



William “Billy” Flora: Revolutionary Service Beyond Great Bridge

As a free African American Patriot, William “Billy” Flora represented a rather small percentage of Virginia’s population.^[1] He [served as a sentry at the south end of the Great Bridge](#), firing eight rounds on the morning of December 9, 1775, slowing the initial British assault.^[2]

Documents describing this action do not name Flora, but this is not unusual.^[3] Flora’s noteworthy actions at the Battle of Great Bridge, first published in secondary sources in the 1840s and 50s, identified him as “Billy” Flora. Interestingly, all records naming him during his lifetime identify him as “William” Flora.^[4]

Flora’s Revolutionary service and life extended well beyond his actions that morning at Great Bridge. An August 1778 “Return of Negroes in the [Continental] Army” identified 755 African Americans out of nearly 21,000 men serving, or 3.63 percent of the force.^[5] Flora was one of the 755 included in that return. He served for at least four years in both minute and Continental units, and likely in Virginia Militia units in 1780 and 1781. He fought in some of the most important battles of the American Revolution.^[6] A review of his service also provides insight on leadership and organizational challenges of Virginia units in the Continental army.

William Flora was born to a free mother and a father who was probably enslaved. Based on existing the law he was considered illegitimate and subject to indenture until age twenty-one but legally took the free status of his mother.^[7] He served his indenture with multiple families that lived south of Great Bridge in Norfolk County and was about twenty-one years of age in

December 1775.[8] At the Battle of Great Bridge he served in the Princess Anne Minute District Company of Capt. William Grimes. Minutemen were volunteers and part of a military structure ordered by the Third Virginia Convention in August 1775, differentiating them from traditional militia called by class.[9] As a minute company volunteer, he likely served in active status through the fall of 1776 when Virginia's regular regiments and traditional militia replaced the minute battalion and company structure.[10]

After the Battle of Great Bridge, minute units operating in Tidewater Virginia's Norfolk and Princess Anne Counties worked to defeat Loyalists supporting Virginia's last royal colonial governor, Lord Dunmore. After Dunmore departed, these units provided local security to prevent Loyalists from disrupting civil governance. For a portion of Flora's service his company patrolled the area on the northern edge of the Great Dismal Swamp between Great Bridge and Tucker's Point in Portsmouth where Dunmore established a fortified base of operations and garrison ashore, during February 1776, before relocating to Gwynn's Island in late May. Flora's company frequently skirmished with the enemy.[11]

The Continental Congress responded to Gen. George Washington's request for an army designed to serve for the duration of the war with the "eighty-eight battalion resolve" in September 1776. Virginia's contribution to this structure was six additional or fifteen numbered infantry regiments for Continental service.[12] In response, on September 20, the Council of the State of Virginia authorized Virginia's Continental Regiments to recruit from the minute companies to fill their ranks.[13] Captain Grimes, Flora's minute company commander, received a Continental commission on November 21 and the next day enlisted Flora into his company as part of the recently authorized 15th Virginia Regiment. Flora enlisted for a term of three years and his name first appears on a muster in January 1777.[14]

The 15th Virginia remained in Virginia forming and training through the spring of 1777. With smallpox spreading throughout his ranks, on February 6 General Washington decided to [inoculate the Continental Army](#). He issued a circular to his regimental commanders on March 12 to inoculate all new recruits and units in route because smallpox, "is more destructive to an Army . . . than the Enemy's Sword." [15] The 15th Virginia received smallpox inoculations at Dumfries, Virginia, but it is unclear if William Flora received his inoculation there.[16]

By April 7 Flora's company commander, Captain Grimes, was in New Castle, Delaware, on his way to join Washington's Army. Grimes may not have been with his unit because by this time he was serving as the regimental major. It is likely Grimes missed or intentionally avoided inoculation because he died in August 1777 in or near Philadelphia, reportedly of smallpox.[17] Lt. Thomas Lewis served as Flora's company commander for the next year, but the regiment continued to use Grimes's name to identify the company.[18]

The 15th Virginia Regiment does not appear on the May 1777 returns of the Continental Army in New Jersey and probably joined Washington's main army in June.[19] The regiment served

along with the 3rd, 7th and 11th Virginia Regiments in Brig. Gen. William Woodford's brigade through June 1778.

Flora participated in the maneuvers of Washington's Army throughout the summer of 1777, marching and countermarching as part of Maj. Gen. Adam Stephen's division. At the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777, Woodford's was the right brigade posted on Birmingham Hill during the British assault. Flora's regiment fought for their lives that afternoon, outnumbered two-to-one, flanks collapsing, fighting valiantly "almost Muzzle to Muzzle" for nearly an hour.[\[20\]](#) William Flora was likely in the thick of the action.[\[21\]](#)

Flora spent the next month marching and countermarching as General Washington attempted to gain positional advantage over the British Army.[\[22\]](#) Flora's next major fight was at Germantown on October 4. Washington's plan of attack involved a complex set of maneuvers, much more difficult than his subordinate commanders could execute. Major General Stephen's division ended up behind Major General Greene's division and Flora experienced one of the longest days of his life, a confusing four-hour engagement with the enemy, and a march of over forty miles.[\[23\]](#)

Following Germantown Washington moved to Whitemarsh and invited an attack that never came. Washington moved the army to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania where Woodford's brigade occupied a post on the southwest corner of the defensive perimeter. Here the 15th Virginia and William Flora faced a long difficult winter.[\[24\]](#)

Months of campaigning, disease, combat injuries, and inadequate food and clothing in winter weather took a tremendous toll on all the units in Washington's Army. Woodford's brigade and Flora's 15th Virginia were no exception. In just two months between October and December 1777 Woodford's brigade lost 420 officers and men. William Flora was one of only 226 of "All Ranks, Present & Fit for Duty" and one of only ninety "Rank & File" (corporals and private men) "Fit for Duty" in December 1777 in Woodford's brigade at Valley Forge. Woodford reported 323 men in his regiment needed shoes. Many Virginians enlisted for two years and received their discharges at Valley Forge. Conditions worsened over the winter and by March 1778 the 15th Virginia had only twenty-seven "Rank & File Present for Duty" and sixty men "Without Clothing."[\[25\]](#) Flora's name appears on the December 1777 through May 1778 company musters as fit for duty, a testament to his personal tenacity and character.[\[26\]](#) After rebuilding, the 15th Virginia Regiment left Valley Forge with only 146 men fit for duty, one of them William Flora.[\[27\]](#)

Regiment	Total	All Ranks, Present & Fit for Duty	Rank & File, Present & Fit for Duty
3 rd Virginia	309	71	47
7 th Virginia	427	46	30
11 th Virginia	326	81	50

15 th Virginia	307	68	40
Total	1,369	266	90

Table 1. Brig. Gen. William Woodford's Brigade, Strength Report Extract, December 1777, Valley Forge, PA. From, Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence*, 50. Capt. William Grimes's Company under command of 1st Lt. Thomas Lewis reported: 2 officers with 2nd Lt Philip Mallory absent with leave; 7 NCOs, 1 died on 3 January 1778, 2 sick absent, 1 in Virginia; 33 privates, 1 died date not listed, 1 on furlough, 4 men on guard, 16 listed as sick absent, 3 of these in Virginia, 1 remarks not legible; Present for duty 1 officer, 4 NCOs, 8 privates, Flora included; Total names on muster 44, present for duty 13; plus 4 on guard or 17 of 44 or 38 percent; all NOCs & privates enlisted for 3 years except one private, duration of war.

Flora's next battle was at Monmouth where Woodford's brigade numbered 475 men and four guns. During the battle Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene led Woodford's brigade in Woodford's absence, and advanced to the left flank of the British Army. On Combs Hill Greene established a firing position for a four-gun artillery battery under command of Lt. Col. Chevalier de Plessis-Mauduit. This firing position provided enfilading fire on the main British defensive line, forcing withdrawal to the Freehold-Englishtown Road and contributing to ending the battle.[\[28\]](#)

Flora soldiered on as the army evolved over the next year, serving in the 15th, 11th and 5th Virginia Regiments as the Virginia Line restructured.[\[29\]](#) During August and September 1778 Capt. [John Marshall](#) (future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) served as Flora's acting company commander.[\[30\]](#) Capt. Marshall formally returned to his duties as the deputy judge advocate in the Army of the United States and one is left to wonder if he and Flora ever spoke of the action at Great Bridge.[\[31\]](#) There was a second major rearrangement of the Virginia Line, in May 1779 while the Continental Army encamped at Middlebrook, New Jersey.[\[32\]](#) Flora and other members of his company moved to the 5th Virginia Regiment. William Flora's was discharged on November 22, 1779, completing his three-year enlistment that began on November 22, 1776.[\[33\]](#)

Flora did not reenlist. He had experienced and survived violent combat, skirmishes, thousands of miles of marching, hot summers and cold winters. By returning to Norfolk County, Virginia, after his discharge he avoided capture at Charlestown, South Carolina in 1780, a fate experienced by many of the men he served alongside in 1779. Flora served in the Norfolk County Militia between 1780 and 1781, based on a statement from Thomas Mathews, who knew Flora and later characterized his service. Mathews was an original 1775 Princess Anne District battalion company commander, Continental officer in the 4th Virginia Regiment, militia lieutenant colonel of artillery under Col. Thomas Marshall and later Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.[\[34\]](#) The statements of both Mathews and Augustine Slaughter are part of Flora's Bounty Land Grant application. Mathews wrote,

This Certifies that during the late war I served as a Colo. in the Artillery of Virginia that I was well acquainted with William Florey who belonged to the 15th Virginia Regm't and was from Norfolk County that he served in the Continental Line until the siege of York or the close of the war to the best of my recollection, and was held in high esteem as a Soldier. Norfolk July 16th, 1806.[\[35\]](#)

Slaughter, a surgeon in the 7th Virginia Regiment, knew Flora because he served with him from 1777 to February 1779 in Woodford's brigade. He wrote,

Norfolk May 30, 1806. I hereby certify that I was Surgeon to the 7th Virga. Reg't. in the years 1776, 1777 & 1778 the greatest part of which time it formed a part of Woodfords Brigade, and the 16th Virg'a. Reg't. formed an other part, during which time Wm. Floray a man of colour, was a soldier in the 16th Reg't. and held in no little estimation by his Officers. A Slaughter[\[36\]](#)

William "Billy" Flora was "held in high esteem as a Soldier"; he was a fighter and a survivor.[\[37\]](#) He fought in multiple hotly-contested actions—at Great Bridge as a minuteman, at Brandywine, Germantown and Monmouth as a regular, at the siege of Yorktown as a militiaman, and at numerous unnamed engagements and skirmishes.[\[38\]](#) During these and other actions he served alongside many of the same men he fought with at Great Bridge: Brig. Gens. William Woodford and Charles Scott, Cols. Thomas Marshall and Abraham Buford, Capts. John Marshall, John Chilton, Joseph Spencer, Thomas Ransdale, Gabril Long, Lt. Reubin Long, and untold others. Flora stood out because of his sustained performance of duty and because he was one of only small number of free African Americans who served in Virginia Continental units. He was easily identified because he had a record of service that few achieved, regardless of race.



Herman Flora (right), a direct descendant of William “Billy” Flora, and the former Attorney General of Virginia, Jason Miyaras (left). Interestingly, a future Attorney General of Virginia & Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, John Marshall, was a Lieutenant in the Culpeper Minute Bn. at Great Bridge. Marshall would later serve as William Flora’s company commander as the 15th and 11th Virginia Regiments merged in the summer of 1778, the first major restructuring of the Virginia Continental Line. Photo by the author with permission of the Flora Family.

After his discharge on November 22, 1779, Flora probably walked 450 miles back home to Norfolk County, Virginia. As a combat veteran of four-years he was not exempted from continued militia service. Based on the statement of Thomas Matthews, Flora was an honorable and reliable soldier who continued his militia service through Yorktown. Because Flora was not literate and unable to record his own story we must rely on the statements of individuals like Thomas Mathews and others who knew Flora during both his Continental and militia service.

Flora’s post-Revolutionary War life as a businessman is thoroughly documented with tax records from Norfolk County beginning in 1782 and ending in 1818. Flora purchased two half lots in Portsmouth, Virginia, likely with the balance of his military pay he received in 1784.[\[39\]](#) In his will, proved January 18, 1819, he left most of his property in Portsmouth, Virginia to his grandson, William Flora.[\[40\]](#) Thanks to individuals who knew Flora and some historians who later recorded his name as the sentry at the Great Bridge on the morning of December 9, 1775, we now know much more about his Revolutionary War journey that enabled America’s independence. His personal contributions and sacrifices extended well beyond one battle in Tidewater Virginia. It is important to recognize Flora and others who made independence possible.

[1] Paul Heinegg, *Free African Americans of North Carolina, Virginia and South Carolina from the colonial period to about 1820* (Clearfield Co. Inc., 2002), 1:7, 376-7. Heinegg estimates only three percent of African Americans in Virginia, or about 6,000 individuals, were free, and were concentrated in southeastern Virginia; based on the birth rate this number was over 12,000 in 1790.

[2] *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), November 20, 1775.

[3] The only surviving primary sources naming individual private soldiers at the Battle of Great Bridge address men who were killed, wounded, sick, disciplined or survived to file pension or land grant applications.

[4] For the best contemporary account of Flora's service at Great Bridge, see: Norman Fuss, "Billy Flora at the Battle of Great Bridge," October 14, 2014, *Journal of the American Revolution*, allthingsliberty.com/2014/10/billy-flora-at-the-battle-of-great-bridge/; for a detailed analysis of the secondary sources cited by Fuss see note 21.

[5] "10 Facts," *Black Patriots in the American Revolution*, American Battlefield Trust, June 14, 2024, www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/10-facts-black-patriots-american-revolution.

[6] Flora is named in nineteen pay or company musters between January 1777 and May 1778 in records of the 15th Virginia Regiment, 1777-1778 (Folders 328-337); Flora is named in nineteen pay or company musters between July 1778 and April 1779, in records of the 11th Virginia Regiment, 1776-1778 (Folder 282); Flora is named in twelve pay or company musters between May 1779 and November 1779, in records of the 5th Virginia Regiment, 1778-1779 (Folders 145-147), 5th and 11th Regiments (Consolidated), 1779, (Folders 156-164), Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783, Microfilm Publication M246, 138 rolls, NAID: 602384, War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93, (Washington, D.C: National Archives).

[7] Indenture was a common eighteenth century practice. Gary B. Nash, *Red White and Black, The Early Peoples of North America* (Prentice Hall, Inc: 1974), 218-19. Flora's initial indenture reads, "It is ordered that John Portlock and Wm. Smith Gent Church wardens of St. Bridges [Brides] Parish bind William Flora orphan of Mary Flora a free negro to Joshua Gammon according to law." Order Book for Norfolk County, Co. Pleas and Quarter Sessions 1763-1765, 15; Heinegg, *Free African Americans*, 1:376.

[8] The records of indenture were to Joshua Gammon in 1763, John Fentress in 1771 and William Bressie in 1773. All three households were located south of Great Bridge in Norfolk County, Heinegg, *Free African Americans*, 1:376.

[9] William Waller Henning, *Statutes at Large of Virginia, Ordinances* (Richmond: J & G Cochran, 1824) 9:35; Pension Application of S6204 Samuel Templeman, Southern Campaigns,

revwarapps.org/s6204.pdf. The Princess Anne Minute District included men from the Borough of Norfolk, Norfolk, Princess Anne, Nansemond & Isle of Wight Counties.

[10] The last record of a Virginia minute battalion was the composited Second Minute Battalion that operated between May and November 1776. Pension application research by the author and E.M Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations in the American Revolution, 1774-1787* (Virginia State Library, 1978), 24-25.

[11] Pension Application, S6204 Samuel Templeman, revwarapps.org/s6204.pdf. Numerous minutemen state their terms of initial volunteer service were for one year; the actual term of service differs by unit, pension application, per research by the author.

[12] Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army*, CHM Pub 60-4-1 (US Government Printing Office, 1983), 93.

[13] H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the Council of the State of Virginia* (Virginia State Library, 1831), 1:78, 83, 168, 252.

[14] Sanchez-Saavedra, *A Guide to Virginia Military Organizations*, 72; See note 6 above, 15th Virginia Regiment, 1777-1778 (Folder 328-337).

[15] George Washington to William Shippen, Jr., February 6, 1777, *Founder's Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-08-02-0281; Circular to the Colonels of Various Continental Regiments, March 12, 1777, *Founder's Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-08-02-0590; Washington to Patrick Henry, April 13, 1777, *Founder's Online*, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0142.

[16] Pension Application of Moses Woosley S6442, revwarapps.org/s6442.pdf; Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana* (Hill and Wang, 2001), 94.

[17] In a letter from Grimes to his wife, April 7, 1777, Grimes referred to himself as a major. Bounty Land Warrant information relating to William Grimes VAS1713, revwarapps.org/VAS1713.pdf. Although General Washington directed all soldiers receive smallpox inoculation in route to the army, Virginians were hesitant to take the inoculation. "George Washington to John Augustine Washington, June 1, 1777," *Founder's Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-09-02-0583. Samuel Templeman stated Grimes died of small pox before arriving in Philadelphia. revwarapps.org/VAS2632.pdf.

[18] 15th Regiment 1777-1778 (Folders 328-337), Revolutionary War Rolls; Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers in the Continental Army During the War of the Revolution, April 1775, to December 1783* (Rare Book Publishing Company, Inc: 1914), 350. After the revolution Lewis served in the United States Legion Army.

[19] Charles H. Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 46.

[20] John Sullivan, *The Letters and Papers of Major-General John Sullivan, Continental Army*, ed, Otis G. Hammond (New Hampshire Historical Society, 1930), 465.

[21] Michael C. Harris, *Brandywine* (Savis Beatie, 2014), 181 and 405; Robert M Dunkerley, *Decision at Brandywine* (Westholme, 2021), 73, 75, 110-111 and 124.

[22] Gary Ecelbarger, *George Washington's Momentous Year* (Westholme, 2024), 1:116-17, 134-35, 150-51.

[23] Ecelbarger, *George Washington's Momentous Year*, 1:163.

[24] Valley Forge Encampment Map and Woodford's Brigade, *Valley Forge Muster Roll*, Woodford's Brigade, History, valleyforgemusterroll.org/woodfords-brigade/; 15th Virginia Regiment, valleyforgemusterroll.org/15th-virginia-regiment/.

[25] Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence*, 50, 54, 60. 64.

[26] 15th Regiment 1777-1778 (Folders 328-337), *Revolutionary War Rolls*.

[27] Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence*, 72; 15th Virginia Regiment, Valley Forge Muster Roll, valleyforgemusterroll.org/15th-virginia-regiment/; Flora's company included one officer, four non-commissioned officers and twenty-four privates, a platoon-sized unit. Eleven privates were recent draftees and the Battle of Monmouth served as their first combat experience. Flora was one of only thirteen veteran privates in his company at Monmouth, 15th Regiment 1777-1778 (Folders 328-337), *Revolutionary War Rolls*.

[28] Mark E. Lender and Gary Wheeler Stone, *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 284, 333, 459; 5th Virginia Regiment, 1778-1779 (Folders 145-147); 5th and 11th Regiments (Consolidated), 1779 (Folders 156-164), *Revolutionary War Rolls*.

[29] See endnote 6 above.

[30] In September 1778 Flora served under Capt. John Marshall, also acting army judge advocate, in the Lt. Cols. company of Lt. Col John Croppers; these musters confirm William Flora's initial enlistment date of November 22, 1776.

[31] From January through April 1779 Flora served in the company of David Mason and Capt. Marshall reverted to his judge advocate duties, 11th Regiment, 1776-1778 (Folder 282), *Revolutionary War Rolls*; Heitman, *Historical Register*, 383; General orders, 20 November 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, [General Orders, 20 November 1777](http://www.foundersonline.org/General-Orders-20-November-1777).

[32] 7th Virginia Regiment, Virginia Continental Line Reorganization, <http://www.7vr.org/single-post/2018/01/07/Virginia-Continental-Line-Reorganization-of-1778-and-1779>.

[33] Flora continued service in the company of Capt. Mayo Carrington, 5th Virginia Regiment, commanded by Col. William Russell, 5th Virginia Regiment, 1778-1779 (Folders 145-147), 5th and 11th Regiment (Consolidated), 1779 (Folders 156-164), *Revolutionary War Rolls*.

[34] Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, eds., *Revolutionary Virginia, The Road to Independence* (University of Virginia Press, 1978-1983), 4:274n6, 422, 495-97, 499n5; 5:44n16, 116-118; 6:48, 49n2, 96, 172, 243, 495, 511; 7:35, 232, 483; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), January 26, February 2, 1776; *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Hunter), January 13, 1776; Virginia House of Delegates, House History, Thomas Mathews, history.house.virginia.gov/members/4528; Heitman, *Historical Register*, 384. Gov. Thomas Jefferson estimated 880 militia in Norfolk County in 1780-81. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1853), 97.

[35] Virginia documents pertaining to William Florey VAS3604; Pension Application of Thomas Mathews W17076 and R16019, revwarapps.org/r16019.pdf; Heinegg, *Free African Americans*, 1:376-77.

[36] Virginia documents pertaining to William Florey VAS3604, revwarapps.org/VAS3604.pdf; Bounty Land Claim relating to Augustine Slaughter BLWt2168-400, revwarapps.org/blwt2168-400.pdf.

[37] Virginia documents pertaining to William Florey VAS3604, revwarapps.org/VAS3604.pdf.

[38] Thomas Mathews mentioned Flora serving at Yorktown, Virginia documents pertaining to William Florey VAS3604, revwarapps.org/VAS3604.pdf; Thomas Mathews Biography, Virginia House of Delegates, House History, Thomas Mathews.

[39] Luther P. Jackson, *Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the Revolutionary War* (Norfolk: Guide Quality Press: 1944), 16-19; Revolutionary War Service Records, William Flora, Certificate for Balance of Pay, November 24, 1783, *Fold3*; William "Billy" Flora, *Encyclopedia Virginia*, encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/william-billy-flora-d-ca-1819/.

[40] *Norfolk County Personal Property Tax List*, 1782-1791, Microfilm no. 47, 1791-1812, Microfilm no. 249, Library of Virginia, Richmond; William Flora, *Virginia, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1652-1900*, Ancestry.com, original source, *Wills, Vol. 5-6 1818-1868*, General Index to Wills, 1755-1950, Virginia. County Court, Norfolk County, Probate Place: Chesapeake, Virginia.