

OPINION

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AMERICAN HEROES

A monument without the chains, or an emancipator

Standing side-by-side with slave masters in an improbable union, free and enslaved African Americans drove independence with no less zeal than foreign allies. Many were rewarded with freedom, pensions and bounty lands, which they used to make America better.



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They passed on an unquenchable hunger for liberty and a spiritual arsenal for democracy. They are deserving of the

highest recognition, which is considerably more than they have received so far. The National Liberty Memorial could be constructed on the Mall by July 4, 2026, as a permanent legacy of the 250th anniversary of the nation.

At least 10,000 served on the American side in the Revolutionary War. Six thousand names are connected to 25 states and hundreds of communities, including 600 from Alexandria and Richlands County to Virginia Beach. Tens of thousands fled plantations. Some performed patriotic acts or simply sought a fleeting taste of liberty.

Given its divisive past and growing mindfulness, Virginia ought to eagerly embrace the chance to contribute a share of the building costs. Almost every district of the General Assembly (138 of 140) is shown on our maps and charts to be witnesses to the history.

It may be inconceivable to many why they would risk the little they had to advance the cause of oppressors. But they saw something in it for themselves that depended on their capacity for forgiveness. Each generation renewed the alliance. Whenever democracy and their gains were threatened, they responded, no matter the level of brutality they were resisting at home.

Returning from World War I, Black soldiers faced the same racial hierarchy and disrespect as before. They remained undeterred, choosing to fight for countries that had kidnapped



AP FILE

The Emancipation Memorial in Washington's Lincoln Park depicts a freed slave kneeling at the feet of President Abraham Lincoln. Some members of Congress have called for its removal.

and colonized their ancestors. Twenty years later, they would fight in World War II when fascism threatened the incomplete rights they had earned over three centuries.

Despite believing that African Americans were more property than humans, James Madison, a catalyst for Jim Crow laws, advocated for their recruitment in exchange for freedom. James Robinson, though, a veteran of both the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War, explains that he was cheated out of freedom twice. Following his service at Yorktown, he was thrashed and forced to relinquish his uniform and medals upon his arrival at a plantation in Mississippi.

During his "seasoning," he descended from human being and American hero to property. When he sought the help of President Franklin Pierce for his pension request, he received this answer, "I was nothing but goods and chattels, like a horse or a sheep." He never received a pension. But at 115 years old, he had outlived his tormenters and become a preacher in Detroit.

Despite what they conceived and achieved, many Americans prefer to view them as victims and passive recipients of freedom, not

engineers driving their own destiny. The actions of 1776's Black patriots, especially Pvt. Robinson, were designated of the highest significance by the U.S. Congress in 1988. At the time, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial was 26 years away, and the African American Civil War Memorial was over a decade in the future. There had been periodic talks about an African American history museum since the early 1900s.

The Mary McCleod Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park, near the U.S. Capitol, was added in 1974 to the Emancipation Statue dedicated in 1876. It depicts Ms. Bethune, an educator, presenting a scroll to children while President Abraham Lincoln strikes the chains of a kneeling slave. Standing across from one another, the statues appear to instruct in a lie about how freedom arrived. They weren't just picking cotton and waiting for a benevolent emancipator.

African Americans received the cold shoulder at the 1876 Centennial Celebration of the Revolution in Philadelphia, and the 1976 Commission nearly entirely ignored their participation. The commemoration of July 4, 2026, is fast approaching. Will the presidentially appointed U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission choose to perpetuate the kneeling slave or affirm this unifying origin story?

Unsettling replacement emancipation statues are appearing in the Caribbean and the U.S. By depicting African Americans as half-naked, indigent and unchained, they give observers reason to believe that they are now the ones in chains. A half dozen members of Congress want Emancipation Statue removed from Lincoln Park.

Frederick Douglass said in 1876, "What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man."

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