

My story is too long

"I'm an old woman," says Margaret Johnston of Lake of the Woods, her sparkling eyes belying her 77 years. "My story is too long."

Not to worry, Margaret, we have all day. Born the eldest child of a plumber/hardware store owner and a florist, Margaret Conrad grew up in the lead mining town of Bonne Terre, MO. Of German and Irish stock in a town that also had Hungarian and African American communities, she says there were "no groups." Everyone pretty much focused forward instead of backward. "In this small mining town, we were all obviously having greater dreams."

Both of her younger brothers grew up to become Navy pilots. Margaret graduated from high school in 1950 and enrolled in Texas State College for Women. But during her first semester, her father died and, being the eldest, she had to come home. She went to work for the Bonne Terre telephone company.

The U.S. Army came knocking...recruiters, looking to fill clerical jobs in the nation's capital. She moved to Washington and then was recruited again, this time by the State Department. "I was stationed in El Salvador and then I was stationed five years in Mexico," she says, adding that this is when she first met James Johnston, when she was Assistant to the Ambassador. "And then I went out to the Congo to work for Edmund Gullion, who was a major figure in the diplomatic service at that point because of his relationship with JFK."

These were exciting times in Africa. The nation's leader, Lumumba was murdered. Leftist rebels captured the town of Stanleyville and massacred scores of white hostages and native Congolese. The U.N. stepped in.

Margaret Conrad was in the middle of it all. "Just keep in mind, I was young." She pauses; a dreamy look flits across her face. "You know when you're young, you don't see it the way you would today... It was very dramat-



Margaret and James Johnston relax at their Lake of the Woods home. James Johnston is a retired vice president of General Motors and former chairman of the board of advisors to the School of Philosophy at Catholic University.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

ic with the U.N. troops there. I used to say it was like Casablanca with Humphrey Bogart."

Then, Jack Hood Vaughan was appointed the second director of the Peace Corps. He was looking for an assistant and "they recommended me. So I was pulled out of Africa, and came back to work for him." And lo and behold, she ran into James Johnston, her old friend from her Mexico days, in Washington, DC.

They were married in 1969; Margaret resigned from the state department and devoted the rest of her life to family and community service. James worked for General Motors,

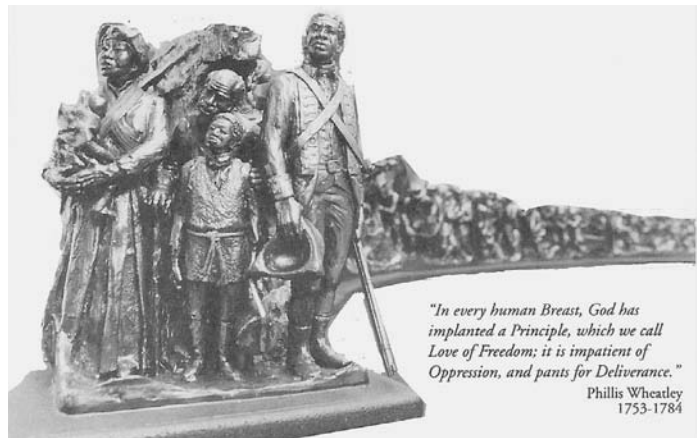
became a vice president, and commuted from Detroit to Washington, even wrote a book on the automobile industry. "I think Jim feels if he were still there, none

of this (the bankruptcy) would have happened," she says ruefully.

In 1990, Margaret Johnston graduated from Trinity University in Washington with degrees in Spanish and Theology, "a year before my daughter." And to this day she describes her "other" passions as Mexico and the Catholic Church.

It was during her time in Washington as a community activist that she co-founded the Black Patriots Foundation. And it was here that she befriended Ed Dwight, who among many other accomplishments, served as America's first black astronaut. She worked closely with this renowned sculptor on a design for a Black Patriots memorial on the mall. She purchased two of his statues, one portraying a black revolutionary war soldier, the other an African American woman bearing a rifle.

"So here I am and I have my statues and I asked the (James Madison Museum) Board what they thought of this idea," she says of her plan to establish a Black Patriots exhibit at the local museum. "These two Africans didn't have a home," she waves in the general direction of the two statues. "They needed to be someplace where people can see them...It is ennobling to all of us to see, that as bad as it was, these people were remarkable and we need to know about it."



A close up of the maquette of the sculpture by Ed Dwight that was proposed for the Black Patriots Memorial in Washington DC. Note the inscription by Black Revolutionary War Patriot and poet, Phillis Wheatley.

"In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance."
Phillis Wheatley
1753-1784

State of Ohio, personally appears Henry Hill aged 25 years resident in said Franklin County

Black Patriots: "they played a role"



PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Dividing her time between homes at Lake of the Woods and Washington, DC, Margaret Johnston has organized an exhibit at the James Madison Museum in Orange that honors African American Revolutionary War Patriots. The exhibit will be unveiled this Sunday at 3 p.m. at the museum's Hall of Agriculture. Following an address by DAR genealogist, Hollis Gentry, refreshments will be served.

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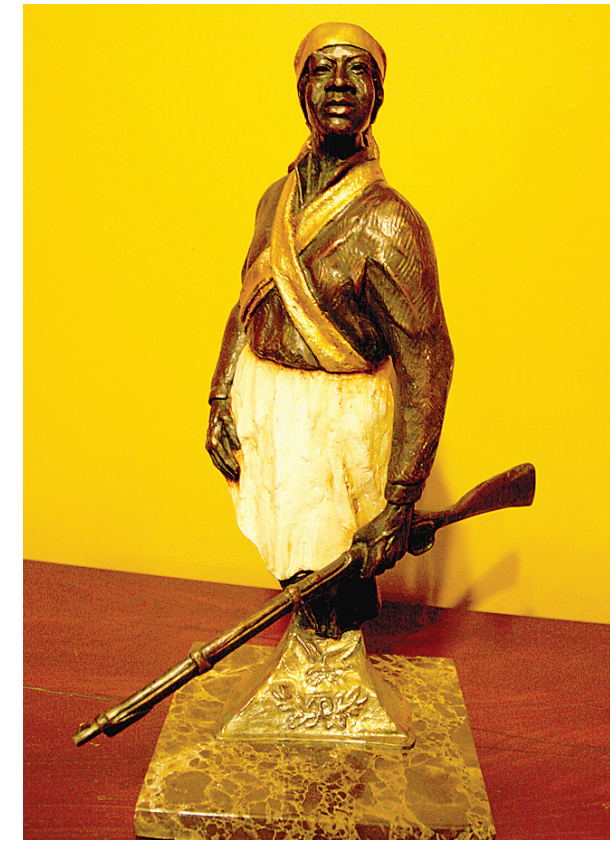
"These people really existed." Margaret Johnston, all four-foot eleven of her, fairly quivers in excitement. "And here's the evidence to it." She thumps a massive tome the size of a dictionary.

The book is entitled, "Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War." In it are the names and/or descriptions of the 5,000-plus men and women of African and Native American descent, including at least one in Orange County, who participated in the Revolutionary War.

"Five thousand...really?" She repeats the skeptics' queries.

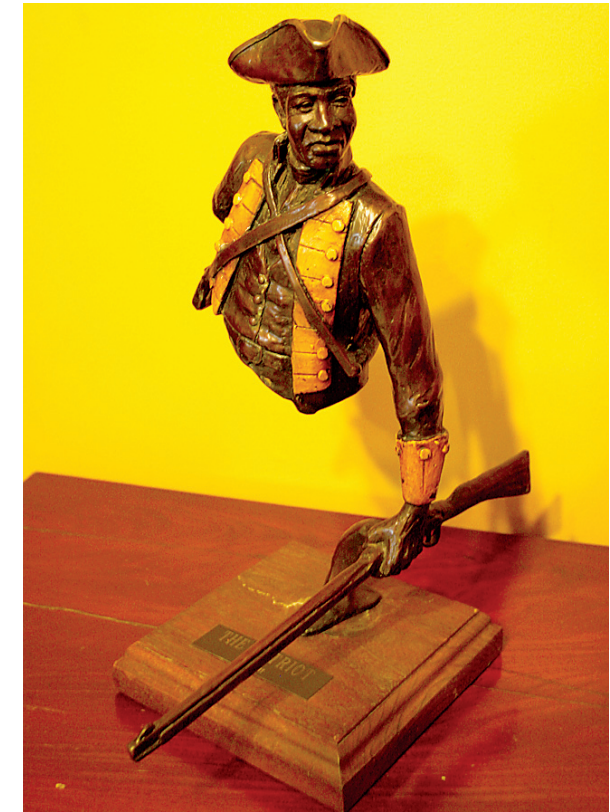
Yes, five thousand. "I've had people roll their eyes, like that." She demonstrates with her piercing blue peepers.

This comes as an amazing revelation to not only whites but also blacks, most of us equally clueless about this neglected piece of our history. For whites it is an ironic epiphany: that men and women of color, both free and enslaved, helped in



PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Two Ed Dwight sculptures being donated to the James Madison Museum by Margaret Johnston depict both a black man and woman bearing arms in defense of their country.



our struggle to free ourselves from an oppressor. "Wow!" exclaims Margaret Johnston, "they played a role."

It is no less ironic for blacks, because this stands in the face of the commonly held perception that their ancestors stood (and toiled) on the sidelines during this white man's war for an independence they would never have. "Wow!" repeats Margaret Johnston feigning amazement; "they played a role."

Here are our ancestors, freedom fighters, both black and white, master and slave, freedman and farmer, united against a common enemy. It makes us all equal Americans from the very beginning!

"This history, becoming more known by both the black and white community; that's the key," continues Margaret passionately. "That's why we can't get it straight because we're not building on a foundation; we're just coming in from wherever we are and whatever we believe."

But this is something different! "You know how people talk about race relations; how can we improve race relations?" she queries rhetorically. "You improve race relations by learning your history and knowing what that community was like; both sides, what was going on. You know... meet your ancestors; find out how they dealt with these remarkable situations. It's exciting. So I think the start is the Forgotten Patriots and you build on that."

At the James Madison Museum, next Sunday at 3 p.m., we will all have an opportunity to "build on that," when, in celebration of Black History Month, Margaret Johnston will formally donate two Ed Dwight sculptures of black patriots. Re-enactors called Out of Time Teachers will be on hand in period dress. Also a noted minority genealogist, Hollis Gentry, will deliver a talk on "Finding Forgotten Patriots." And the Susannah Chandler Chapter of the DAR will donate "the book" to the museum.

And to think the Daughters of the American Revolution, of all organizations, is behind it! Commonly held misconceptions are crumbling by the dozens. The DAR is an exclusive club of blue-blooded, white-haired and definitely white-skinned little old ladies, right? Well, yes, back in the late 1930s they were. But no longer, and one of the main reasons for that is Margaret Johnston.

Her first connection to the DAR came when her Uncle C.P. was researching the family and found that she goes back to a musician/private in a North Carolina Regiment of the Continental Line. He urged her to join the organization.

She remembers her response. "You have to know that I've been told that blacks are not members because they didn't serve in the Revolutionary War. And if I get in there and I find out that they served,

you know, Uncle C.P. that I will not be able to live with that....And that's what happened; I got in and found out that, Good Lord, they served... And that's why it became so critical to me that this history be verified, which the DAR itself is now doing."

In fact, it was Margaret Johnston who championed the membership of the first modern-day black to join the DAR, a woman named Karen Farmer. She also sponsored the second modern-day member, Lena Ferguson, who, with her nephew and Margaret founded the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Foundation in the early 1990s.

"The DAR, today's generation of members, they want black members, and they've got this book...and the people who gathered the evidence are the DAR who seemed to stand in the way for years, and now they're saying, 'come join us.'"

Actually the first black member ever to join the DAR did so in 1896. Her name was Eunice R. Davis and she was 95 at the time! That's according to DAR genealogist, Hollis Gentry who has been working on "the book," for the past two years now.

"It's challenging," says Gentry of the task of researching African American Revolutionary War soldiers. In many cases, they only have a first name, or just a master's name. "Sometimes in the records they just said 'six negroes,'" says Gentry, adding that the book has been 20 years in the making. But in researching her own family, she discovered that "there are a lot of records for African Americans. They're in the same places as white records: the court records, the deeds, the court minutes, the wills, the court orders. And that's not any different than the typical white person of that time."

Asked if the process is easier now than when Alex Haley published his seminal work "Roots," you can almost hear her smile ruefully over the phone. "Ah, the Alex Haley question." She's been asked that one before.

"Alex Haley did not publish any methodology that we could use," she says with a note of finality. "They call it 'faction.'" But, she credits Haley for sparking an all-important interest in scientific African American genealogical research.

And, of course, today's technology has helped immeasurably. Data bases are growing; scientific research on the topic is being published more regularly; genealogical organizations such as Afrigenaeas have cropped up; and the massive Mormon data base... all have made the job less daunting. "You still need to go back to the archives," cautions Gentry, "but in terms of African American research, there are more resources on line than back in the '70s."

So who were these black patriots? "Most people only think of the people fighting," says Gentry. But those on the list of 5,000 "could be women who cooked, sewed and helped." In many cases, it's impos-



The American Revolution can be traced back to this event, when British soldiers fired on a crowd in Boston on March 5th, 1770. At left, Crispus Attucks may be the most famous of Black Revolutionary War Patriots. He was the first man to die in the Boston Massacre of 1770, an event that sparked the American Revolution.

sible to know just what their roles were; some were fighters; some were servants; some stayed home to get the crop in; some fought on the front lines.

Some may have had a gun not only in their hands, but also to their heads, forced by their masters to bear arms against the British. Margaret Johnston says that may have been the case in some rare instances, but mostly "They had conscious choices. They weren't just made to go into war."

Many served in the militias to keep them close to home. "Those are the ones we have the hardest times documenting," says Hollis Gentry. "And those are the areas where you would find more minorities, especially if they ere enslaved."

Probably the most famous of black patriots is Crispus Attucks, who, according to an ad placed in the Boston Gazette in 1750 "Ran away from his Master William Brown of Framingham on the 30th of Sept. last; a mulatto Fellow, about 27 years of age, named Crispus, 6 Feet and 2 inches high, short curl'd Hair." He was actually of American Indian and African American descent. His last name, Attucks, means "deer" in the Wampanoag language.

Anyway, it is unclear whether it was Attucks who first threw a piece of wood at British soldiers who had been called out to quell a distur-

bance in front of the Old State House on March 5th, 1770. Either way, they panicked and pulled the trigger. Five Americans died on the spot; another six were mortally wounded. It became known as the Boston Massacre.

Attucks was the first to die, shot twice in the chest. "He was the first person to die in the Revolutionary War," exclaims Margaret Johnston. "And that event is what started the Revolutionary War."

Closer to home: the case of Henry Hill. The DAR found him by poring over pension records. "We still don't have a lot of information on him," apologizes Hollis Gentry. "One can assume he was free at the time...For the most part in Virginia they already had to be free to get a pension." She adds that only 400 of 80,000 pensioners have been documented. "There's still more to be done...tons more."

But we do know this. A letter dated January 21, 1938, from A.D. Hiller to Luella Herbert in a matter regarding Hill's successful petition as a military pensioner in Franklin, Ohio summarizes the archival handwritten document of 1819.

He enlisted at the courthouse in Orange County, VA and served one year as private in Captain Spencer's company in Colonel Heath's Virginia regiment and was in the battle of Monmouth. He enlisted in 1780, served as private in Captains Craig's and S. Stribling's companies in Colonel Campbell's Virginia regiment, was in the battle of Guilford, in the siege of Ninety-Six and the battle of Eutaw Springs and was discharged January 18, 1782, having served 18 months. He also stated he was in the battle of Chamblee, no details of this service given.

Orange County historian Frank Walker writes in an e-mail: "Carolyn French (of Barboursville) used to tell about a freedman relative of hers who began traveling with Lafayette's army when it began pulling back from Petersburg. This individual stuck with Lafayette all the way through the pullback to Culpeper County, and when the advance began through Orange County, he joined that army." That person may have been Henry Hill.

Walker adds there may have been more Orange County African Americans who participated. "A number of African-Americans served as pioneers with Lafayette on his march through here." And in fact, "the book" quotes Lafayette's plea to the Governor of Virginia to raise "150 Negroe pioneers to march with army, and also a corps of Hundred Negroe wagoners, they might be easily got and would afford great services." Pioneers, of course, were men with axes who cleared the way.

Walker writes, "In early June 1781 Lafayette used his pioneers in Orange County to improve and widen what we today call "the Marquis Road" (Rte. 669). Cornwallis had stopped his pursuit of Lafayette and bivouacked briefly at Cook's Ford on the North Anna while units were dispatched to try to capture the Virginia legislature and to destroy colonial army stores." This is what sparked Jack Jouett's historic ride from Cuckoo to Charlottesville to warn Jefferson.

"The Marquis Road leads to Brock's Bridge on the North Anna,

but at the time the 'road' to it was not much more than an improved trail," continues Walker. "Lafayette wanted to get his men and wagons to that point as expeditiously as possible, hence the need for the services of the pioneers."

Some blacks actually fought for the British. In a cunning move that recognized Virginia's reliance on slave labor, Lord Dunmore tried to undermine the revolutionary effort by issuing a proclamation in 1775 that basically freed the slaves if they came to fight with him. "A good number of African Americans did leave and die," confirms Hollis Gentry. Many of them languished in a holding facility on Gwynn Island, to be abandoned later by the retreating British. Gentry adds, that some freedmen also sided with loyalists and relocated to Canada, where many died of disease and hardship. Others, both free and enslaved didn't leave out of loyalty to masters, families or land they owned.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Flanked by the two sculptures she is donating to the James Madison Museum, Margaret Johnston has done everything from serve as an assistant to ambassadors to co-founding the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Foundation.

"First you get out that everyone understands that there were over 5,000 African Americans who served in the Revolutionary War and others who served with the British," says Margaret Johnston. "So, it is true, it is a reality, and it is a major part of our history that is not talked about, that is not known, that is not believed."

She thumbs through the book, "Forgotten Patriots." "I think it changes your perception of that period. It broadens it." Margaret helped spearhead an effort to place a black patriot's memorial on the mall in Washington, DC. It featured a park and a winding sculpture by renowned Renaissance man, Ed Dwight. That project ran out of time and money, and Margaret is no longer on the board of the Black Patriots Foundation. She's not even sure it still exists. But, in a sense, it is being rekindled at the James Madison Museum, this Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m., thanks to Margaret Johnston, all four-foot eleven of her.