

## Cesar Tarrant, Skilled River Pilot for the Patriots

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Cesar Tarrant was born around 1740, probably in Hampton. In 1765, Cesar was sold to Carter Tarrant, who owned 50 acres near the head of Hampton Creek. Tarrant paid 97 pounds, 10 shillings, more than usual for a male slave, possibly because of Cesar's skill as a river pilot. Just how or when Tarrant acquired his skills is unclear. Although local river pilots were often white and handed their profession down to their sons, it was not uncommon for enslaved men to be trained in navigation.

Cesar Tarrant supported the Patriot cause during the Revolutionary War. There is no record of what discussions there may have been between Cesar and Carter Tarrant regarding his military service. Although a promise of freedom was unlikely, it is possible that Cesar may have volunteered.

On October 13, 1775, the Continental Congress founded the Continental Navy, a grandiose name for the naval arm of the fledgling country. By 1776, the Patriot fleet consisted of 27 warships, compared to about 270 in the mighty Royal Navy. Eleven of the 13 former colonies also had state navies of at least a few vessels. Between December 1775 and July 1776, Virginia's Committee of Safety established its own navy. Of seven pilots appointed, four were enslaved, including Cesar Tarrant, who entered the service in either 1776 or 1777.

One of the earliest vessels brought into the Virginia Navy was the schooner *Patriot*, a pilot boat modified to carry ten small swivel guns and twenty men. Cesar Tarrant served as pilot on the *Patriot's* crew. In October 1778, *Patriot* was sailing in company with the Virginia Navy ships *Dragon* and *Tartar* under the overall command of Captain Richard Taylor. When the British privateer *Lord Howe* entered the Chesapeake Bay, only *Patriot* was quick enough to pursue when *Lord Howe* attempted to flee.

Despite facing a larger and more heavily armed vessel, Captain Taylor ordered *Patriot* to ram *Lord Howe*, hoping to board and capture her. The British vessel fired a broadside that raked *Patriot* fore and aft, killing two Virginians and seriously wounding several others. The *Lord Howe* was able to escape. Captain Taylor praised the pilot's performance in combat. Years later *Patriot's* gunner, James Burk, testified that Cesar had "steered the *Patriot* during the whole of the action, and behaved gallantly."

In 1783, after the war ended, enslaved men who had served as substitutes for their owners were freed. Cesar Tarrant, who apparently wasn't substituting for Carter Tarrant, remained in bondage. In 1784 Carter Tarrant died and Cesar Tarrant was willed to Carter's wife Mary. Finally, in 1789, the General Assembly purchased the freedom of Cesar Tarrant as a reward for his meritorious service. That freedom did not extend to his entire family, although Cesar later was able to purchase the freedom of his wife and a daughter. Tarrant continued working as a pilot until he died in Hampton, Virginia, in 1797, a free man, property owner, and respected professional. Tarrant Middle School in Hampton is named for this Revolutionary War hero.