer on the following 21 August, was the same as the George of Georgia, aged seventeen, who was recruited as drummer by the Third Company of the same regiment on the following 16 December. Sometimes the situation was more enigmatic. For example, Wallace (Wallis) of South Carolina, who was recruited as drummer on 26 June 1780, was reassigned as musketeer on 21 August when George Jr. was recruited as drummer in the same company. Then, on 9 March 1781, an otherwise unmentioned musketeer named Stewart was reassigned as drummer to replace our previously mentioned Possum, who had been dismissed. This suggests, but does not prove, that Stewart and Wallace were the same person. William Rockwell and William Roessel were obviously the same person, since they concur in first name, place of origin, unit, and function. The same is true of Jacob Thon of Deban in American and Jacob Thon of Long Island.

Merts is revealed elsewhere to be the same as March, as one might guess from the fact that März was the current German spelling of that month; and, as we have seen, Caesar Tschu's name was more recognizable to an Englishman when written Jews, which may have been a

⁵ This explains the hopeless confusion in the archives between the entries for the two Hessian officers Karl Ludwig August Heino, Freiherr von Münchhausen and Jakob Ludolf Karl, Freiherr von Münchhausen, both of Oldendorf.

⁶ Americans who served in Europe during World War II will remember the daily broadcast beginning, "This is Chermayn callink."

corruption of Jules. Quite often a cross-reference is our only clue that an entry refers to a black. There is no racial information about the above-mentioned Peter Pope of Virginia who enlisted as a drummer in October 1779; but he must have been black if he was the Pope of Virginia who enlisted as *Profos* (military policeman) in the same company two years later, for this time his color was mentioned.

The drummer John (Jean) Winder of Charleston would appear to have been black if for no other reasons than that most drummers recruited by the Hessians in America were black and that Charleston had a large black population.⁷ It is also to be noted that the monthly reports do not always indicate when sickness, capture, and desertion began but merely state that the person in question was being carried on the rolls as sick, captured, or deserted at the time the report was submitted.⁸ It is also to be remembered that some recruits may have enlisted fraudulently, giving false names, ages, or domiciles, as we shall see in the case of Jacques from the West Indies.

Because many documents are lacking and because the surviving ones sometimes fail to identify blacks as such, this account cannot be complete. Instead it will merely furnish a number of typical examples that should suffice to give a vivid picture of the duties performed by blacks in Hessian service. Although many stones are missing from this mosaic and some are no doubt erroneously placed, a general outline should still emerge. Because documenting each individual fact would cause an excess of footnotes, the reader is referred to the twenty-nine regimental diaries and rosters in which they are found.⁹

It may interest the reader to know where most of the black Hessians came from. Of those whose origins are given, the greater number came from the original thirteen mainland colonies, while five came from

⁷ The following drummers were surely black, even if not so designated: Henry Thomson and Paul Robert of Johns Island, Marcus of Charleston, John Steven of James Island, James Anthony of S. C., Johnny and Sam of Portsmouth, Va., and Isaac Springfield of Va. If these and others were added to this study, it would be longer but no more conclusive.

⁸ This occurred whenever reports reached the regiment long after the event, as when invalided soliders died in distant hospitals, or when missing soldiers were subsequently reported as captured. For example, Christian Marcu was carried on Col. von Porbeck's rolls as a prisoner of war until May 1783, when it was learned that he had joined the Americans in Philadelphia in Dec. 1782.

⁹ Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg, 12 *Kriegsministerium* 8807, 8810, 8814, 8815, 8824, 8834, 8836A, 8836B, 8836C, 8837A, 8837B, 8838, 8839, 8839A, 8843, 8848, 8857, 8868, 8869, 8878; SR 313, 471, 555, 556, 557A, 816, 817, 818, 832. This research has been greatly helped by the *Hetrina* volumes, which guided me to the pertinent sources: *Hessische Truppen im amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg [Hetrina]*, ed. Inge Auerbach and Otto Fröhlich (Marburg 1976).

Africa (three of them from Guinea), three from the West Indies (one from Antigua and one from Peters), and one from Lisbon.¹⁰ Of the colonies, South Carolina supplied by far the largest contingent, which is not surprising when we consider that the coastal area occupied by the British and Hessians was predominantly black, the white yeoman farmers having been almost entirely displaced by large-scale planters using only Negro labor.¹¹ Besides that, the blacks were better adjusted to the subtropical climate, which kept most of the European troops in the lazaretto much of the time. Although they too suffered from malaria, their tropical origins prepared them to withstand it better.

Of the some forty-seven recruits from South Carolina, twenty-eight claimed Charleston as their home, while four claimed Johns Island and one each claimed Ponpon, James Island, and Stono Ferry. The Simon who gave his home as Ponpon¹² when enlisting in August 1777 was surely the Wilhelm Simon who joined the same company four years later from Charleston. Perhaps his service in the big city had caused him to assume a family name. Some of these recruits gave their homes merely as "Carolina," yet we are safe in assuming that most of them meant South Carolina, since the Hessians seem to have recruited few blacks in North Carolina, where they served for a shorter period.¹³

Virginia followed with fourteen recruits, three of them from Portsmouth, three from Suffolk County, and one each from Norfolk, Gloucester, Nemsey, and New Kent County. New York came next with eleven: three from Long Island, two from Brookline Ferry, one from Flatbush, one from Fishkill (Viskill), and one from Deban (Devon?). New Jersey came next with nine: three from Morristown, and one each from Bordington (Burlington), Fraxton, Imblistown, Middlebush, Princeton, and Perth Amboy. Georgia followed with six: in addition to the previously

¹⁰ From Africa: Anthony; from Senegal: John Wilkinson; from Guinea: William Rockwell, John Hunter, and Peter; from the West Indies: George Adam, Jacques, Pompey Prontorf, Caesar Tschu, John Robinson (Peters), and William Morrison (Antigua); from Lisbon: Anthony Made.

¹¹ In 1740 John Martin Boltzius, the German pastor at Ebenezer, could say that many S. C. plantations had no whites at all, being managed by American-born slaves.

¹² Because of the Hessian confusion between *p* and *b* and possibly influenced by the French word *bonbon* (candy), the scribe wrote Bombon.

¹³ Exceptions may have been Thomas Rottger (Rodger?), 22 years old, who enlisted from N. C. as a drummer in the Bose Regiment in April 1778, and deserted during the same month, and Peter Schott (Scott?), who was recruited by the Dittfurth Regiment on 29 July 1780. In neither case is the race indicated. Whereas there is no evidence of enlistments in N. C., Johann Ewald describes a horde of black camp followers with Cornwallis' troops as they retreated through that state. Johann Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, trans. J. P. Tustin (New Haven, 1979), p. 305. The manuscript of this fascinating diary has been donated to the Citadel, Charleston.

mentioned Possum and George Jr. of Ogeechee and Carl James of Ebenezer, we find Peter and Peterson of Savannah and also George and Philip, whose towns are not specified. The George Adam who enlisted in December 1779 as being from the West Indies was listed as being from Savannah when he deserted in January 1783. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania each provided two recruits, and Connecticut and Florida each one. Unidentified are the home states of Priester (Mansfield in North America) and Prom (China in America).

Age is also an interesting factor. Since most of the black Hessians were drummers, they tended to be very young, mostly in their teens or early twenties. Caesar Ferguson of Newport and Peter of Savannah were only eleven, London of Charleston was twelve, and March of Charleston and Isaac (home not given) were thirteen; but even tender youth did not excuse misbehavior, as we shall see in the sad case of Jacob of Flatbush. Whereas most black drummers and even musketeers and teamsters were young, John Hunter of Guinea had reached the ripe age of fifty-two when he changed from drummer to teamster on 12 April 1783.

Slavery was, of course, a major factor in black recruitment. Though seldom stated in the Hessian records, many of the blacks, certainly most of those recruited in the Southern colonies, had been slaves. This was the case with Possum. After capturing Savannah, Lt. Col. Archibald Campbell gave Possum to Col. von Porbeck, who had just joined the British garrison at Savannah, believing him to have been the property of a rebel. However, the commanding officer, Lt. Col. Alured Clarke, assured them that the lad had belonged to an orphan who was no longer present, so, at Clarke's requisition, Possum was dismissed and apparently given his freedom.

A certain Jacques had given his home as Selvicent in France when he enlisted in March 1777, but he was dismissed on 4 April of that year when it was revealed that he was not a free man. Nevertheless, during the following month he was recruited as a musketeer and served as such until being reassigned as drummer on 1 October of the same year. John (Jann) of Brookline Ferry, who enlisted in April 1778, was "reclaimed" on 8 May of that year and dismissed from the service; and the same was true of Isaac, aged thirteen, who enlisted in July 1778 but was reclaimed on the 31st of the next month. This suggests that they were runaway slaves who had enlisted but had been found and repossessed by their masters, no doubt with fitting punishment. Since the Hessians were supposedly protecting His Royal Majesty's loyal subjects, they could not confiscate their property, as we have seen in the case of Possum.

The dangers, rigors, and boredom of military life can best be borne in company, so it is not surprising that many black Hessians enlisted

with one or more companions. Possum of Ogeechee and Daniel of South Carolina both enlisted in May 1780 in Savannah, where they were joined on the 26th of the following month by Wallace of South Carolina, George Sr. of South Carolina, and George of Ogeechee. Because of their different domiciles, George Sr. and George Jr. do not appear to have been father and son, but merely George the older and George the younger, a distinction made for accuracy in submitting reports, since neither had a last name. Surprisingly, the older was a drummer and the younger a private. Paul Robert, John Benn, and Henry Thomson enlisted together on 16 May 1780 at Johns Island; and Harry and Printz seem to have enlisted together in Charleston in December 1780. Comradeship is also revealed by desertions: Jack Johnson of Charleston and James of Suffolk deserted together on 16 June 1780, and wagonhand John of Virginia and wagon-hand Prom of China deserted together on 27 July 1782.

It is immediately apparent that the largest number of black Hessians were drummers. Their relative status among the troops is hard to evaluate: the drummer could be a child, as we have seen in the case of the eleven and twelve year olds, while the musketeer had to be a grown man. The Hessian regiments had strict minimum size requirements, but exceptions could be made for young recruits who gave promise of growing larger with time.¹⁴ Once a drummer had reached the required stature, he could transfer to another duty. Wallace, who had enlisted as a drummer, was reassigned as musketeer on 21 August 1780; and George Jr., who had enlisted as a private (and therefore presumably a musketeer),¹⁵ was reassigned as a drummer. Anyone who has been in military service knows that assignments sometimes exist only on paper: the soldier serves in the most needed capacity but officially occupies any available billet while waiting for the right one to become vacant.

Frequently, when a black drummer joined a unit, a Hessian drummer was reassigned as a private or a musketeer. For example, Reinhard Amend became a musketeer on 15 May 1782 when Caesar Ferguson and Coeton Hampton were recruited as drummers, and numerous other examples could be cited.¹⁶ On the company commander's part it was

¹⁴ Draft lists in Hessia included all young men "not under 5 feet 6 inches, or 5 feet 4 inches if still growing." Atwood, *Hessians*, p. 21.

¹⁵ The word *Gemeiner* (private) seems to have included *Fusilier*, *Musquetier*, and *Grenadier*.

¹⁶ Philip Gais was reassigned as private when John Peter was appointed drummer on 24 June 1780, the drummer Philip Vonderwege became a musketeer when displaced by John Robinson, and Rohr was reassigned as musketeer when George of Georgia enrolled as drummer in Dec. 1781. When Wallace and George Jr. were recruited as drummers on 26 June 1780, Ernst Schaaf and Johann Graus were reassigned as musketeers; and, when London and George joined a month later, Löffler and Kring were reassigned as musketeers.

practical to take on a youngster so as to free an able-bodied man for combat. However, it should be remembered that not every applicant was qualified to be a drummer: Jos Sante(s) of Norfolk was dismissed on 1 June 1780 because of poor sight and bad behavior; and Jacques of Charleston, who had enlisted on 30 September 1780, was dismissed within the month "because he is not suited as a drummer" (*weilen er zum Tambour nicht schickt*).

Despite the dangers involved, it would seem that the service as musketeer was the most glamorous. As we have seen, the would-be Frenchman Jacques was recruited the second time in that capacity, and Wallace also serve thus for a short time. Later, when Gen. Knyphausen, the commander of all Hessians in America, refused Wallace's request to be reassigned as musketeer, the latter was dismissed from the service. Perhaps he refused to serve in any other role, or perhaps, like Jacques, he was no longer found adequate as a drummer. Cornelius McKenzie of Middle Bank, N. J., served over three years as a grenadier. Isaac Williams began serving as a grenadier in May 1777, but there is no record of how long he served.

Whereas the majority of black Hessians were drummers, a good number were *Knechte* (servants or laborers). Some of these were further designated as *Packknechte* (sumpters, packhands) and *Wagenknechte* (carters, teamsters), and it is not always possible to ascertain what duties the *Knecht* performed. No doubt, in time of need, such as while preparing for Count D'Estaing's attack on Savannah, all hands pitched in to dig trenches. The "Moor" John Jack replaced Christoph Schmidt as *Packknecht* on 1 March 1780; and the drummer John Hunter was reassigned as *Wagenknecht* on 16 April 1783 after more than three years as a drummer. Sam of Virginia enlisted for the first time, at the age of fourteen, as a drummer; but three years later, having increased in age and size, he reenlisted in the same regiment as a *Knecht*.

One usually thinks of drummers and labor troops as non-combatants; although drummers accompanied their troops through shot and shell, they are usually depicted carrying their huge drums but no arms. This seems to be contradicted, as we shall see, in reports of drummers who take French leave with full arms. Both drummers and labor troops were exposed to artillery fire, especially during sieges such as those at Savannah and Yorktown; yet the records I have searched show no blacks killed in action and only one wounded.¹⁷ Some scholars have suggested that the older musketeers refrained from aiming at the youthful drummers; but, even if that were so, shells and rockets were no respecters of

¹⁷ Cornwallis of S. C. was wounded during the siege of Savannah in Oct. 1779.

person. Perhaps the drummers' casualties were low because they followed their units, as Lt. Peter Böhm, himself a Hessian officer, has assured me. The drummer Goethe of New York was drowned on 16 June 1777 while unloading a boat.

Whereas these reports mention no black combat deaths, they do show that even blacks were susceptible to disease.¹⁸ Thomas of Long Island, thirty years old, died of sickness on 20 April 1778 after five months in service; and Prince Lewis, twenty-six years old, died in Burlington on 28 March 1777 after little more than a year. Paul Robert of Johns Island died of sickness in Charleston on 17 June 1780 after only one month of service; Champer Ederson of Rhode Island, twenty-three years old, died on 16 July 1782 after three years of service. Drummer Joab Robert of Johns Island, who died of sickness on 17 June 1780, was surely black, since all the white people had fled before the British and Hessians occupied the island.

The Hessians lost more black troops through capture than through death or sickness. The Knyphausen Regiment lost the most: in April 1782 it listed as missing¹⁹ Jack of South Carolina, John Jacob of Fraxton, James of Portsmouth, Jack Johnson of Charleston, and Tony of Imblis-town. The same regiment had already lost James of Suffolk, Tschu (Jews), and Pompy Prontorf, who were listed as captured on the monthly lists from June 1779, October 1781, and November 1781 respectively. Prontorf was redeemed from the Rebels to serve with the Leib-Compagnie. The Prince Successor Regiment was still missing Jean Rode and Thomas of Hampton in August of 1782; for on their way to captivity in Frederick, Md., in June of that year they had been forcefully seized by the local inhabitants. We have no clue whether they had been recognized as renegade slaves, or whether they were being impressed into Rebel service.

It is, of course, not always possible to determine whether a man was really captured or whether he cooperated with his captors, as could have been the case of Jean Rode and Thomas, who may have been glad to be released from captivity. The Vacant Company lost six black drummers from the Rebel jail in Philadelphia, these being the very men listed above as missing from the Knyphausen Regiment. The Rebels took James of Portsmouth and Jack of South Carolina on 9 October 1780 and put them on a privateer, and they did the same with John Jacob of Fraxton on 8

¹⁸ Quarles, *Negro in the Revolution* pp. 29-30, shows that many blacks died of small pox.

¹⁹ Although they have just appeared on the rolls as captured, they may have been captured earlier, possibly the previous year at Yorktown.

March 1782 and with Tony of Imblistown, Jack Johnson of Charleston, and James of Suffolk on 20 March of that year.

The Hessians lost far more blacks to desertion than to death, disease, and capture combined. Desertion was a moral issue with the actual Hessians, who had been taught to submit to the divinely ordained authority of their rulers, which, if bad, was God's just punishment for their sins. Nevertheless, such religious scruples and the military pride and loyalty inculcated in the troops did not prevent all Hessians from deserting to the Americans, especially when the latter offered them lands and livestock.²⁰ Other Germans in Hessian service felt fewer scruples,²¹ especially if they had been wrongfully impressed into service. The Americans in Hessian service, both white and black, had even less compunction about deserting and were restrained, if at all, only by fear of firing squad or flogging.

Deserters who voluntarily returned to their posts seem to have been forgiven, if we may judge from the case of the drummer Jack of South Carolina, who deserted from Major von Ende's company in Col. von Porbeck's regiment on 10 February 1782 but returned to duty three months later. Jacob of Flatbush, who first enlisted at the age of thirteen, was caught as a deserter at the age of fifteen and was forced to run the gauntlet of two hundred men on two successive days, after which he enrolled again.²² Four years later, on 25 May 1783, he deserted from Greenwich, this time with uniform and equipment but without arms.

One desertion became a trans-Atlantic cause célèbre. A certain Lt. Col. Hans Heinrich Eitel wrote on 2 May 1782 to His Most Illustrious Landgrave to complain that a drummer named Dick, whom he had wished to try for desertion, had already been tried and punished by the detached artillery unit in which he was serving. Eitel was not annoyed that the drummer had been punished, but only that the detached regiment had infringed upon the corps' right of jurisdiction, for he feared that it might set a precedent. A scribble at the bottom of the page,

²⁰ Col. von Porbeck lost nineteen men to desertion in March 1782 immediately after Gov. John Martin of Georgia issued a proclamation in German offering 200 acres of land, a good cow, and a brood sow to any Hessian who would change sides. See George F. Jones, "Georgia's German-language Proclamation: An Appeal to the Hessians to Desert," *Reports of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland*, forthcoming.

²¹ At least a third of the deserters from von Porbeck's regiment were not Hessians but natives of places as far away as Alsace, Bavaria, Bohemia, Brandenburg, Cologne, Mainz, the Palatinate, Pomerania, Saarbrücken, Saxony, Silesia, Speyer, Sweden, Waldeck, and Worms.

²² George Seume, a Saxon theological student who had been illegally impressed by Hessian recruiters, wrote a harrowing account of a gauntlet he had witnessed when a guard helped some prisoners escape before going to America.

apparently the draft for a reply, declares that the subordinate unit had acted properly in order to save time in view of the great distance from the corps. Despite the probability of being apprehended and the certainty of dire punishment if apprehended,²³ the disaffected soldiers persisted in attempting desertion, particularly after the outcome of the war was assured. Paul Peter deserted successfully on 15 December 1782 in Charleston and was therefore better off than his fellow drummer Jack of Carolina, who remained with his unit and froze to death on a march from New Utrecht to Jamaica Town on Long Island.

Like many other deserters, some of the black Hessians absconded with their uniforms and accoutrements (*montierung*). Samuel of South Carolina deserted with uniform and equipment, but without his arms, on 7 December 1782, as did George Adam of Savannah; and Jacob of Flatbush also wore his uniform when he deserted the second time in October 1783. London of Charleston, although only twelve years old, deserted on 26 October 1782 with both uniform and arms, and wagon-hand Morris had deserted already on 26 May 1781 with full armament, thus furnishing evidence that drummers and labor troops were armed and could therefore be used in combat.

Toward the end of the war many men deserted with their equipment and full arms; and this suggests that they intended to join the enemy, who were in need of well armed and accoutered men. Also, loyal service on the American side, even if belated, exculpated those who had served the enemy. Whereas most of the deserters left their sentry posts, some, like John of South Carolina on 14 February 1783, deserted from their quarters, which was more dangerous. Sometimes a trooper deserted so soon that he seems to have enlisted only for the enlistment bounty and uniform: the nineteen-year-old drummer John of Brookline on Long Island enlisted on 1 August 1783 and deserted twenty-eight days later. Of the hundred and fifteen blacks investigated for this study, twenty-four deserted, yet this percentage is scarcely higher than that of their European comrades in arms.

Despite this apparently high desertion rate, many black soldiers served out their time loyally. On 19 January 1783 the following wagon-hands were dismissed after four years of service: Prince of Charleston, William Simon of Charleston, Peter of Guinea, and Philip of South Carolina. James of Charleston was dismissed at the same time after one year of service. Jacob Williams of St. Augustine served as *Knecht* for four years, and Cornelius McKentire served as a grenadier for three. The

²³ To prevent desertion, Savannah was closely patrolled by the Royal Militia, consisting of "Moors" and Creek Indians, who shot and scalped many would-be deserters. Jones, "Georgia's German-language Proclamation."

following drummers were dismissed after the following periods of service: after four years, William Simon of Ponpon, John Jacob of Fraxton, Robert Philip and George Prince of South Carolina; after three years, Jack of Carolina, Jack Johnson of Charleston, March of Charleston, John Caligula of Johns Island, and Tony of Imblistown; after two years, Pompy Prontorf of the West Indies and Wallace of South Carolina; after one year, William James and Thomas Suesser of Charleston and Harry of South Carolina. Titus of Charleston served until January 1783, but we do not know when he began his service. This would suggest that South Carolina and New Jersey produced the most loyal recruits. Some, like Jack of Charleston, George William of Jamaica Town, and James of Suffolk, were dismissed after very brief service, yet it is still possible that they had fulfilled their commitments. In any case, the fact that the Hessian commanders continued recruiting blacks until the very end²⁴ proves that they were, by and large, pleased with their performance.

This investigation has answered some questions, mostly questions that have never been posed, such as: Were there any black Hessians? How many were there, from where did they come, and in what capacities did they serve? However, it has actually posed far more questions than it has answered. The records give only bare facts, dates, and statistics as of the time at which they were written. They tell us little about the men involved, nothing about their motives for enlisting, their thoughts or impressions while serving, or their future fates. These men left no diaries or letters as so many of their European fellow sufferers did, so we must use our own suppositions to fill in the details. Why did the drummer Jack return to duty in Savannah three months after deserting? Had he deserted in order to receive the promised hundred acres, cow, and brood sow, only to discover that these were not for men of color? Or had he not actually escaped the carefully guarded city but just gone underground among his people, vainly hoping to find a route of escape?

It is unlikely that any of the men or boys we have discussed enlisted out of loyalty to His Gracious Britannic Majesty, for in that case they could just as easily have joined an English-speaking unit. Some may have welcomed Hessian service as an escape from slavery, other may have found it the only employment available when their masters had fled and their plantations had been devastated.²⁵ Some of the youngsters may

²⁴ Thomas Dück of Charleston, aged 15, was recruited in Nov. 1783 after hostilities had ended.

²⁵ In the journal of the Hessian Grenadier Battalion Platte for 1780, Carl Bauer mentions the great number of blacks who joined the British after the capture of Charleston either for lack of food or to escape their masters. Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg, 12 *Kriegsministerium* I B a 16, pp. 291-292.

have been attracted by the gaudy Hessian uniforms, in which they must have cut a fine figure. Besides that, the Hessian pay, furnished by the British crown, was relatively high; and British currency was sounder than the continentals with which the Congress paid its own ragged troops.²⁶

But even more inviting than these financial benefits may have been the tolerant attitude of the Hessians, who had not been schooled in racial prejudice.²⁷ Nowhere in the Hessian reports and letters do we find any supercilious or condescending attitudes towards the blacks, and we may assume that the common Hessian soldier judged the negro by his performance rather than by his color. Few if any Hessians had ever seen a black before coming to America, except for Caspar, the negro among the Kings who follow the star to Bethlehem in the Hessian Christmas Play. This king, usually the most sumptuously costumed, approaches the Christ Child with the words, "I am a king from the land of the Moors. The sun has burned me so black." (*Ich bin ein König aus Mohrenland, die Sonne hat mich schwarz gebrannt.*) It is possible that this association with the Moorish king caused Col. von Porbeck and his fellow Hessians to call all negroes Mohren; yet it is to be remembered that that term had long been used of the black musicians in the Prussian army. The first of Prussia's many black musicians was Hassan the Moor, christened Christian Gottlieb, who attained honorable status, married a lord mayor's daughter, and died in 1690 as court trumpeter of Duke Hans Adolf of Schleswig-Holstein. Frederick William, the "Soldier King," was so fond of black musicians that he allowed his foreign policy to be influenced by the party desiring to continue and expand Brandenburg's commercial ventures on the west coast of Africa. Even though the commercial undertaking failed and the colonies were sold to the Dutch, the Soldier King continued to receive his black musicians.²⁸

One might ask why there were so many black drummers but so few black fifiers or oboists, since many of the Moorish musicians in the

²⁶ The poverty of the American troops is well described by the Hessian officer Johann Ewald, who served throughout the Revolution. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, pp. 340-341.

²⁷ In the journal mentioned in note 25, Bauer gives a compassionate description of the pitiable life of the slaves on the rice plantations in S. C. Capt. Andreas Wiederholdt even believed the black the mental equal of the white. M. D. Learned and C. Grosse, *Tagebuch des Capt. Wiederholdt, America Germanica IV* (1902), p. 51 Lt. Peter Böhm has supplied me with a song showing the Hessian soldiers' compassion for the blacks: "Es traf bloss eine grosse Zahl / Von Negeren bei uns ein, / Doch ohne Kleidung, ohne Brod / Sind sie vergnügt mit Reis. / Der Schwarze kennet keine Not, / Weil er vom Glück nichts weiss."

²⁸ M. Rischmann, "Mohren als Spielleute und Musiker in der preussischen Armee" *Zeitschrift Für Heereskunde und Uniformkunde* (Juli, Aug., Sept. 1936), pp. 82-84.

Prussian army had played the oboe. During the nineteen-thirties the Germans were particularly fond of Negro jazz clarinet and saxophone players; and we may assume that the Hessians in America also enjoyed negro rhythms when played on woodwinds. Lt. Peter Böhm has suggested the most logical explanation: the Hessian regiments employed fewer oboists, who were found only in one company of the regiment while drummers were found in all companies, the ratio being six to sixteen. According to our statistics, however, blacks did not fill this quota: possibly there were enough skillful German woodwind players, whereas no Europeans could compete with the African drummers.²⁹

Atavism may have played a role in the Africans' skill with the drum: the drum as a martial musical instrument was introduced to Europe by blacks from the Sahara. The ancient Greeks had attacked in phalanxes and the Romans had attacked as maniples; but the Germanic warriors had not kept step, and they and their medieval descendants fought individually as an armed rabble, each man trying to outdo his comrades to win personal glory. Such was the army of King Alphonso VI of Castile when he rode out to meet the Almoravids, who had come to the aid of the hard-pressed Moslems of Spain. Then, on that fateful day at Zallaka in 1086, the dusky Almoravids advanced in step to the deafening rumble of drums, which dismayed the Christian knights and panicked the Christian horses; and Alphonso's reconquista was halted.

Eventually, all European armies saw the advantage of advancing in unison; and, by the time of Jean Martinet and the Great Elector of Brandenburg, armies spent long hours in close order drill to the beat of the drum, until the individual was totally integrated into the military machine. It was precisely this kind of concerted action that General von Steuben tried to inculcate into his ill-shod troops at Valley Forge. For such tactics, the drum was an indispensable weapon, and drummers were in high demand. It was not difficult for a black youth endowed with rhythm to find employment.³⁰

Also unanswered in our sources is what became of the black Hessians after they deserted or were dismissed. How many of them fought later for the Rebels, and in what way? How long did the black prisoners shanghaied from the Rebel jail at Philadelphia serve on shipboard? How

²⁹ In contrast to eighty-three drummers, I have found only three fifers: Penn of Charleston, William Rockwell of Guinea, and Jacob Thon of Deban. John Stevens of James Island, enlisted as a fifer but became a drummer two years later.

³⁰ Many also served on the British side. According to James W. St.G. Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves' War for Independence" *Historical Reflections* II (1975), p. 58, nearly every Loyalist regiment had black drummers. Walker (pp. 51-67) convincingly shows that most blacks were not fighting for national independence, as Quarles might lead some to believe.

many died in action? Were any captured and impressed into British service? And what happened to Possum, who touched off our investigation? Did he evacuate Savannah with the British and accompany them to St. Augustine, the West Indies, or a Northern colony? Or did his young master return and claim him? Or was he among those who accompanied their units to Hussia? Some thirty-one black Hessians are said to have accompanied their units to Europe and been baptized with German names; but many of these soon sickened and died, mostly of consumption. One prospered, married well, and had the gracious Landgrave himself as sponsor at his child's baptism; another died and was dissected in the anatomy theatre of the Collegium Carolinum at Cassel, proving to the astonished witnesses that under his black skin he was just like a white man.³¹

³¹ Zolldirektor i. R. Woring, "Mohren als Musiker und Spielleute" *Zeitschrift Für Heereskunde und Uniformkunde* (Jan., Feb., März 1937), p. 27. There is little reason to hope that most of the black Hessians fared any better than other blacks, whose shameful treatment is described by Mary Beth Norton in "The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution" *The Journal of Negro History* 58 (1973): 402-426.