Race and Rhetoric in Revolutionary Charleston

My Research
I examined the divergent rhetoric that British loyalists, Hessian soldiers, and American Patriots used to describe Blacks during the Revolutionary War in South Carolina. It was necessary and important to study the rhetoric these groups used in order to compensate for the lack of documents that we have written by Black people at this time. I argue that Loyalists utilized a rhetoric of utility and service to describe Black Carolinians. John Cruden was a South Carolina Loyalist tasked with dividing up and administering seized confiscated lands and property for Lord Cornwallis, the British commander. Cruden’s rhetoric of blacks’ potential utility changed to a language of necessity as he faced scarce resources and military demands. Black Loyalists also adopted the language of utility in their post-war petitions to the British government, in which they outlined their brave service and heavy sacrifices. The Hessians, however, approached the subject of Blacks in South Carolina quite differently. For Johann Ewald, this took the form of a complete silence on the subject. This silence is glaring. There are obvious instances where he could have mentioned the black majority in the low country: while he described the ethnic demographics of South Carolina, he made no mention of Blacks; similarly, he left slaves out of his discussion of confiscated property. Johann Hinrichs, on the other hand, employs a vocabulary of autonomy and choice when describing black Carolinians, particularly when he told of a planned slave insurrection that planters quelled. Finally, the Patriots from outside South Carolina questioned and challenged common narratives surrounding slavery. Walter Finney, from Pennsylvania, for example questioned slavery from an economic perspective, objecting to class politics in South Carolina. Ebenezer Hazard, on the other hand, used an absolute moralist rhetoric of that prefigured abolitionist arguments. This reveals how nuanced and differing not only this discourse were, but also how those discourses were informed by thoughts and conceptions of race.

Methods
This study began with a question: how did different types of participants in the American Revolution describe enslaved Black Americans. I began with a preliminary reading of significant scholarship that has shaped the study of Black individuals in the Revolutionary War. After reading those seminal works, I narrowed my focus geographically to South Carolina. Once focused on South Carolina, I began to shift through primary source documents such as letters and journals. As I started to find useful pieces of information in primary sources, I continued to sift through more scholarship, which gave me more ideas and primary sources to examine.

Areas for Future Research
In terms of areas for future research, I have been continuing my work from the summer in a research seminar with Dr. Ruddiman. I have added a significant amount of additional scholarship which has bolstered my understanding of historiographic issues surrounding the Revolutionary War. Furthermore, there are more primary sources that I have examined including South Carolina newspapers and additional British documents.

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