

Joseph Harris, Skilled River Pilot for the British

In 1775, Joseph Harris (described as a “small mulatto man”) was enslaved by Henry King, a prosperous Hampton merchant who had a small fleet of ships. Harris was a skilled river pilot who knew the regional rivers and how to read tides and winds. As the political situation between Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore, and the Patriot government worsened, Harris began spying for the British, no doubt motivated by an opportunity for freedom from slavery. It was a gamble as there was yet no formal announcement that service for the British would result in freedom.

Harris was well-positioned to pick up information. His enslaver, King, was a prominent Patriot leader in Hampton. As a pilot, Harris had unlimited access to the local waterways. His activities spying for the British were discovered and the Patriot leaders in Hampton threatened him with death. As a result, Harris decided to escape, and in July 1775 he made his way to the British fleet, where he was welcomed. He was soon employed piloting British warships.

On Sept. 2, 1775, a hurricane blew through Hampton Roads and the British tender Liberty ran aground in the Back River near Hampton. Royal Naval Lieutenant Matthew Squire, Captain of the fourteen-gun sloop Otter, was aboard Liberty, which was piloted by Harris. Stuck in the mudflats when the storm subsided, the Liberty crew members split up to try to avoid being discovered. Squire and Harris stayed together, perhaps a sign of how much the captain trusted his pilot. Harris led Squire to a friend’s house where they spent the night. They evaded the Patriot squads searching for them, obtained a canoe, and returned to the British base at the shipyard in Gosport (modern day Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth).

On October 26, 1775, Harris returned to Hampton. On the morning of October 27, he was piloting the Hawke, one of the British ships that fired on Hampton that day. During the brief but bloody fight with the Patriots, the tender got too close to the shore and was captured. Lieutenant John Wright, captain of the Hawke, jumped overboard. Harris also abandoned the ship and helped Wright to safety.

Harris remained with the British Navy, but not for long. In the summer of 1776 he fell ill, either from smallpox or from one of the many other diseases that were then rampant on naval vessels. He died aboard a British ship in the Chesapeake Bay on July 19, 1776, probably unaware of what had happened in Philadelphia two weeks before. The British had provided him the chance to become a free man, and he was willing to die for the opportunity to be free. Like many of his formerly enslaved counterparts, that freedom was short lived.