

The Search for Nero Hawley

A FAMILY SEEKS A TANGIBLE LINK
TO A BLACK PATRIOT ANCESTOR.

BY HUGH B. PRICE

ON A CRYSTALLINE SATURDAY LAST OCTOBER, I drove to Trumbull, Connecticut, a bucolic town north of Bridgeport, to reconnect with my ancestral roots. Mind you, this was not a grueling pilgrimage but a scenic excursion during the peak of the fall foliage season.

Why Trumbull? My mother has traced her lineage as far back as the American Revolution. An archivist, she has also been trained to track down ancestors. Her mother, Cora, was a Hawley from Connecticut. Nero Hawley, who was Cora's great-great-grandfather, lived in Trumbull, known back then as North Stratford. Born a slave in 1742, he was persuaded by the promise of freedom, and a signing bonus, to enlist on April 20, 1777, in the 2nd Connecticut Regiment. At the time, the 36-year-old Nero belonged to a sawmill owner named Daniel Hawley; his wife, Peg, was a servant of Rev. James Beebe, with whom the couple lived. Peg was expecting their sixth child when Nero signed up, apparently with the encouragement of Reverend Beebe. Sixteen other blacks from Nero's hometown also enlisted.

Nero Hawley fought the redcoats at Whitmarsh, Pennsylvania; Monmouth, New Jersey; and Stony Point, New York. A scout, he joined other starving and ragtag troops who camped at Valley Forge during the brutal winter of 1777-78 as a member of the 2nd Regiment under the command of Gen. George Washington. Due to incompetence and graft, critically needed food and uniforms were delayed or never arrived. As Gail Buckley recounts in her 2001 book, *American Patriots*, conditions at Valley Forge were so horrific that as many as 4,000 soldiers went barefoot and seminaked in the snow and bitter cold.

Nero earned an honorable discharge in April 1781, and at age 41 he was emancipated on November 4, 1782, by his master, Daniel Hawley. The couple remained in North Stratford, where they raised their seven children. Blessed with an entrepreneurial spirit, Nero bought some land laden with clay and set up shop manufacturing bricks. His property also included nearly 40 acres of woodlands, from which he cut timber to sell.

When I was growing up, family genealogy made little impression on me. Mom told us about Nero, but I used to joke that her real goal in ferreting out his story was to become the first black woman admitted to the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was amusing to contemplate such an outcome and the acute heartburn it was bound to cause the ladies of the DAR; after all, in 1939 the organization had barred the renowned black soprano Marian Anderson from singing at Constitution Hall, the prestigious Washington, D.C., concert venue it owned.

Until fairly recently, the phenomenon of black Revolutionary War soldiers received scant attention. In *American Patriots*, Buckley describes the heroism and sacrifice of blacks who fought in that conflict. Some 5,000 of them served under General Washington. Before I read Buckley's book, I didn't know that by 1779 roughly one in seven members of Washington's brave army was black. Indeed, that fact prompted the historian Thomas Fleming to observe that the Continental Line was "more integrated than any American force except the armies that fought in the Vietnam and Gulf wars." That so many black soldiers had taken up arms in the founding of our country wasn't mentioned in any grade school, high school, or college class I sat through.

In the 1970s my mother and her elder sister, Violet Schuster Royster, teamed up to try to fortify the family's oral history of Nero with written proof. They visited the Trumbull Historical Society to peruse its records. Mom tells me the clerk there was startled when the two black women showed up to inquire about one of Trumbull's favorite sons. When they initially inspected Nero's file, they noted that he was listed as white. On a subsequent visit several months later, the notation had been changed to Negro.

During their detective work, Mom and Vi made the acquaintance of the founding president of the Trumbull Historical Society, a retired banker named Merrill Beach. Even before meeting them, Beach had become fascinated by Nero's story and had

The house in Trumbull, Connecticut, where Nero Hawley, the author's ancestor, once lived.

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actually begun researching a book about him, to be titled *From Valley Forge to Freedom: A Story of a Black Patriot*.

Nero Hawley died on January 30, 1817, at the age of 75. After his death Peg attended the Church of Christ in Trumbull and lived in town until her death on July 26, 1833, at 90. The remarkable longevity of Mom, her mother, and the two of Mom's 10 siblings who lived well into their nineties (one brother missed by only a year) must be Peg's gift to her progeny.

Today Nero's gravesite is a featured stop on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, located at Riverside Cemetery, just off Daniel's Farm Road in Trumbull. The clapboard

nection. Taken with my story, the owner of the house, Bill Feller, invited me in.

Bill and his wife, Michele, live there with Michele's mother, Paulette Guion, whose family has owned the property since the 1920s. Bill led me through the two-story dwelling. It was like being in a museum. The rooms on the first floor had the original exposed beams and low ceilings dating back to when people generally were much shorter. The furnishings suited the early American origins of the house.

During the visit, I asked Bill whether he'd heard any rumors about the ghost of Nero Hawley. As a youngster, my relatives used to regale us with such a tale, which I dismissed

as pure fantasy designed to spook kids. Yet Merrill Beach had also come upon a mention of a ghost during his research. It seems that in the late 1960s, a couple lived in the house with their two children. Here is Beach's account of the episode, in *From Valley Forge to Freedom*:

"It was in the spring of 1968 at two o'clock in the morning that the housewife, attending one of her children in the back bedroom over the kitchen, was startled to see a ghostlike black man in a grayish blue uniform of a soldier standing in the doorway. She was apprehensive. He was reassuring as he said, 'Have no fear, I will do no harm.' She

called to her husband who was sleeping in their front bedroom. At that moment the ghost disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared."

Not only did Bill Feller know all about Nero's ghost, he told me that on at least three occasions he'd seen a female ghost standing near the window in the master bedroom. His wife added a convincing note of verification when she said that while she hadn't spotted this ghost herself, she could vouch for her husband's agitated state each



An unnamed black man aims a pistol at British soldiers in this painting by William Ramney depicting the Battle of Cowpens, which took place in South Carolina in 1781. By the war's end, thousands of black men had joined the fight.

house at 49 Daniels Farm Road, where Nero lived with his master Daniel Hawley in the mid-1700s, still stands. In fact, as I discovered last fall, it's in good shape and is still occupied—very much so.

That afternoon, I stood at the edge of the lawn snapping photos of the former Hawley house. When a car pulled into the driveway, the driver gave me a quizzical look, clearly curious as to why I was photographing his home. I strode over to introduce myself and explain my ancestral con-



The door in the Hawley house where a ghost is said to have been seen.

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time he told her he'd just seen it. He hadn't been able to discern the ethnicity of the ghost or the vintage of its clothes, he said, because the overall image was hazy and shrouded in white.

The experience of traipsing through Nero's former dwelling place that Saturday afternoon left me feeling much the way I do when strolling among ancient ruins in Europe and Morocco. I had entered the rooms and trod the soil where my ancestor walked more than two centuries earlier. Although I've generally scoffed at the idea of ghosts, the sightings over the years by people who struck me as credible convinced me at the very least to suspend my disbelief.

When Merrill Beach's book on Nero was published in 1975, my family and I joined other Hawley descendants for an autograph reception at the Trumbull Historical Society. We were each given a copy of the book, along with a brick from Nero's kiln, unearthed during the excavation for a state road.

Two decades later, in February 1997, my wife, Marilyn, and I attended the opening reception at Glenn Horowitz Bookseller in New York City for an exhibition titled "Against the Tide: African Americana/1711-1987." The intriguing collection ran the gamut from historical documents and manuscripts to first editions of novels written by African-Americans. Since Mom is an archivist, we purchased a copy of the thick catalogue of the collection, and I shipped it to her the following day. She called within hours of receiving it to ask whether I realized what was in the collection. I confessed that I hadn't even opened the volume. In great

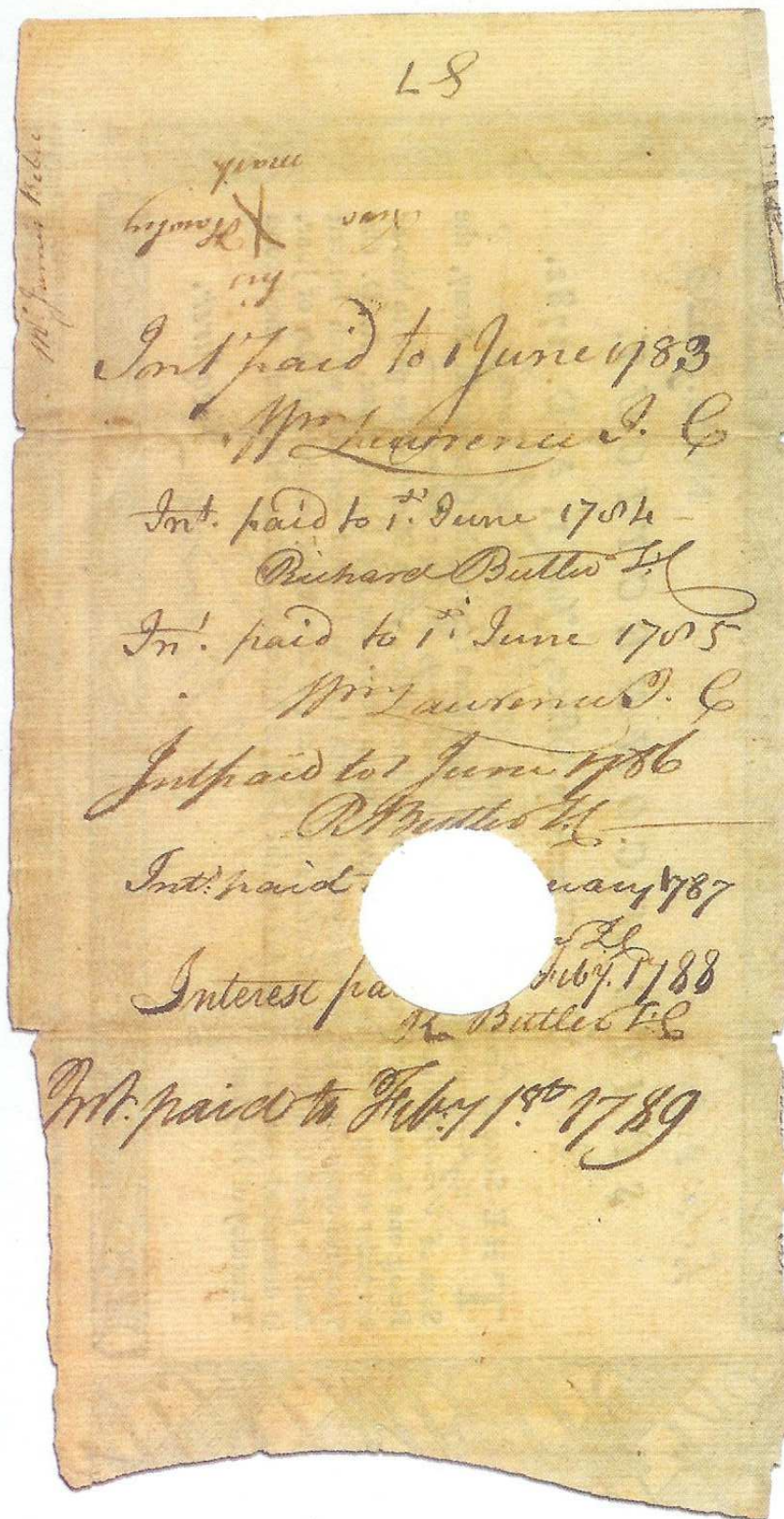
excitement, Mom told me that it contained the description of an original document signed by Nero Hawley in 1782.

At that moment, I silently vowed to try to obtain it for her. What could be a more fitting reward for her lifelong quest to hunt down information on our ancestor? The next day I called the gallery owner to ask about the document. He replied that it was owned by a collector who surely wouldn't want to part with it. I asked the gallery owner to inquire on my behalf. He called a while later to tell me his hunch had been confirmed: no sale. Now that I was hot on the trail of tangible proof of Nero's existence, I desperately tried to pull rank by explaining that I headed the National Urban League, one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious civil rights organizations. Still no sale!

WHEN REASON FAILED, I RESORTED to emotion. From the collector's perspective, I pleaded, this document probably represented little more than one prized artifact among many. Yet it meant everything to Nero's descendants, I said, and in fairness belonged with our family. That argument did the trick. The collector agreed to sell the document to me for \$1,500. Still, this all seemed very abstract. The transaction had been consummated via telephone. All that the catalogue contained was a written description of the document, and I hadn't even glanced at that.

A messenger arrived at my office a couple of weeks later. He handed me a manila envelope, which I grasped gingerly and carried to my desk, closing the door behind me. Ever so deliberately, I opened the envelope, my hands trembling. There it was, encased in clear plastic. I rested the document in the palm of my right hand. Slightly frayed, it nonetheless seemed to be in pretty decent condition for a slip of paper more than two centuries old.

The document was a printed Treasury note, dated June 1, 1782, payable to Nero in the amount of 13 pounds, two shillings, and five pence. It was partial compensation



A prized artifact: the more than 200-year-old pay voucher of the Revolutionary War soldier Nero Hawley.

for his service in the Connecticut Line of the Continental Army. Nero had countersigned it with an X. I stared in amazement at the draft, as though it were a swath of skin peeled off Nero way back when and meticulously preserved ever since. For nearly half an hour I sat there, silent, savoring the feeling of holding in my hand an item that had been touched, signed, and cashed by my ancestor 215 years before.

Eventually I slid it back into the packet. Then I called my mother and, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, said that I wanted to visit her in a couple of weeks. She had no idea that I'd tried to acquire the ancient bank draft: I had intentionally kept her in the dark in case my quest proved futile.

Two weeks later, as my wife and I entered Mom's house, we betrayed not a hint of what we'd brought her. We sat with her at the breakfast table, as was our custom on arrival. I told Mom we had something she ought to see. Then I handed over the package, which she opened casually, probably thinking it was the latest batch of press clips from the National Urban League.

Mom gasped when she spotted the surprise inside, and again when I said we were giving it to her. The moment was so moving, the sense of familial continuity so profound, that we all three just sat there in silence. Mom fingered the document gently with the practiced grip of a pro and said she would treasure it. Ever the archivist, she declared that the first thing she intended to do was de-acidify it; then it would last for centuries, as if 200 years weren't testament enough to its durability.

For decades, Mom and Vi had played bloodhounds, relentlessly tracking Nero's history and legacy. They had pored over archives and rummaged through the records of historical societies and libraries. The bank draft closed the loop. It was the ultimate prize for their dogged pursuit of Nero.

In early 2002 I had a telephone call from Nancy Gibson, at the time a curator with the Daughters of the American Revolution. She explained that the DAR planned

to mount an exhibition heralding the contributions of blacks and Native Americans who'd fought on behalf of America's freedom and independence in the Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1783.

Ms. Gibson had heard that I was related to Nero Hawley. After years of my gently poking fun at Mom and Vi's efforts to link us to Nero so they'd become the first black women admitted to the DAR, the quest for recognition, respect, and gratitude had finally borne fruit.


In recent years, the very existence and contributions of black Revolutionary War soldiers have gained attention through books such as *American Patriots*. The Black Revolutionary War Patriots Foundation, established in 1985 and based in Washington, D.C., has advanced the cause as well.

Much as I welcomed the call from Ms. Gibson, this was Mom's story, not mine. And my brother Kline is the genuine history buff in our family. So I quickly put Ms. Gibson in contact with them. As you can imagine, she was delighted to learn about Nero's Treasury note: A signed original document from that era would greatly enrich the DAR exhibit. She asked permission to use it, which we granted after being assured of insurance coverage, security, and appropriate climate control in the exhibit hall. Mom knew exactly what guarantees to seek.

The exhibition, "Forgotten Patriots: African-American and American Indian Service in the Revolutionary War," opened on October 18, 2002, in the DAR Museum's Main Gallery, adjoining Constitution Hall. It kicked off with a festive reception. Although at 90 my mother traveled less than she used to, you'd better believe she made the trek to D.C. I loved watching her swell with pride at the sight of the display devoted to Nero Hawley. The exhibit featured the Treasury note and described the role Aunt Vi and Mom had played in unearthing the information about Nero.

The search for Nero taught me some invaluable lessons about family history. In the era before e-mail, Mom used to tease me mercilessly about not writing letters.

My canceled checks, she'd warn, would be the only written record of my existence. Clearly she was absolutely right to press the search for Nero and find the missing links in the chain that connected us back to him.

Beyond its significance for our family, Nero's story helps illuminate a crucial part of the American, not to mention African-American, experience. It is also a fascinating and critical component of authentic U.S. military history. It took the DAR exhibition to show me how a family anecdote or artifact can help fill in some evidentiary gap, illustrate an important facet of America's history, document our people's legitimate role in creating—and defending—this country, and rebut the shibboleths and outright lies about the lukewarm patriotism of black Americans. Nero and his fellow black patriots fought for the right of African-Americans to call ourselves full-fledged Americans. It's a hard-won right we'll never relinquish. 

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The author discusses his ancestor at the "Forgotten Patriots" exhibition at the DAR Museum in Washington, D.C., 2002.

