

Prince Estabrook
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole and Charles Price

With the acrid smell of gunpowder in his nostrils and enveloped in a cloud of gun smoke that blinded him to all but the muzzle flashes of British muskets, Prince Estabrook suddenly experienced an agonizing blow to his shoulder that either knocked him to the ground, writhing in shock and disbelief or left him staggering away to safety—we do not know which. It had been only moments ago that the Red-coated soldiers had rushed onto Lexington Common shouting their battle cries and screaming imprecations at the wavering lines of Colonial militia. Captain Parker had just ordered his men to “quit the Field” when the firing commenced. Prince had scarcely begun to retreat in obedience to the order when he was wounded. All around him there was shouting and screaming, groans of the wounded and dying, the continuing discharges of the guns of the King’s troops, and the pounding footsteps of the Regulars as they rushed across the common— opposed by just a few scattered, answering shots of the retreating militia.

The shooting finally ended, and the urgent beat of a drum summoned the out-of-control troops back into ranks, hastened no doubt by the blows from the flattened swords of angry sergeants. Officers quieted the men, brought about order and chastised them for their unsoldierly behavior. A pause followed as the officers consulted, and then gave the men permission to fire a victory salute, give three cheers for the King and resume their march to Concord. Spectators and returning militia cautiously made their way back to the field of engagement to care for the wounded, and for many to weep over the bodies of fathers, sons, brothers, neighbors and friends — lying still in death.

The above account of Prince Estabrook’s experience is of course somewhat conjectural, but Prince, a slave, was indeed wounded on Lexington Common becoming the first Black battle casualty of the American Revolution. Whether he was able to run from the Common despite his wound or fell to the ground is unknown. Most likely his wound was cared for later by Doctor Joseph Fiske who is credited with dressing the wounds of the Lexington militiamen following the engagement. Doctor Fiske later would also treat a number of wounded British soldiers, casualties of the afternoon retreat from Concord, for which service he submitted a bill to the Provincial Congress.¹

What had brought Prince to this moment in his life when he, a Black man, a slave, would be numbered among the wounded of this small New England village that, while suffering the first deaths and firing the first shots in support of liberty, countenanced the holding of others as slaves? Other African-American men in addition to Prince served the Town of Lexington and surrounding communities as members of the militia and later as soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Alice Hinkle in her book, *Prince Estabrook, Slave and Soldier*, points this out as does author George Quintal in *Patriots of Color: A Peculiar Beauty and Merit, African Americans and Native Americans at battle Road and Bunker Hill*, a wonderfully detailed research effort.²

Militia regiments from New England tended to include Black soldiers both free and slave, in greater numbers than other colonies. Some Black militiamen may have served because they were simply grouped among the able-bodied men ages sixteen to sixty required to join the militia. This would have probably been truer with respect to free Black men. The motivations of slaves like Prince were most likely more varied. Some may have served out of loyalty to the family they served or they might have accompanied one of the family members to battle. Prince did seem to feel loyalty toward the Estabrook family who owned him, as evidenced by the several stories that were passed down by family members as well as the fact that he continued to live in close

association with the Estabrooks all his life.³ More likely, perhaps, both Black slaves and freemen hoped to gain wider acceptance as members of their communities and the former even to win their freedom.

Author, Alice Hinkle, in her volume cited above, has outlined Prince's life. He was about thirty-four years old in 1775 and had been the property of members of the Estabrook family perhaps since the time he had been a child. In 1775 Prince was the property of Benjamin Estabrook, but as Alice Hinkle pointed out, "How and when Prince arrived in Lexington . . . remains a mystery." It is possible that he was the child of a slave named "Tony" owned by Joseph Estabrook II. When Joseph II died in 1733 his will directed that Tony not be sold and that he be allowed to choose his master from among Joseph's children. Tony may have chosen to join the household of Joseph III who died in 1740, at which time Benjamin Estabrook perhaps inherited Tony. Then, when Prince was born about 1741 he would have become the property of Benjamin.⁴

According to family tradition, Prince and Benjamin established a close working and perhaps personal relationship through growing up in the same household, even though Benjamin was eleven or twelve years older.⁵ The Estabrook home was located just East of Lexington center along what was known as the Concord — Cambridge Road, now Massachusetts Avenue. The home-site was immediately west of the bridge that spanned Vine Brook. The Estabrooks owned land along both sides of the Cambridge — Concord Road and also along the road to Woburn where an elevation was known as Estabrook Hill.

Prince recovered from his wound sufficiently to serve again in Captain Parker's Company on June 17 and 18 in Cambridge following the Battle of Bunker Hill.⁶ Thereafter, it would be more than a year before he would again be called to arms, perhaps because the Massachusetts Committee of Public Safety had ceased the enlistment of slaves and the Continental Army followed suit. At first, a distinction was made between free Blacks and slaves with the former allowed to continue service, but eventually slave enlistments were encouraged.⁷

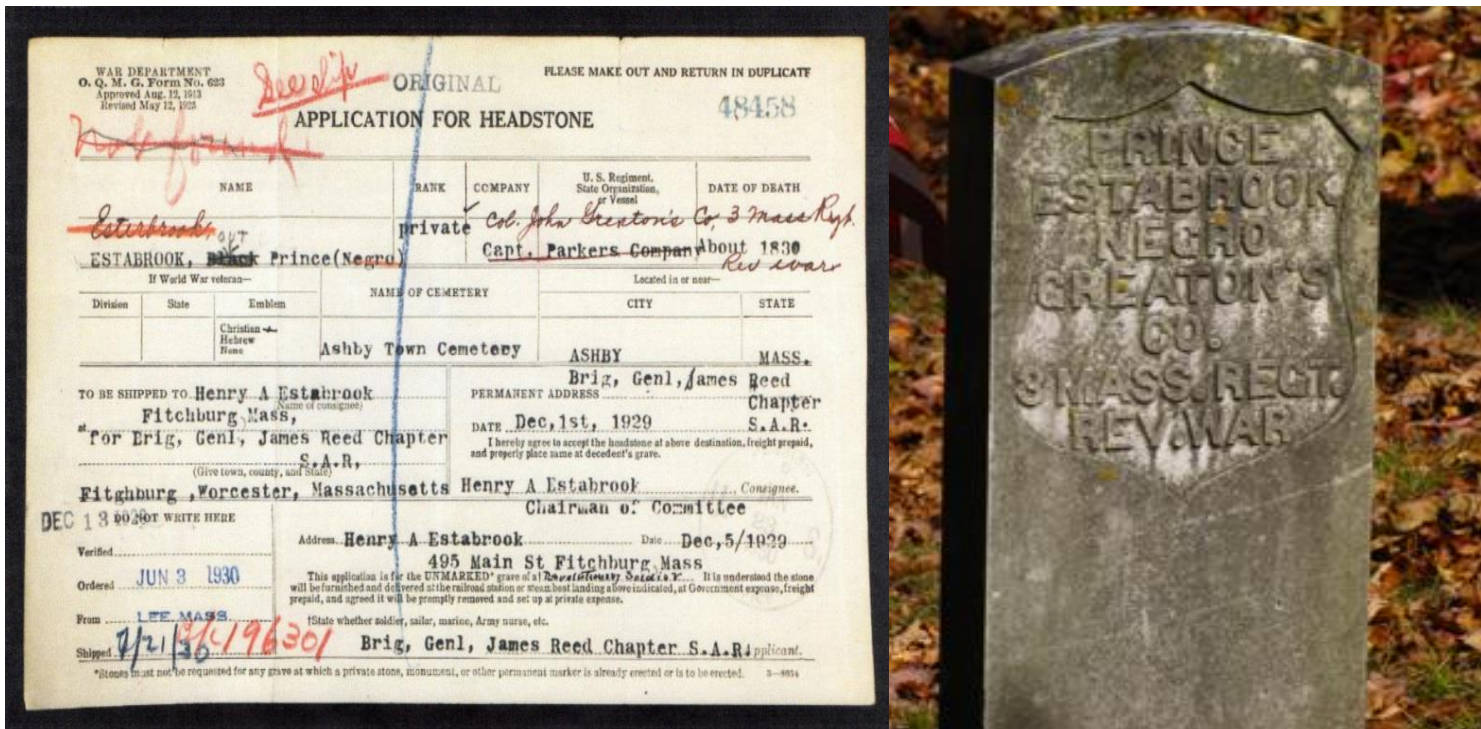
From July 12 to February 18, 1776, Prince served in Captain Charles Miles's Company of Colonel Jonathan Reed's Regiment at Fort Ticonderoga. Then, from November 6, 1777 to April 3, 1778 he was a member of Captain Simon Hunt's Company of Colonel Eleazer Brooks's Regiment serving at Cambridge. From the end of this enlistment until the year 1780 there is no record of his serving, but on July 10, 1780 his name appeared on a descriptive list of men raised to reinforce the Continental Army. Prince marched to camp on August 12, and was described as 39 years of age, five feet, eleven inches in height, "complexion, negro," and engaged or the Town of Lexington. Although described as a 6-month man he actually served for eight months and twenty-one days and was discharged on April 7, 1781.⁸

His final tour of duty began on June 11, 1781 when he accepted a bounty to serve for the Town of Lexington for a period of three years in the Continental Army. He was described this time as only five feet six inches in height, of black complexion with black hair and eyes, and his occupation was given as "farmer." On May 20, 1782 he was listed as serving in Captain Joseph William's First Company of Colonel John Greaton's regiment and then in August and September of 1783 as belonging to the First Company of Colonel Michael Jackson's Regiment. When he was discharged is not certain as the last roll on which his name appears was dated October 14, 1783.⁹ However, Colonel Jackson's Regiment was the last Continental Army regiment to be disbanded and the only infantry unit still active after the dissolution of the Continental Army. Jackson's Regiment, then known as the 1st American Regiment, was finally disbanded in 1784. Prince's three-year enlistment would have been up that year, and he may be credited as perhaps being one of the last soldiers to have served in the Continental Army.¹⁰

Following his military service, Prince returned to Lexington to again work for the Estabrooks. Because of his war service, or even more likely due to the fact that slavery was outlawed within the borders of Massachusetts in 1783, he had won his freedom. He probably lived with Benjamin Estabrook whose household according to the 1790 tax list “included a non-white freeman . . . as a resident.”¹¹ In the 1790’s Prince’s name began to appear on the Lexington Tax Rolls. Alice Hinkle wrote, “Prince was not taxed for property, which indicates that he moved from slave to employee of Benjamin Estabrook.”¹²

Benjamin died in 1803, and about two years later Prince moved from Lexington to live with Benjamin’s son Nathan in Ashby, MA. Alice Hinkle states, “An eighteenth-century white clapboard farmhouse, one owned by a member of the Estabrook family still stands in Ashby, along the Road to New Ipswich. According to legend, it was once Prince’s home.”¹³ Again, family tradition records that Prince died in Ashby in 1830 about age 90.¹⁴ Reportedly, Prince was buried in the First Unitarian Universalist Church cemetery. According to an article that appeared in a 1930 edition of the *Fitchburg Sentinel*, Prince was buried in the same graveyard where Nathan Estabrook and his wife Sally lay buried, but sadly Prince was buried in the pauper’s section.¹⁵

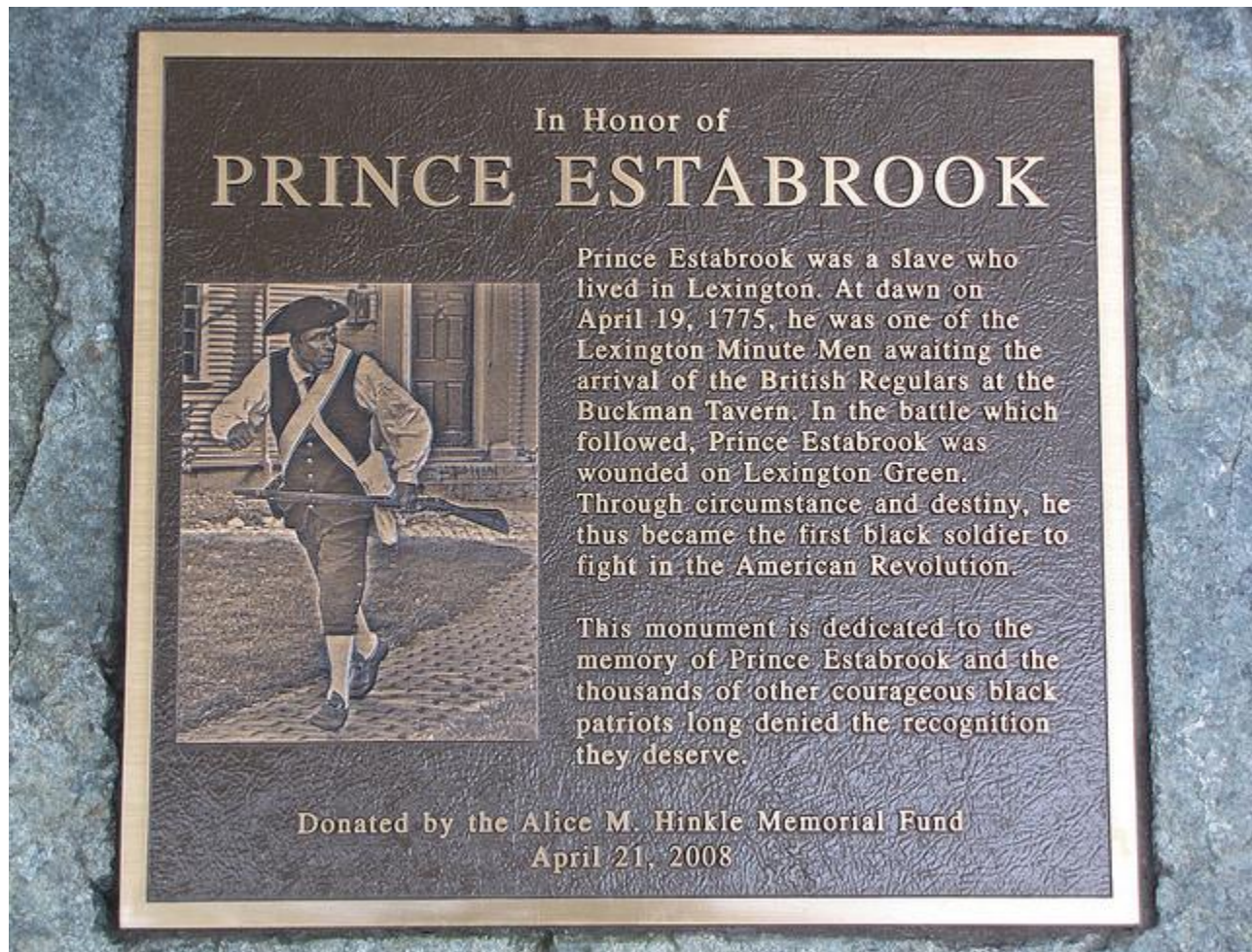
In 1930, a headstone was placed by the U.S. War Department to mark Prince’s gravesite. At the ceremony, the Reverend Henry A. Estabrook, who had initiated the request for the marker, gave the eulogy. He was a descendant of the Estabrooks of Lexington and his description of Prince as a “brave defender of American liberty” was both appropriate and ironic given that he was talking about a man who not only had been held as a slave but was also one of those thousands of Black soldiers whose participation in the Revolution had been written out of history for generations.¹⁶



Application for Prince’s Headstone

Prince’s Headstone

In 2008 a marker was also placed on the grounds of Buckman Tavern to honor Prince Estabrook. The marker shows Charles H. Price, Jr., who as a member of the Lexington Minute Men has portrayed Prince for many years, rushing toward Lexington Common to face off against the on-coming British Regulars.



Footnotes

¹A photo of the bill submitted by Doctor Fiske appears in Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts from Its First Settlement to 1868, Revised and Continued to 1912*, Two Volumes, Lexington Historical Society, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1913. *Volume I History*, p. 225.

²Alice Hinkle, *Prince Estabrook, Slave and Soldier*, Pleasant Mountain Press, Lexington, MA, 2001; George Quintal, *Patriots of Color: A Peculiar Beauty and Merit, African Americans and Native Americans at battle Road and Bunker Hill*, Division of Cultural Resources, Boston national Historical Park, Boston, MA, 2004.

³Hinkle, pp. 28-9, 36-40.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 26-8.

⁵Ibid., p. 28

⁶Hudson, *History*, p. 425.

⁷Quintal, pp. 22-28.

⁸Ibid., pp. 97-8.

⁹Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁰Robert K. Wright, Jr., *The Continental Army*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D. C. 1983, pp. 180-82. "When [Major General Friedrich Wilhelm von]Steuben's effort in July [1783]to negotiate a transfer of frontier forts with Maj. Gen. Frederick Haldimand collapsed, however, the British maintained control over them, as they would into the 1790's. That failure and the realization that most of the remaining infantrymen's enlistments were due to expire by June 1784 led Washington to order Knox, his choice as the commander of the peacetime army, to discharge all but 500 infantry and 100 artillerymen before winter set in. The former regrouped as Jackson's Continental Regiment under Col. Henry Jackson of Massachusetts. The single artillery company, New Yorkers under John Doughty, came from remnants of the 2d Continental Artillery." [When]Congress had again rejected Washington's concept for a peacetime force in October 1783 . . . moderate delegates then offered an alternative in April 1784 which scaled the projected army down to 900 men in 1 artillery and 3 infantry battalions, Congress rejected it as well, in part because New York feared that men retained from Massachusetts might take sides in a land dispute between the two states. Another proposal to retain 350 men and raise 700 new recruits also failed. On 2 June Congress ordered the discharge of all remaining men except twenty-five caretakers at Fort Pitt and fifty-five at West Point."

¹¹Hinkle, p. 40.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid. pp. 39-40.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 41.