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“Is This the Land of Liberty?”: Continental Soldiers and Slavery  
in the Revolutionary South

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Late in the War for Independence, Continental soldiers from New England and mid-Atlantic regiments traveled through unfamiliar southern states. As they campaigned in Virginia and the Carolinas, these outsiders commented on enslavers and enslaved people in their letters and journals—and later in their memoirs. Existing scholarship has incorrectly connected these wartime observations by outsiders with the rising antislavery sentiments of the revolutionary era. Though some northern soldiers did note regional differences in slavery with surprise and disapproval, these reactions were not static. What they chose to record was powerfully shaped by the state of the war; their relationships with inhabitants, white and Black; and the expectations for the texts in which they penned these observations. These soldiers’ writings about slavery changed as their relationships with southern inhabitants evolved. They embraced their white countrymen and either erased Black Virginians who sought freedom with the British or raged against Black men whom the British armed in South Carolina. Rather than cleanly connecting with the first wave of gradual emancipations, Continental soldiers’ writings highlight how co-opting outsiders, agnostic or naive about intensive exploitation of enslaved people, proved a component of white Americans’ nationalist project in the revolution.