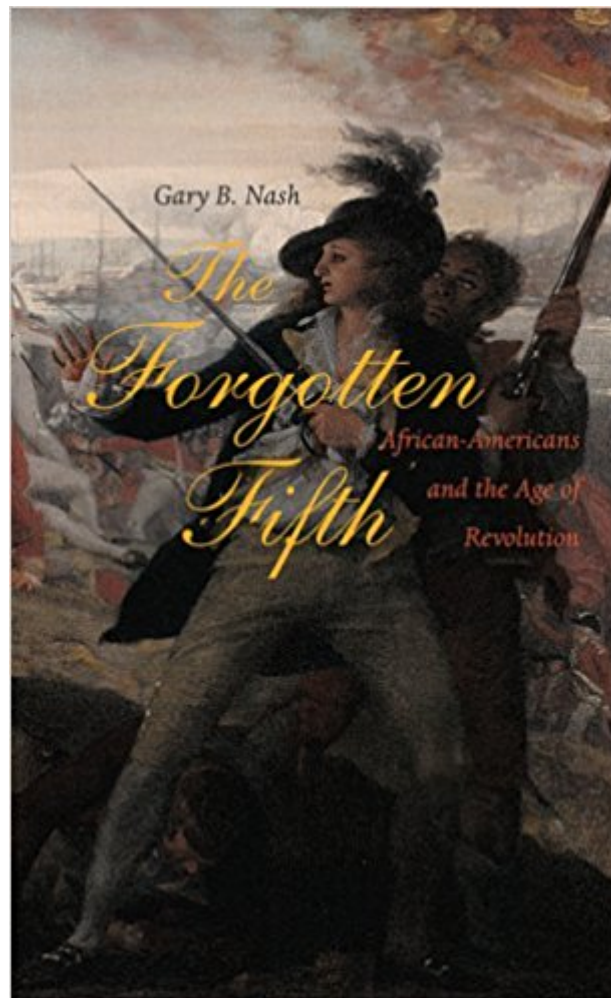




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The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans In The Age Of Revolution (The Nathan I. Huggins Lectures)



Synopsis

As the United States gained independence, a full fifth of the country's population was African American. The experiences of these men and women have been largely ignored in the accounts of the colonies' glorious quest for freedom. In this compact volume, Gary B. Nash reorients our understanding of early America, and reveals the perilous choices of the founding fathers that shaped the nation's future. Nash tells of revolutionary fervor arousing a struggle for freedom that spiraled into the largest slave rebellion in American history, as blacks fled servitude to fight for the British, who promised freedom in exchange for military service. The Revolutionary Army never matched the British offer, and most histories of the period have ignored this remarkable story. The conventional wisdom says that abolition was impossible in the fragile new republic. Nash, however, argues that an unusual convergence of factors immediately after the war created a unique opportunity to dismantle slavery. The founding fathers' failure to commit to freedom led to the waning of abolitionism just as it had reached its peak. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, as Nash demonstrates, their decision enabled the ideology of white supremacy to take root, and with it the beginnings of an irreparable national fissure. The moral failure of the Revolution was paid for in the 1860s with the lives of the 600,000 Americans killed in the Civil War. *The Forgotten Fifth* is a powerful story of the nation's multiple, and painful, paths to freedom.

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Customer Reviews

Nash's reminder that African-Americans made up a fifth of the population during the Revolutionary era exemplifies the purpose of this lively, accessible "corrective to historical amnesia," comprising three discrete chapters based on lectures he delivered at Harvard in 2004. The wide-ranging first chapter, "The Black Americans' Revolution," illustrates how the War for Independence whetted slaves' thirst for freedom. Nash chronicles slave defection to the British (for whom many more blacks fought than for the Americans) and sketches vivid portraits of individuals who sued for their freedom in the courts. The impassioned second chapter asks, "Could Slavery Have Been Abolished?" and argues the affirmative—that ending slavery during the postrevolutionary period was not only possible but would have unified rather than split the nation. Nash traces broad political and economic conditions (e.g., widespread abolitionist sentiment) to support his argument, and blames the nation's leaders and founding fathers for their lack of political courage. The concluding essay explores questions of citizenship and national identity through the early 19th-century writings of two contemporary Philadelphians, the African-American businessman James Forten and Tench Coxe, a white political economist. Nash (*The Unknown American Revolution*) exhibits gracefully assertive scholarship in this brief but meaty synthesis. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Adult/High School—This well-written, compact book by a master historian presents the appalling story of the denial of political and human rights for black Americans after they had fought during the Revolutionary War. More infuriating, this rejection came despite the era's grand rhetoric, all men are created equal. In three chapters, readers learn of the heroism and tenacity of black patriots, and also of blacks who fought for the British; the near success of efforts to abolish slavery following the war; and the sad story of the first decades of the 19th century, when blacks in the North and South were deprived of civil liberties. In the process, Thomas Jefferson's hypocrisy in racial matters is delineated. Readers are also shown that, going back many generations, commercial interests of many politicians have trumped ideals. Nash supplies accessible accounts of important American black leaders too often left out of textbooks, such as businessman and pamphleteer James Forten, surveyor Benjamin Banneker, poet Phillis Wheatley, and others. A must-buy.—Alan Gropman, National Defense University, Washington, DC Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution is a book, written by Gary B. Nash, which brings to light the history of one-fifth of the early American population: African Americans,

who have been for the most part marginalized in American history. Now with powerful words and historical data about African Americans, Nash explores what the world was like for these people during the time of the American Revolutionary War. The book is divided into three chapters, each chapter maintaining somewhat different theses than the other. However, the author's general thesis for the book is mentioned in the preface: "My goal in writing history has not been to destabilize history but rather to bring attention to those forgotten Americans who have inarguably been part of constructing our society and our nation." Evidently, Nash wanted his readers to see a part of American history that has been long neglected by most American historians, and why reexamining the forgotten history of African Americans roles in the American Revolutionary War is vital for our understanding of early American history. The title of the book, *The Forgotten Fifth*, reflects the thesis because it's about rediscovering the forgotten fifth of the American population, the African Americans. The subtitle *African Americans in the Age of Revolution*, too, reflects the thesis. This is because the thesis is about African Americans and their role in the American Revolutionary War; the title and subtitle fitting perfectly well with the author's general thesis. Nash effectively reveals to his readers what many do not know about the American Revolutionary War. First, African Americans played an important part in the war-effort due to the fact that the American Revolutionary War was a "poor man's war." The majority of the men who fought were men from the bottom of the social ladder. These were poor farmers, urban poor, landless laborers. Among them--and many Americans do not know this--were blacks and slaves. For this very reason, the first chapter in this book is titled "The Black Americans' Revolution," secondary to the fact that many blacks fought for both the British and the Americans. The American Revolution War created the perfect spark to what became known as the largest slave rebellion in American history. However, while there were many blacks fighting for the Americans, Nash brings up that there were many African Americans fighting for the British too. As the book quotes, "[T]hey secretly wished that the British army might win, for then all Negro slaves will gain their freedom," a belief that is almost universal among the Negroes in America." Secondly, after the war, slavery could have been abolished, as argued by Nash. However, South Carolina and Georgia threatened to leave the union if slavery was abolished. However, "[b]y the late 1780s most southerners admitted privately that even the entire South could not make it on its own." Third, after Thomas Jefferson was elected, his racist ideology prevented the nation from going forward and becoming an equal society, and avoiding a future civil war. Therefore, by raising these three main points, Nash develops and elaborates his argument for his thesis. Nash used both primary and secondary sources to support his thesis. He tended to use more secondary sources like scholarly journals. The primary sources Nash used were diaries and pamphlets

produced by abolitionists. By using many sources to reinforce his statements this book allows the reader to see the important part African Americans, though many of them were slaves, played in early American history. Consequently, it isn't a surprise that this book is a great book on American slavery. The Forgotten Fifth unquestionably does what not every book can do for the reader: it shows us a history that many have forgotten. Having read this eye-opening story has, without question, persuaded me that the author's thesis is correct. Nash's argument is to write history and not to destabilize history; he brings attention to those forgotten Americans who have inarguably been part of constructing our society and our nation (which is commendable). Overall, Nash accomplished writing a phenomenal book on American slavery that many people have forgotten.

I used this in my course on the Early National Period (American history). Students really responded to it well.

Great abbreviated history that is especially relevant in the rise of a new contemptuous racism and white supremacy epidemic in U.S. of America, since its inception.

Gary Nash's *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* is an excellent introduction to early U.S. history, particularly the Revolutionary Period, from an African American perspective. What becomes clear from his study is that American history and the story of the nation's founders cannot be understood without a thorough examination of the lives and contributions of African Americans. Much of the groundwork for these lectures is contained in Nash's 1991 work, *Race and Revolution*, which is an excellent companion to this work because it excerpts the writings and petitions of the black founding fathers: people like Richard Allen, Benjamin Banneker, Prince Hall, and James Forten. Nash reminds readers of an important fact: African Americans were actively involved in the debates of the Revolutionary Period and in the military action as well, fighting on both the American and the British side. In terms of the military involvement, white and black soldiers fought side-by-side in integrated units in the Revolutionary War, a phenomenon which would not re-occur until the Korean War, nearly two hundred years later. The first chapter "The Black Americans' Revolution" discusses African Americans' participation in the Revolutionary War, a subject that is generally not widely known in the United States. Nash describes the large flight of slaves and freemen to the British-side who offered emancipation in 1775 through Lord Dunmore's Emancipation Proclamation. In contrast, the American forces offered freedom in exchange for one year of military service. For the colonials, wide-spread emancipation

was never offered despite the enlightenment rhetoric expressed in the Declaration of Independence and in state constitutions. Nash begins chapter one by crediting previous historians and, in particular, William C. Nell, whose *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) was the first historical account of black soldiers fighting for the Americans. Nash discusses how Nell, a black school teacher in Boston, focused exclusively on black patriots, de-emphasizing black participation on the British side. The emphasis of Nell's history advanced a political argument for black citizenship and rights in the 1850s, during a period when rights were being retracted in the North. Chapter two "Could Slavery Have Been Abolished?" looks closely at the contradiction between the Declaration of Independence, with its statements about unalienable rights, and the Constitution, which inscribed legal slavery. Nash makes a convincing case that there was an opportunity for abolition at the beginning of the Republic, which was later sacrificed to short term political interests reflecting the North and Mid-Atlantic states' lack of conviction. Nash criticizes the trend among professional U.S. historians to apologize for the founding fathers' inaction on abolition--the view that historical circumstances did not permit abolition at this time. Nash offers insights about the conflicted views and attitudes of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson on slavery. The third chapter discusses citizenship and the hardening of racial codes in the 1800s. African Americans' rights and freedoms in the North and Mid-Atlantic states were being curtailed by legislation barring blacks' participation in civic life and foreclosing economic opportunities. Much of the chapter contrasts the views of two Philadelphians: James Forten, a black patriot of the Revolutionary War, and Tench Coxe, a white politician who published pamphlets on race in America in the 1810s and 1820s. Nash threads the discussion of Forten's and Coxe's views throughout the chapter in order to discuss black and white views on race and citizenship in the early 1800s. A final comment is that this book is very readable in a way that academically-oriented histories often are not. Nash is a diligent scholar and a strong writer with a gift for brevity. As a result, the book can be enjoyed in a few sittings, yielding rewards well worth a reader's time. The footnotes lead in many different directions, and point out new areas of interest for amateur and professional historian alike. There is a wealth of knowledge in this short book. *The Forgotten Fifth* can be read profitably by high school, college, and graduate students. It is an important study that will enrich and deepen one's understanding of American history.

Gary Nash has done it again. He ponders whether abolition following the Revolutionary War would have been possible. He provides the most detailed argument to date as to how and why it could of happened. I, being a historian myself, had previously accepted the opposition side and thought

abolition would not have been possible following the revolutionary war due to states rights and the loose union established by the thirteen colonies during the war for independence, but Nash brings up some interesting points as to why this train of thought is an inaccurate portrayal of the times. The book also discusses some of the black leaders following the revolution and their attempts to gain an equal footing for blacks within the new republic. The political struggle of blacks during this period of American History is often untold, and Nash does an outstanding job of summing up what occurred in such a short and easy read that will leave you wanting more. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to those who wish to explore a forgotten part of our history. For further reading on the subject I would recommend "Washington's Decision," "Water from the Rock," and "The Negro in the American Revolution."

This is an excellent book to be used in a history class I'm taking. Normally I'm not too sure about books I'm asked to get for classes such as this, but it turned out to be an excellent read. I would recommend it to anyone.

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