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The Black Nation and the Bicentennial

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COMMENTARY

16 **The Black Nation
And the Bicentennial**

By Ronald Walters

As an important benchmark of history, the American Bicentennial raises for Black Americans the question of the manner in which this period is to be observed. Is it to be celebrated, or to be remembered with sober reflection which calls for new commitments? Part of the answer here is tempered by the realization that Blacks did play a constructive role in the shaping of the new social order. The general facts are known that in the period of the Revolutionary War, a Black man was the first to give his life, that 5,000 Black soldiers fought in the war, that it was in a Black-owned tavern in New York City that the New York Tea Party was planned and where George Washington gave his farewell address to his officers. And, that a Black woman saved George Washington's life, and so on.

But the dominant status of most Black people in 1776 was conditioned by the harsh realities of slavery to the extent that the colonists in many places were preparing for *two wars*. One war was to be fought against the British, the other against the potentially insurrectionist slaves who, it was thought, having been made aware of the slogans and the promises of independence which inspired both the French and the American revolutions, now planned to secure their own freedom from the whites. The irony of this situation is reflected in numerous petitions by slaves for their freedom during this period, one of which stated, "We have no Property! We have no wives! No Children! We have no City! No Country!" Another read in part,

"We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty . . ." (Herbert Aptheker,



John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, "My Countrymen in Chains!" was published in 1835 as a broadside with this drawing as its heading. At the bottom were three lines that read: "He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death. Exod. XXI: 16. England had 800,000 Slaves and she has made them FREE! AMERICA has 2,500,000! — and she HOLDS THEM FAST!!! Sold at the Anti-Slavery Office, 130 Nassau Street, and 67 Lispenard St., New York. Three Cents."