

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

Black Christianity Before the Civil War: Did You Know?

Spiritual memories of slave—in their own words.

She'd Be A-Prayin'

My mother, all de time she'd be prayin' to de Lord. She'd take us chillun to de woods to pick up firewood, and we'd turn around to see her down on her knees behind a stump, a-prayin'. We'd see her wipin' her eyes wid de corner of her apron—first one eye, den de other—as we come along back. Den, back in de house, down on her knees, she'd be a-prayin'.

—*Rebecca Grant*

Good Bye, Child

While traveling in Delaware, a child of a slave was sold: As the colored woman was ordered to take it away, I heard Fannie Woods cry, "O God, I would rather hear the clods fall on the coffin lid of my child than to hear its cries because it is taken away from me." She said, "Good bye, Child."

We were ordered to move on, and could hear the crying of the child in the distance as it was borne away by the other woman, and I could hear the deep sobs of a broken hearted mother. We could hear the groans of many as they prayed for God to have mercy upon us and give us grace to endure the hard trials through which we must pass.

—*Fannie Woods*

Welcoming the Baby

Whenever white folks had a baby born, den all de old niggers had to come th'ough the room, and the master would be over 'hind the bed, and he'd say, "Here's a new little mistress or master you got to work for." You had to say, "Yessuh, Master," and bow real low, or the overseer would crack you.

—*Harriet Robinson*

Religion With Filling

That religion I got in them way-back days is still with me. And it ain't this pie-crust religion, such as the folks are getting these days. The old-time religion had some filling between the crusts.

—*Prince Bee*

Turning Loose

On Sundays, us would git tergether in de woods an' have worship. Us could go to de white folks' church, but us wanted ter go whar us could sing all de way through, an' hum 'long, and shout—you all know, jist turn loose lak.

—*Emily Dixon*

Bloodied Prayer

One night Joe an' my mammy an' some more slave wus down on deir knees prayin' fur de good Lord to sot dem free, an' Frances [a house slave] wus slippin' round de corner uf de house an' heard what dey was sayin'. An' she goes back to de house an' tells de old marse [master], an' he sont [sent] de oberseer down dar an' brung ebery one uf dem to de stake, an' tied dem, an' whupped dem so hard dat blood come from some uf dem's backs.

—*July Halfen*

Revealed Freedom

I've heard 'em pray for freedom. I thought it was foolishness, then, but the old time folks always felt they was to be free. It must have been something 'vealed [revealed] unto 'em.

—*Anonymous*

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Black Christianity Before the Civil War: From the Editor - The Trojan Horse Gospel

editor

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."—**Paul**

These ancient words of a Jewish convert were addressed to first-century Greek Christians in Asia Minor; they had nothing to do with political slavery but slavery to religious law. Like the great Trojan horse, these words look magnificent, but they didn't seem to pose any danger to Roman principalities and powers.

Yet they contained a dangerous idea that made its way from Asia Minor, through Europe, and across the world. That idea sat patiently for centuries, only vaguely comprehended—that there is an undissolvable link between spiritual and other freedoms, and that wherever a people experience spiritual freedom, it will not be long before they create for themselves social and political freedoms.

The story of black Christians before the Civil War is a chapter in the larger story of the Trojan horse gospel, the story of a faith that finally overwhelmed whips, shackles, and southern law; illiteracy, superstition, and cowardice; even northern courts and "Bible Christianity." It is the story of how the gospel took root in the lives of black Americans and gave them hope and courage in tragic conditions, and gave them freedom.

This issue covers the struggle of both free and slave Christians, and tries to let blacks speak as much as possible. We've adopted the scholarly convention of reporting black speech in dialect, even though it may make for difficult reading now and then. Then again, to "clean up" these quotes would be to homogenize their voices and to lose a sense of the history.

By the end of the Civil War, conditions were radically different, especially for southern Christian blacks—though they still had to endure the horrific injustices of the "Jim Crow" era. But that is another story for another issue.

As usual, we're troubled by all we had to leave out, by writers we couldn't obtain, by pictures we couldn't get. Suffice it to say, this story is richer and deeper, more troubling and inspiring still.

Mary Ann Jeffreys, CH's editorial administrator for nearly ten years, has become assistant editor of Virtue, a sister publication at CTi. She is most well known for organizing our tours and for acquiring the stunning images that have regularly graced these pages. She will be sorely missed. If you want to wish her well, you may e-mail her (tcwedit@todayschristianwoman.net).

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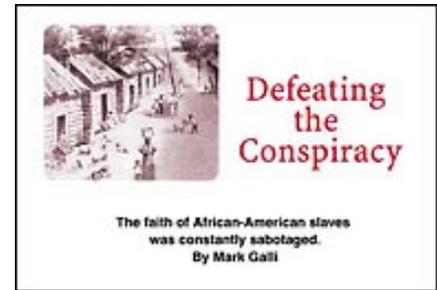
Defeating the Conspiracy

Ignorance, prejudice, and even Bible Christianity joined forces to sabotage the faith of African-American slaves.

Mark Galli

Peter Randolph, a slave in Prince George County, Virginia, until he was freed in 1847, described the secret prayer meetings he had attended as a slave.

"Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation," he wrote, "the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place. ... This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.



"After arriving and greeting one another, men and women sat in groups together. Then there was "preaching ... by the brethren, then praying and singing all around until they generally feel quite happy."

The speaker rises "and talks very slowly, until feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time there fall to the ground 20 or 30 men and women under its influence.

"The slave forgets all his sufferings," Randolph summed up, "except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming, 'Thank God, I shall not live here always!' "

It is a remarkable event not merely because of the risks incurred (200 lashes of the whip often awaited those caught at such a meeting) but because of the hurdles overcome merely to arrive at this moment. For decades all manner of people and circumstances conspired against African Americans even hearing the gospel, let alone responding to it in freedom and joy.

No time for religion

The plantation work regimen gave slaves little leisure time for religious instruction. Some masters required slaves to work even on Sunday. Even with the day off, many slaves needed to tend their own gardens, which supplemented their income and diet (others opted to socialize, to dance, or get drunk).

One of the largest obstacles was sheer prejudice. Many masters believed Africans were too "brutish" to comprehend the gospel; others doubted Africans had souls. Anglican missionary to South Carolina Francis Le Jau reported in 1709, "Many masters can't be persuaded that Negroes and Indians are otherwise than Beasts, and use them like such."

Such thinking was combated by men like Puritan Cotton Mather, who, in his tract *The Negro Christianized*, pleaded with owners to treat their "servants" as men, not brutes: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self. Man, thy Negro is thy neighbor."

Other masters believed conversion would make slaves "saucy," since they would begin to think of themselves equal to whites. According to John Bragg, a Virginia minister, slave owners agreed that conversion would result in the slaves "being and becoming worse slaves when Christians." Some even believed "A slave is ten times worse when a Christian than in his state of paganism."

There were legal complications as well. Many masters in colonial America believed if a slave was baptized that, "according to the laws of the British nation, and the canons of the church," he must be freed. Colonial legislatures sought to clear up this matter, and by 1706 at least six had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave "as to his bondage or freedom." It wasn't just economics but a twinge of Christian conscience that prompted the legislation. As Virginia's law put it, it was passed so that masters, "freed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity."

But clergy were in short supply even for whites in the eighteenth-century South. In 1701 Virginia, for example, only half of the forty-some parishes containing 40,000 people were supplied with clergy. And regarding white settlers in Georgia, one missionary said, "They seem in general to have but very little more knowledge of a Savior than the aboriginal natives."

Finally, there were cultural obstacles. In 1701 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was formed, and one of its purposes was to seek the conversion of slaves in colonial America. As an arm of the Church of England, however, it was less than effective with the "target" population. Le Jau described his refined and rational method of teaching African Americans: "We begin and end our particular assembly with the collect. ... I teach them the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Commandments. I explain some portion of the catechism ... "

With culture, prejudice, and injustice joining forces, few slaves were converted. As one missionary reported in 1779 about conditions in South Carolina: "The Negroes of that country, a few only excepted, are to this day as great strangers to Christianity and as much under the influence of pagan darkness, idolatry, and superstition as they were at their first arrival from Africa."

It would, it seemed, take a miracle to turn things around. And a miracle is just what America had already begun to experience.

Black awakening

In 1733, during a local revival instigated by his preaching, Jonathan Edwards noted, "There are several Negroes who ... appear to have been truly born again in the late remarkable season." When the Great Awakening arrived in full—with shouts and groans and spiritual ecstasy—blacks began to swell the crowds coming to hear revival preachers. In Philadelphia, George Whitefield reported, "Nearly 50 Negroes came to give me thanks for what God had done to their souls." In the late 1740s, Presbyterian Samuel Davies said he ministered to seven congregations in Virginia in which "more than 1,000 Negroes" had participated in his services.

Presbyterian theology and Anglican liturgy, however, held little appeal to most blacks. Not until Methodists and Baptists arrived—with their emphasis on conversion as a spiritual *experience*—did black Christianity begin to take off.

John Thompson, who was born a Maryland slave in 1812, said he and his fellow slaves "could understand but little that was said" in the Episcopal service his owner required them to attend. But when "the Methodist religion was brought among us ... it brought glad tidings to the poor bondsman." It spread from plantation to plantation, he said, and "there were few who did not experience religion."

Baptists and Methodists prized spiritual vitality more than education in clergy, so if a converted

African American showed a gift for preaching, he was encouraged to preach, even to unconverted whites. Thus arose the earliest black preachers of repute, men with names like "Black Harry" Hosier, Josiah Bishop, "Old Captain," and "Uncle" Jack.

The Great Awakening, then, planted the seed of a more experiential type of Christianity that blossomed suddenly late in the eighteenth century. Black Methodism in the U. S. grew from 3,800 in 1786 to nearly 32,000 by 1809. Membership in black Baptist congregations increased as well, from 18,000 in 1793 to 40,000 in 1813.

Southern whites were not necessarily comfortable with this. Though a few masters argued that slaves "do better for their masters' profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian love and duty," others kept their slaves distant from the Christian preaching. Francis Henderson, a fugitive slave, said his master had refused him permission to attend a Methodist church saying, "You shan't go to that church—they'll put the devil in you."

And Francis Asbury, the famous Methodist bishop, complained, "We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us."

By 1820, one white Presbyterian minister, Charles C. Jones, could still moan, "But a minority of the Negroes, and that a small one, attended regularly the house of God, and ... their religious instruction was extensively and most seriously neglected."

A slave conspiracy in 1822 and a revolt in 1831 didn't help matters. The conspiracy was led by Denmark Vesey who, as one co-conspirator confessed, "read in the Bible where God commanded that all [whites] should be cut off, both men, women, and children, and said it was no sin for us to do so, for the Lord commanded us to do it." The slave revolt, the bloodiest in U.S. history, in Southampton, Virginia, was led by Nat Turner, a prophet and preacher, who said he had been directed to act by God (see "[God's Avenging Scourge](#)," p. 28). After such incidents, masters were even more reluctant to let blacks gather alone for any reason.

Still, the southern conscience, pricked by northern abolitionist agitation, prompted increasingly more slave owners to take the Great Commission seriously. Slave owners wanted to prove that slaveholding could be a positive good for both owners and slaves.

In 1829, the South Carolina Methodist Conference appointed William Capers to superintend a special department for plantation missions—the first official and concerted effort of the sort. Four years later, Charles Jones began a ministry to evangelize slaves and to convince others to do likewise.

Jones, called "the apostle to the negro slaves" was, in fact, a slave owner. He came from a distinguished Georgia family and eventually owned three plantations and 129 slaves. A man with one compassionate eye and another fierce with purpose, Jones urged his southern brethren to "look to home" first. "The religious instruction of our servants is a duty," he wrote in 1834. "Any man with a conscience may be made to feel it. It can be discharged. It must be discharged ... as speedily as possible." This would not only win the approval of God and their own consciences, he argued, but also the respect of the North.

After the major denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist—split over slavery, efforts to evangelize slaves accelerated. Southern whites were eager to show northerners that a gentle, Christian society—slave and free—could flourish in the South.

According to some southerners they succeeded: by 1845, one southern churchman crowed that the slave mission "is the crowning glory of our church."

Failure of white Christianity

The gospel presented to slaves by white owners, however, was only a partial gospel. The message of salvation by grace, the joy of faith, and the hope of heaven were all there, but many other teachings were missing.

House servants often sneered and laughed among themselves when summoned to family prayers because the master or mistress would read, "Servants obey your masters," but neglect passages that said, "Break every yoke and let the oppressed go free."

One white evangelist to slaves, John Dixon Long, admitted his frustration: "They hear ministers denouncing them for stealing the white man's grain, but as they never hear the white man denounced for holding them in bondage, pocketing their wages, or selling their wives and children to the brutal traders of the far South; they naturally suspect the Gospel to be a cheat and believe the preachers and slaveholder [are] in a conspiracy against them."

The institutional church, in both the North and South, had long before deserted the slaves—even the Methodists, who early on insisted that slave owners, upon their conversion, free their slaves. But by 1804, the General Conference agreed to let Methodist societies in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Tennessee allow their members to buy and sell slaves. And in 1808, the annual conference of the Methodist church authorized each conference to determine its own regulations about slaveholding.

After Denmark Vesey and his fellow conspirators (many of whom were Methodists) were arrested, southern clergy felt constrained by public opinion to affirm the racial status quo. Baptists and Episcopalians in Charleston denied any intention of interfering with slavery. By the early 1800s, the southern churches had completely folded on the issue.

In instance after instance recorded in countless slave narratives, the conversion of masters made matters worse for slaves. As ex-slave Mrs. Joseph Smith explained it, the non-religious owner simply gave slaves Sundays off and ignored them the entire day. But Christian owners, eager for the sanctification of their charges, could not let Sundays pass without due vigilance.

As Smith explained, "Now, everybody that has got common sense knows that Sunday is a day of rest. And if you do the least thing in the world they [the owners] don't like; they will mark it down against you, and Monday you have got to take a whipping."

Some didn't wait until Monday. One slave reported that his master served him Communion at church in the morning and whipped him in the afternoon for returning to the plantation a few minutes late. Susan Boggs recalled the day of her baptism: "The man that baptized me had a colored woman tied up in his yard to whip when he got home. ... We had to sit and hear him preach, and [the woman's] mother was in church hearing him preach."

It is not difficult to see why Frederick Douglass called slaveholding piety "a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action nor bowels of compassion."

Experiencing the real

It is amazing that under these circumstances any slaves found the Christian message convincing. And yet blacks clearly saw the difference—a difference white owners were utterly blind to—between the message of the Bible and the slaveholding culture in which it was taking root. When William Craft's supposedly Christian master sold his aged parents because they were no longer an economic asset, Craft said he felt "a thorough hatred, not for Christianity, but for slaveholding piety."

Slaves, when hearing the Christian message, were struck by something that transcended their culture. Many of them described how they were seized by the Spirit, struck dead (so to speak), and raised to a new life. Such conversions took place in the fields, in the woods, at camp meetings, in the slave quarters, or at services conducted by the blacks themselves.

John Jasper, a famous black preacher in Richmond, for example, was converted while at work as a stemmer in a tobacco factory. He remembered that when "de light broke; I was light as a feather; my feet was on de mount'n; salvation rol'd like a flood thru my soul, an' I felt as if I could knock off de fact'ry roof wid my shouts."

Josiah Henson said he was "transported with delicious joy" when he heard a sermon from the Book of Hebrews that said Christ tasted death "for every man." He exclaimed, "O the blessedness and sweetness of feeling that I was loved!"

Such experiences were so real that nothing masters did or said could shake their Christian confidence.

Of course, this experience of faith was not sustained by the "family prayers" led by the master or mistress, or the formal worship at which both blacks and whites gathered on Sundays. Such formats were heavily proscribed by the sensibilities and fear of white Christians.

In such settings, gifted blacks were sometimes allowed to preach. They were usually limited to assisting white preachers, which included the obligatory admonition at the end of the service for slaves to pay attention to the teachings of the white preacher. One ex-slave said, "We had some nigger preachers but they would say, 'Obey your mistress and master.' They didn't know nothing else to say."

Even when blacks met alone, though, preachers had to be circumspect. As one put it, "If a colored preacher or intelligent free Negro gains the ill-will of a malicious slave, all the latter has to do is to report that said preacher had attempted to persuade him to 'rise' or to run away; and the poor fellow's life may pay the forfeit."

Then, when alone with his black brothers and sisters, he would add, " ... iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free."

Invisible church

Yet it wasn't just the message that was chained by the circumstances, but the very style of worship blacks yearned to express. Sarah Fitzpatrick, an Alabama slave, noted, "White fo'ks have deir service in de mornin', an' niggers have deirs in de evenin', a'ter dey clean up, wash de dishes, an' look a'ter eve'thing. ... Ya' see niggers lack [like] ta shout a whole lot, an' wid de white fo'ks al' round 'em, dey couldn't shout jes' lack dey want to."

Although some southern whites forbade blacks from meeting alone, this didn't stop slaves from taking risks to enjoy their own experience of the Spirit. Ex-slave Charlotte Martin, for example, said her oldest brother was whipped to death for secreting off to a worship service.

Lucretia Alexander explained that after enduring the white preacher's sermon ("Serve your masters. Don't steal your master's turkey. ... Do whatsoever your master tells you do to"), her father would hold worship secretly in one of the slave quarters. "That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'. ... They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper."

To get a little distance between themselves and their masters, slaves would often meet in woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets, aptly called "hush harbors." Calvin Woods recalled singing and praying

with other slaves, huddled behind quilts and rags, hung "in the form of a little room" and wetted "to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air."

On one Louisiana plantation, slaves would steal off into the woods and "form a circle on their knees around the speaker, who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender's mouth."

Such secrecy was not required everywhere, and in many places and upon a variety of occasions—Sunday worship, prayer meetings, baptisms, and revivals—blacks worshiped alone and in full voice. As one ex-slave put it, referring to camp meetings: "Mostly we had white preachers, but when we had a black preacher, that was heaven."

Frederick Law Olmsted described one New Orleans service he attended in 1860. A man sitting next to him "soon began to respond aloud to the sentiments of the preacher, in such words as these: 'Oh yes!' and similar expressions could be heard from all parts of the house whenever the speaker's voice was unusually solemn, or his language and manner eloquent or excited."

Olmsted also noted "shouts, and groans, and terrific shrieks, and indescribable expressions of ecstasy—of pleasure or agony—and even stamping, jumping, and clapping hands were added."

He then focused on one worshiper: "The preacher was drawing his sermon to a close ... when a small old woman ... suddenly rose, and began dancing and clapping her hands; at first with slow measured movement, and then with increasing rapidity, at the same time beginning to shout 'Ha! Ha!' ... her head thrown back and rolling from one side to the other. Gradually her shout became indistinct; she threw her arms wildly about instead of clapping her hands, fell back into the arms of her companions, then threw herself forward and embraced those before her, then tossed herself from side to side, gasping and finally sunk to the floor, where she remained ... kicking, as if acting a death struggle."

Perhaps it was indeed a death struggle—with an oppressive culture that sought to wring life, physical and spiritual, out of her. But if so, it was one that moved toward resurrection. One ex-slave preacher talked about the effect of such services: "The old meeting house caught on fire. The spirit was there. Every heart was beating in unison as we turned our minds to God to tell him our sorrows here below. God saw our need and came to us."

Many black preachers didn't know a letter of the Bible or how to spell the name of Christ. "But when they opened their mouths," said one ex-slave, "they were filled, and the plan of salvation was explained in a way that all could receive it." Sometimes the exhorter merely related his conversion experience, or how God had comforted him in times of distress. When the preacher was exhausted, he said, the faces of the listeners "showed that their souls had been refreshed and that it had been 'good for them to be there.' "

Confident faith

By the time the guns of Fort Sumter pounded forth in 1860, the number of black Christians below the Mason-Dixon line had grown to an astounding half-million, not counting the thousands who participated secret slave worship. The numbers were uneven across the South: black Christians constituted 20 percent of the black population in South Carolina, but only about 10 percent in Virginia. In some cities, there were black congregations that numbered in the thousands. All in all, this was about double the number of black Christians from the early 1800s, and multiples more than in the early 1700s.

That blacks accepted the Christian gospel is remarkable in itself, considering the stumbling blocks

thrown in their way. Certainly some of the success must be credited to white missionaries—both slave owners and abolitionists—who insisted that slaves hear at least the rudiments of the Christian message.

But the Christianity that finally took hold of black souls, that grew and blossomed in its own distinct way, and that comforted and gave hope to a sorely oppressed people, was a different thing altogether than what whites had imagined. It was in some sense created and nurtured by blacks themselves, who refused to let whites frame their faith.

Instead they discovered for themselves the biblical message, as historian Arnold Toynbee put it, "that Jesus was a prophet who came into the world not to confirm the mighty in their seats but to exalt the humble and the meek."

This not only gave blacks hope but a confidence whites recognized and feared. Francis Henderson described her conversion this way: "I had recently joined the Methodist Church, and from the sermons I heard, I felt that God had made all men free and equal, and that I ought not be a slave—but even then, that I ought not to be abused. From this time I was not punished. I think my master became afraid of me."

Black boldness was due in part to their belief in God's special concern for the poor. As ex-slave Jacob Stoyer put it, "God would somehow do more for the oppressed Negroes than he would ordinarily for any other people."

But blacks were also bolstered by their trust in a coming judgment at which slaveholders would receive recompense. Moses Grandy remembered how during violent thunderstorms whites hid between their feather beds, whereas slaves went outside and, lifting up their hands, thanked God that judgment day was coming at last."

It was, in the end, a confidence in a God who would set things right, either in this age or in the age to come. At age 90, Jane Simpson recalled, "I used to hear old slaves pray and ask God when would de bottom rail be de top rail, and I wondered what on earth, dey talkin' about. Dey was talkin' about when dey goin' to get from under bondage. 'Course I know now."

Mark Galli is the editor of Christian History. To prepare this article, he relied upon Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution (Oxford, 1978)* and Milton Sernett's *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism (Scarecrow, 1975)*.

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He Still Wid Us - Jesus

The musical theology of spirituals.

Yolanda Y. Smith

Militant abolitionist Thomas W. Higginson was the commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first Union regiment made up of freed slaves. In his camps, his soldiers would break out into song, which Higginson wrote down and published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

"These quaint religious songs were to the men more than a source of relaxation, they were a stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven," he wrote.

"By these they could sing themselves, as had their fathers before them, out of the contemplation of their own low estate, into the sublime scenery of the Apocalypse. I remember that this minor-keyed pathos used to seem to me almost too sad to dwell upon, while slavery seemed destined to last for generations; but now that their patience has had its perfect work, history cannot afford to lose this portion of its record."

North to Canaan

Though Higginson and others noted that almost without exception, "all had a religious motive," spirituals were part of an elaborate system of secrecy. Sometimes these messages announced a secret meeting: "There's a great camp-meeting in the Promised Land."

Others may have signaled an impending escape: "Steal away to Jesus! I ain't got long to stay here!" Still others were used to mock their masters and to expose their religious hypocrisy: "Ev'rybody talkin' 'bout heav'n ain't goin' there."

"A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven," wrote Frederick Douglass. "We meant to reach the **North**, and the North was our Canaan."

As one young boy, listening with Higginson to "De Lord Will Call Us Home," explained, "Day tink **de Lord** mean for say **de Yankees**."

But spirituals, though they had their hidden meaning, were primarily religious in nature, and were a key part of the worship experience of the slaves. On Sundays and other worship times, they became the basis of the ring shout:

"When the 'sperichil' is struck up, [all present] begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. ... Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual, and sometimes the song itself is also sung by the dancers. But more frequently a band ... of singers ... 'base' the others, singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on the knees."

But such songs weren't limited to the "praise-house"; they also served an important function in the work environment. Whether house slaves or field hands, they were expected to put in long hours of

back-breaking work, with a minimal amount of food and rest.

In order to keep up with this pace, the slaves, often sang as they worked. As one ex-slave reflected, "We would pick cotton and sing, pick and sing all day."

The trouble I see

The spirituals provided a means of expressing the hope and despair that arose out of the living conditions under the brutal system of chattel slavery.

Nobody knows the trouble I see,
Nobody knows my sorrow;
Nobody knows the trouble I see,
Glory, hallelujah!

In the midst of such hardships, the spirituals emerged as a source of strength and support.

Through the spirituals, enslaved blacks affirmed that God is on the side of the oppressed. Inspired by God's actions on behalf of the children of Israel in Egypt, slaves firmly believed that God would deliver them from their bondage.

They anticipated, as Howard Thurman stated, "that inasmuch as God is no respecter of persons, what he did for one race he would surely do for another." One such spiritual began:

My army cross over,
My army cross over.
O, Pharaoh's army drowned!
My army cross over.

The slaves sang of Jesus as Lord, Conquering King, Reigning King, Suffering Savior, and Victorious Liberator. They believed in his supernatural power and in his ability to overcome oppressive systems. But while affirming his divinity, the slaves embraced Jesus as a constant companion, mediator, and friend. The suffering and death of Jesus held great meaning for oppressed slaves, as did his resurrection.

He have been wid us, Jesus
He still wid us, Jesus
He will be wid us, Jesus
Be wid us to the end.

In de morning when I rise,
Tell my Jesus huddy [howdy] oh;
I wash my hands in de morning glory,
Tell my Jesus huddy, oh.

Slaves also emphasized the Holy Spirit's presence and active involvement in their lives. Through this relationship, slaves affirmed they could feel the presence of the Spirit.

Jest befo' day, I feels 'im. Jest befo' day, I feels 'im.
My sister, I feels 'im. My sister, I feels 'im.
All night long I've been feelin' 'im.
Jest befo' day, I feels 'im. Jest befo' day, I feels 'im.

The sperit, I feels 'im. The sperit, I feels 'im!

Slaves referred to themselves as "all God's chillun'," "born of God," and "little children." This sense of their own humanity was validated by their belief that they were indeed children of God and created to be free. In light of this self-understanding, the slaves expressed a longing for freedom—not only from trials, tribulations, sin, and evil, but from slavery.

An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

Higginson's worry that "history [would] lose this portion of its record" with slaves' freedom never came to pass. Spirituals have significantly affected the rise of jazz, blues, gospel, pop, and country music, and influenced dance, drama, literature, and art.

Spirituals were resurrected in the Civil Rights movement. "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Jesus," for example, changed to "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom," and "This Little Light of Mine" became "This Little Light of Freedom."

Though spirituals have changed over the years and no longer resemble the original form they embodied during slavery, they continue to evoke a sense of passion and hope whenever they are sung.

As W.E.B. DuBois wrote half a century after the Civil War, "Through all the sorrow of the sorrow songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things."

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Resources:

Among the better books explicitly on spirituals are Richard Newman's [Go Down, Moses: A Celebration of the African-American Spiritual](#) and [Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals](#) by Arthur C. Jones and Vincent Harding.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

By Any Means Necessary

Black abolitionists were tired of waiting for a gradual peaceful end to slavery.

Ted Olsen

Will the Lord suffer this people to go on much longer, taking his holy name in vain? Will he not stop them, preachers and all? O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men to witness that your destruction is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you repent."

The words of David Walker, the Bostonian son of a free mother and slave father, were as much a threat as they were a jeremiad. His 76-page pamphlet, *Walker's Appeal ... to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), marked the beginnings of a new abolitionism—and the beginnings of a rift between white and black antislavery movements.

Nervous reactions

"They want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us," Walker wrote of southern slaveholders. "Therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed ... and believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man who is trying to kill you than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty; in fact the man who will stand still and let another man murder him is worse than an infidel."

Walker had never been a slave, but having been born in Wilmington, North Carolina, he knew its horrors. He had once seen a son forced to whip his mother to death. As a devout Baptist with a deep knowledge of the Bible, he believed the Old Testament God who violently freed the Israelites would free "the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived."

The Boston clothier was also fluent in the rhetoric of the American Revolution, quoting Thomas Jefferson at length. For Walker, the Declaration of Independence, which affirmed the right of revolution, justified blacks' rising against their oppressors. Thus they could act confidently:

"Never make an attempt to gain our freedom or *natural right*, from under our cruel oppressors and murderers, until you see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ the king of heaven and of earth who is the God of justice and of armies, will surely go before you. And those enemies who have for hundreds of years stolen our *rights* and kept us ignorant of him and his divine worship, he will remove."

Southern whites were horrified by "the diabolical Boston Pamphlet." They passed laws forbidding blacks to read, banned the distribution of all antislavery literature, and offered rewards of up to \$10,000 for Walker's arrest.

More importantly, however, *Walker's Appeal* also worried white abolitionists. "A more bold, daring, inflammatory publication, perhaps, never issued from the press of any country," wrote Quaker Benjamin Lundy, the most famous abolitionist of the day. "I can do no less than set the broadest seal of condemnation on it."

Abolitionist racism

Quakers and others had been arguing against slavery since colonial times, but their antislavery sentiments were patient. They believed "an abhorrence of slavery would gradually work its way" in the south, just as it had in the north, and that "it was the duty of [slavery opponents] patiently to wait the event."

But whites in the movement failed to see how pervasive racism was in their own ranks. In fact, one black newspaper editor suggested that many whites joined the antislavery cause because it allowed them to judge the South without confronting their own bigotry. Many in New England had never even seen an African American, and most societies forbade the admittance of blacks.

"Until abolitionists eradicate prejudice from their own hearts," opined one antislavery editor, "they can never receive the unwavering confidence of the people of color."

A few did receive such confidence, however, most notably William Lloyd Garrison. The publisher of the radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, Garrison was one of the few whites to support *Walker's Appeal* (though, as a pacifist, he denounced its call for violence, saying "a good end does not justify a wicked means"). One of the main founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, he was the loudest voice calling for an immediate, not gradual, end to slavery.

As one resolution at the society's founding put it, "We shall spare no exertions nor means to bring the whole nation to speedy repentance."

Only three African Americans were at that founding meeting, but its message was one that resonated with black abolitionists around the country, for whom every day of waiting meant another day of butchery.

"The pleas of crying soft and sparing never answered the purpose of a reform, and never will," wrote David Ruggles, founder of both the first African-American weekly magazine and the first African-American bookstore—and one of the key figures in freeing the most famous black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass.

Split in the ranks

Born a slave in Maryland in February 1818, Douglass taught himself to read and eventually escaped at age 20. He ended up in New York, where Ruggles fed, clothed, and hid him. Eventually Douglass began working in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and began recruiting other blacks to the abolitionist cause. Within a few minutes of meeting Garrison, the white journalist asked him to become a paid lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.

His speeches earned him local fame but also the ire of northern mobs, especially when he attacked not only southern slavery but their northern racism. In Indiana, rocks and rotten eggs were hurled at him, and his hand was broken. He was often forced from trains, though he once held to his seat so tightly that his attackers had to remove the chair with his person.

Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* earned him international fame, and he was soon the country's foremost black leader. Eventually, however, he and Garrison had a public falling out that mirrored similar splits in the abolitionist societies.

They disagreed about the legitimacy of American institutions like the Constitution, the government, and the churches (Garrison thought them all to be inherently proslavery), but their split had deeper roots. White abolitionists had been happy letting black abolitionists like Douglass publish narratives of their lives as slaves and give speeches describing the horrors of slavery. But when blacks attempted to take more leadership of the movement—as Douglass did when he attempted to start his own newspaper, *The North Star*—they were discouraged—even by radicals like Garrison.

The split widened as black abolitionists grew increasingly militant. Charles Lenox Remond, a former barber, encouraged slave uprisings and supported war between American and Britain, hoping the resulting disarray would allow slaves to seize freedom. Like Garrison, he believed the Constitution was evil, and he supported the dissolution of the Union if it meant the end of slavery.

Presbyterian minister Henry Highland Garnet, a former slave from Maryland, disagreed with Remond about the Constitution, but was even more militant than his fellow preacher—he even carried a sidearm. At the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, he issued his famous "Address to the Slaves of the United States":

"Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been—You cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. **Rather die free-men than live to be slaves.** Remember that you are four millions."

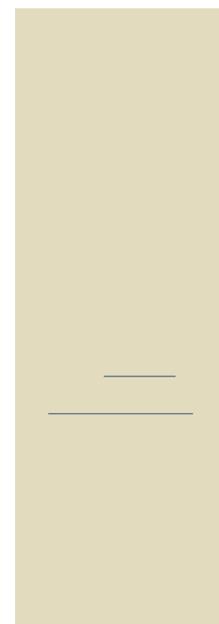
The speech shocked the abolitionist community. Even Douglass, who spoke after Garnet at the convention, denounced violent rebellion as a strategy. Within five months, however, even Douglass supported slave insurrections. After passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, blacks became even more militant. "The only way to make the fugitive slave law dead letter," Douglass said, "is to make a half a dozen or more dead kidnappers."

Unexpected Freedom

Black abolitionists saw, ironically, more fruit in the North than in the South (where they were largely limited to rescuing individual slaves). For white abolitionists, the end of slavery was the goal; for blacks, slavery was only the worst part of the nation's larger problem of racism and discrimination. Thus their agitation put pressure on northern legislatures, and some Jim Crow laws, segregation policies, and "Black Codes" were eliminated.

As white abolitionist Abby Kelley wrote, "We have good cause to be grateful to the slave for the benefit we have received to **ourselves**, in working for **him**. In striving to strike his chains off, we found, most surely, that we were manacled ourselves."

Ted Olsen is assistant editor of Christian History.



From the Archives: Slavery Under Ideal Conditions

Henry Bibb

Mr. Young [a devout Methodist] never was known to flog one of his slaves or sell one. He fed and clothed them well and never overworked them. He allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays was allowed them to cultivate it.

In time, he became deeply involved in debt, and his property was all advertised to be sold by the sheriff at public auction. It consisted of slaves, many of whom were his brothers and sisters in the [local Methodist] church.

The first man offered on the block was an old gray-headed slave by the name of Richard. When they had bid him up to 70 or 80 dollars, one of the bidders asked Mr. Young what he could do, as he looked very old and infirm? Mr. Young replied by saying, "He is not able to accomplish much manual labor, from his extreme age and hard labor in early life. Yet I would rather have him than many of those who are young and vigorous; who are able to perform twice as much labor because I know him to be faithful and trustworthy, a Christian in good standing in my church. I can trust him anywhere with confidence."

This giving him a good Christian character caused them to run him up to near two hundred dollars. His poor old companion [his wife] stood by weeping and pleading that they might not be separated. But the marriage relation was soon dissolved by the sale, and they were separated never to meet again.

After the men were all sold they then sold the women and children. They ordered the first woman to lay down her child and mount the auction block; she refused to give up her little one and clung to it as long as she could while the cruel lash was applied to her back for disobedience. She pleaded for mercy in the name of God. But the child was torn from the arms of its mother amid the most heart-rending shrieks from the mother and child on the one hand, and bitter oaths and cruel lashes from the tyrants on the other. In this way the sale was carried on from beginning to end.

There was each speculator with his handcuffs to bind his victims after the sale, and while they were doing their writings, the Christian portion of the slaves asked permission to kneel in prayer. While bathing each other with tears of sorrow on the verge of their final separation, their eloquent appeals in prayer to the Most High seemed to cause an unpleasant sensation upon the ears of their tyrants. They were soon raised from their knees by the sound of the lash, and the rattle of the chains, in which they were soon taken off by their respective master—husbands from wives, and children from parents, never expecting to meet until the judgment of the great day.

Having thus tried to show the best side of slavery that I can conceive of, the reader can exercise his own judgment in deciding whether a man can be a Bible Christian and yet hold his Christian brethren as property, so that they may be sold at any time in market, as sheep or oxen, to pay his debts.

Henry Bibb (1815-1854), a fugitive slave, became a leading abolitionist. This selection is a condensed excerpt from his 1849 Narrative of the Life and Adventures of an American Slave.

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Black Moses

The mystical faith and no-nonsense tactics of the Underground Railroad's most famous leader.

Matt Donnelly

In 1831, a Kentucky slave named Tice Davids made a break for the free state of Ohio by swimming across the Ohio River. His master trailed close behind and watched Davids wade ashore. When he looked again, Davids was nowhere to be found. Davids's master returned to Kentucky in a rage, exclaiming to his friends that Davids "must have gone off on an underground road." The name stuck, and the legend of the Underground Railroad was born.

There were no tracks on the Underground Railroad, or even any designated routes. Neither did anyone hide or travel underground. The Underground Railroad was simply a loose network of free blacks and whites in the North who helped an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 fugitive slaves find freedom in the northern United States and Canada.

Some individuals helped by offering fugitive slaves a place to hide for a day or two, others provided money for their travel to Canada, and a small number even went south to personally lead slaves to freedom.

The task of helping fugitive slaves was not an easy one. Those known to be involved in the Underground Railroad—and it was often not a secret—were criticized in popular books and newspapers in both the North and South. Neighbors spied on their activities, and slave owners and slave catchers kept their houses and businesses under almost constant watch. Some were asked to leave their churches, and their children were often harassed in school. Others, fearing for their lives, left their homes and moved to other states.

Still they remained, driven by their Christian faith and the conviction that "all men are created equal" (at a time when it was far from "self-evident"). When a fugitive slave came into their area, these "conductors" on the Underground Railroad acted quickly to usher him inside and into a safe hiding place.

Free black communities, especially the churches, were active in this work. Depending on the situation, the slave was offered a meal, money, a disguise, and help in finding the next safe haven as he journeyed north. Many slaves found a new home among the large free black communities of Philadelphia, Buffalo, Detroit, and Cincinnati; others found homes in Canada. Some slaves began new lives as domestic servants, mechanics, and field laborers, but many did not have any marketable skills and found life in the North very difficult.

'Moses' of Her People

The most celebrated leader in the Underground Railroad was ex-slave Harriet Tubman, who had escaped from the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1849. When she first reached the North, she said later, "I looked at my hands to see if I was de same person now I was free. Dere was such a glory ober eberything, de sun came like gold through de trees and ober de fields, and I felt like I was heaven."

Tubman was not satisfied with her own escape to freedom, however. She made 19 return trips to the South and helped deliver at least 300 fellow slaves to freedom, boasting "I never lost a passenger." Her

guidance of so many to freedom earned her the appellation Moses.

Tubman's friends and fellow abolitionists claimed that the source of her strength came from her faith in God as deliverer and protector of the weak. "I always tole God," she said, " 'I'm gwince [going] to hole stiddy on you, an' you've got to see me through.'"

Though infuriated slaveholders posted a \$40,000 reward for her capture, she was never apprehended. "I can't die but once" became her motto, and with that philosophy she went about her work of deliverance.

She always made her rescue attempts in winter but avoided actually going into plantations. Instead she waited for escaping slaves (to whom she had sent messages) to meet her eight or ten miles away. Slaves would leave plantations on Saturday nights so that they wouldn't be missed until Monday morning, after the Sabbath. It would thus often be late on Monday afternoon before their owners would discover their slaves were missing. Only then did they post their reward signs—signs men hired by Tubman would take down.

Because her rescue missions were fraught with danger, Tubman demanded strict obedience from those she helped. A fugitive slave who returned to his master would likely be forced to reveal information that would compromise her mission. If a slave wanted to quit in the midst of a rescue, Tubman would hold a revolver to his head and ask him to reconsider.

Asked whether she would actually kill a reluctant escapee, she replied, "Yes, if he was weak enough to give out, he'd be weak enough to betray us all and all who had helped us, and do you think I'd let so many die just for one coward man?"

She never had to shoot any slave she helped, but she did come close with one: "I told the boys to get their guns ready, and shoot him. They'd have done it in a minute; but when he heard that, he jumped right up and went on as well as any body."

Tubman said she would listen carefully to the voice of God as she led slaves north, and she would only go where she felt God was leading her. Fellow abolitionist Thomas Garrett said of her, "I never met any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God."

Apart from Tubman's work, history has often understated the role of blacks in the Underground Railroad. White abolitionists provided the safety and resources necessary for many flights to freedom, but blacks often took far more risks in directly freeing slaves. The bravest of all, however, were those slaves who finally decided to escape from captivity and board the Underground Railroad.

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Black Christianity Before the Civil War: Christian History Timeline

A Christian History timeline

A. G. Miller

1619 Twenty slaves of African descent are sold in Jamestown, Virginia—the first Africans sold on American shores.

1701 The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) begins missionary work among Native Americans and, later, African slaves. Overall, this Anglican organization is not a success among either group.

1730 John Wesley comes to Georgia with the SPG as a missionary to the Native Americans and African slaves. When his missionary efforts prove ineffective, he returns to England.

1739-41 George Whitefield's preaching tour of the colonies inaugurates the Great Awakening.

1758 The first recorded black congregation organizes on the plantation of William Byrd, near Mecklenburg, Virginia.

1773 Black Baptists found a church on the plantation of George Galphin, at Silver Bluff, South Carolina;

1773 Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* is published in London.

1775 War breaks out between Great Britain and its 13 American colonies.

1776 Black Baptist churches organize in the Virginia cities of Williamsburg and Petersburg.

1776 The Declaration of Independence acknowledges "certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

1780 The Methodist denomination requires all its itinerate preachers to set their slaves free.

1783 Jarena Lee (1783-185?) is born free in Cape May, New Jersey. Known for her powerful preaching and missionary work, she traveled great lengths to do so. In 1827, for instance, she traveled 2,325 miles and delivered 178 sermons.

1782 George Liele leaves for Jamaica

1783 The Revolutionary War ends September 3.

1784 The first General Conference (the Christmas Conference) of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church forbids its members to own slaves.

1787 Absalom Jones and Richard Allen lead a small group of Africans out of Philadelphia's St. George

Church after being forced to give their seats to white congregants. (Some scholars argue this occurred in 1792).

1787 Philadelphia blacks, including Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, organize the Free African Society as a burial society and support organization for widows and orphans.

1788 Andrew Bryan, born a slave in 1737, organizes the first African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia. By 1800 the church had 700 members. Bryan's mentor was another slave preacher, George Liele, who had escaped slavery during the Revolutionary War, settled in Jamaica, and organized the first black Baptist church in the Caribbean Islands.

1789 The U.S. Constitution declares slaves "three-fifths persons."

1791 The Bill of Rights passes.

1793 The Fugitive Slave Act allows slaveholders to reclaim runaway slaves in free states.

1794 Richard Allen purchases a lot at the corner of Philadelphia's Sixth and Lombard Streets, moves a blacksmith shop to the site, and invites Bishop Francis Asbury to dedicate it as a worship center named Bethel Church.

1794 Lemuel Haynes becomes first black to pastor a white congregation, in Rutland, Vermont.

1794 Absalom Jones helps found and then pastors the African Episcopalian Church of St. Thomas, the first black Episcopal church in America.

1801 The Cane Ridge Revival inaugurates the Second Great Awakening.

1804 The Republic of Haiti is established as result of an eight-year war between rebelling slaves and France.

1805 Joy Street African Baptist Church organizes in Boston.

1807 The first black Presbyterian church (in New York City) installs John Gloucester, a former slave, as its founding pastor.

1807 British Parliament abolishes the slave trade; the United States bans the importation of slaves.

1809 The Abyssinian Baptist Church is founded.

1813 The Union Church of Africans (now called the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church) breaks with the Methodist Episcopal Church. Led by Peter Spencer, the new denomination was concentrated mainly in Delaware and Maryland.

1815 Elders of St. George's Church take the leadership of Richard Allen's Bethel Church to court, hoping to maintain control of the operations of the black Methodist congregation. They lost before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court January 1, 1816.

1816 John Stewart begins missionary work among Ohio's Wyandot Indians.

1816 The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) organizes in Philadelphia with Richard Allen

consecrated as its first bishop.

1819 Jarena Lee, one of the premiere female black preachers, begins her preaching career.

1820 The Missouri Compromise prohibits slavery in all states north of 36 degrees 30 minutes north latitude (except Missouri).

1822 The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) organizes in New York City with James Varick as its first bishop.

1822 The First Colored Presbyterian Church of New York is founded with Samuel Cornish as pastor.

1822 An insurrection planned by Denmark Vesey, a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston, is discovered in Charleston, South Carolina.

1823 Julia A. J. Foote, the daughter of former slaves from Schenectady, New York, becomes a powerful preacher within the AMEZ Church, helping the denomination to be the first black church to ordain a woman as elder 75 years later.

1827 Samuel Cornish founds *Freedom's Journal*, the first black abolitionist newspaper.

1829 David Walker, a freeborn South Carolina African American, publishes his critical essay against American racism, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles, Together With a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America*.

1829 The Catholic religious order Oblates, Sisters of Providence, organizes to educate "free children of color" in Baltimore. Sister Mary Elizabeth Lange, a free black, is appointed as superior general.

1830 James Augustine Healy, the first black Roman Catholic priest in the United States, is born to an Irish father and a mulatto slave mother. He and his brothers and sisters rose to several prominent positions within American Catholicism. Because of their light complexion they were able to move in the white world undetected as having African ancestry. Patrick Frances Healy (1834-1910) was the first black Jesuit, the first black to earn a doctorate, and the second president of Georgetown University. Eliza [Sister Mary Magdalen] (1846-1918) was an educator and later became convent superior of Villa Barlow at St. Albans in Vermont. She was transferred to the College of Notre Dame as superior on Staten Island during the last year of his life. Hugh, born in 1832, was also ordained a priest and died in his early 20s.

1830 The American Society of Free Persons of Color for Improving their Condition in the United States meets at Richard Allen's Bethel Church in Philadelphia. These conventions, which were dominated by black ministers, were an attempt by the free black community to strategize ways to end slavery in America and to end discrimination by whites in the North.

1831 Nat Turner leads an insurrection in Southampton Virginia. At least 57 whites are killed before the revolt is put down.

1831 William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing his abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*.

1834 Ohio's Providence [Baptist] Association organizes.

1834 Great Britain abolishes slavery throughout the Empire.

1836 [Baptist] Union Association of Ohio is formed.

1837 Amanda Berry Smith (1837-1915) is born in Long Green, Maryland. After the death of her husband in 1869 she began to preaching before mixed audiences in the southern Reconstruction and North. In 1878, Smith was invited England where she ministered for two years, then went to India for a year. She then spent eight years of ministry in West Africa, starting in 1881, before she returned to the United States.

1839 Illinois's Wood River [Baptist] Association is established.

1842 Sisters of the Holy Family, The Catholic religious order, is founded by Henriette Delille, a free French mulatto woman who worked among the poor black citizens of New Orleans.

1843 Black Presbyterian pastor Henry Highland Garnet gives a fiery "Address to the Slaves," in which he calls for slaves to rebel.

1843 Isabella Baumfree (1797-1883) changes her name to Sojourner Truth and begins a career as preacher, abolitionist, and feminist.

1844 The Methodist Episcopal Church separates over the issue of slavery, forming North and South branches.

1845 White Baptists split over the issue of slavery. The northern group, the Northern Baptist Convention, is now called the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.. The southern branch took the name of Southern Baptist Convention, claiming an estimated 200,000 black members.

1849 Harriet Tubman (c. 1821-1913) escapes slavery from the Maryland Eastern Shore. Following the North Star as her guide, she made some 19 trips into the South, and leading some 300 blacks to freedom.

1850 Passage of the Fugitive Slave Law makes the apprehension of blacks, ex-slaves or not, relatively easy.

1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

1853 Representatives from seven states organize the Western Colored Baptist Convention, which lasted until 1857.

1854 The Presbyterian Church establishes Ashmun Institute (later renamed Lincoln University) in Pennsylvania to train black men for missions and ministry.

1854 The Kansas-Nebraska Act declares that the residents of new territories have the right to decide the slave issue for themselves.

1856 The Methodist Episcopal Church North establishes Ohio's Wilberforce University, named for the famous British abolitionist, to educate blacks. The AME Church, under the leadership of Bishop Daniel A. Payne, purchased Wilberforce University in 1863, making it the first college for African Americans owned and operated by a black organization.

1857 In the Dred Scott case, the Supreme Court declares that slaves are property, even when living in a free state, and that Congress cannot forbid slaveholding.

1859 John Brown leads an unsuccessful raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, hoping to inspire and supply a widespread slave insurrection.

1860 The Confederate States of America secede.

1861 The Civil War begins.

1863 Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves in rebelling states.

1864 The American Missionary Association sends Sara G. Stanley, an African American educated at Oberlin college, south to educate the newly freed slaves. She was one of many blacks and whites who saw the education of former slaves as their calling.

1865 The Confederate States surrender and the United States Congress passes the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolishes slavery except for convicted criminals.

1867 The Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention organizes with 100,000 members and 200 ministers.

1868 The Fourteenth Amendment establishes citizenship for African Americans.

1870 The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) organizes in cooperation with the Methodist Episcopal Church South. During the Reconstruction period, the Methodist Episcopal Church South lost significant numbers of its former slave membership to the AME, AMEZ, and the Northern Methodists. At its founding, the Southern Methodists were down to 40,000 freedmen and women.

1870 The Fifteenth Amendment establishes right to vote for black men.

1886 Led by Rev. William J. Simmons, six hundred delegates from 17 states organize the American National Baptist Convention.

1895 Three Baptist organizations unite, forming the National Baptist Convention of the U.S.A., Inc.—the largest African American denomination in the U.S.

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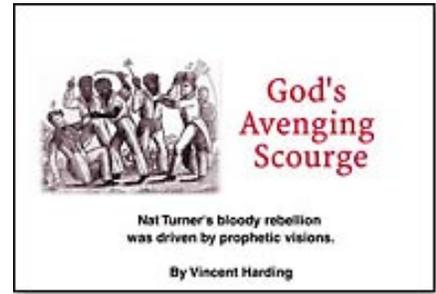
God's Avenging Scourge

Nat Turner's rebellion, the bloodiest in slave history, was driven by his prophetic visions.

Vincent Hardin

Nat Turner seemed to have imbibed deeply all the best elements of evangelical southern white religion. He did not use tobacco or liquor, he seemed to live a perfectly disciplined life among men as well as women; by and large, he caused no real trouble for the keepers of the status quo.

Indeed, around 1821 the young black man had vividly demonstrated to whites the exemplary advantage of his high standing among the other Africans by returning voluntarily to Samuel Turner after having run away for about 30 days. Therefore whites could never have predicted that Nat would be possessed by a driving messianic mission to become God's avenging scourge against the slaveholders and their world.



Blood on the corn

We are not sure of all that Nat learned from his immediate family, but his father taught him at least one thing: slavery was not to be endured. While Nat was still a child, his father had joined the ranks of the fugitives. From the rest of the community of captives, Nat learned the same lesson. He knew of the injustices suffered by his community. He learned its ritual songs and prayers, and the stories of heroes. But Nat claimed that his most profound lessons came in his own lonely, personal struggles with the spirit, whom he identified as "the Spirit that spoke to the prophets."

By the time he was 25, Nat had wrestled many times in the night with the Spirit of his God, the God of his Fathers. He had been pressed especially hard by the words: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all things shall be added unto you." As he attempted to plumb the meaning and mystery of that promise, he had been driven into his own month-long experience of the wilderness, but then had returned to the Turner farm.

Steadily he became more convinced that the Kingdom he sought was not the one preached by most of the white men he had heard. Instead, he saw the promised Kingdom of righteousness as one which would somehow be realized on the very farms and fields of Virginia, a Kingdom in which the power of the slave masters would be broken. What made the vision chilling and exhilarating was his vivid awareness of being a chosen instrument for the bringing in of this Kingdom.

Still, the way forward was not yet clear, and Nat Turner went about his life and work, waiting. By this time Turner was a familiar figure in Southampton County and the surrounding areas. Of average height, muscular in build, coffee-tan in complexion, with a wide nose and large eyes, he walked with a brisk and active movement among his people, marked within himself and among them as a special man.

On Sundays and at midweek meetings, he exhorted and sang in black Baptist gatherings. At one point, word spread that Nat Turner had cured a white man of some serious disease, and then had baptized the white believer and himself in a river. Such a story only added to his renown.

None of these developments, none of this high regard, moved Turner from his central purpose and passionate search. He waited and worked and married, but knew that all these things were only a prelude.

Then in 1825 a clearer vision came: "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.'"

Again, one day as he worked in the fields Nat claimed to have "discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven." On the leaves of the trees, he said he found "hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men ... portrayed in blood."

Through this African imagery the white and black fighters had appeared again, but this time the meaning was even clearer in his mind. It signified to Nat that "the blood of Christ had been shed on this earth ... and was now returning to earth." Therefore, he said, "It was plain to me that the Savior was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand."

In the spring of 1828, the fullest description of the Kingdom he sought, and of his own role in its coming, were spoken to Nat's third ear. On May 12, 1828, Nat said, "I heard a loud voice in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it and fight against the serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first."

As if to clear away any lingering doubt he might have had, Nat heard the spirit's clear instructions, that at the appearance of the proper sign "I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

For 28 years Nat Turner had been nurtured by the black community, instructed by signs on the leaves and in the skies. But it may have been difficult to wait for **the** sign: about this time, it seems, Turner was whipped by Thomas Moore, his present owner, "for saying that the blacks ought to be free, and that they would be free one day or another."

Turner soon moved to a new home in the country, on the farm of Joseph Travis near Barrow Road. So Nat did his temporary work and bided his time, watching for the sign.

Hatchets and axes

The sign came in February 1831, with an eclipse of the sun. He told his closest comrades that the time of battle and blood was approaching. With him in the initial leadership cadre were four men: Henry Porter, Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, and Samuel Francis. Evidently there was a group of some 25 who would form the core of the fighting force at first, convinced that others would be recruited as the struggle was openly joined.

The Fourth of July, that prime symbol of white American contradictions, was chosen as the date for the uprising. But as the time approached, Nat became ill (were there fears or premonitions?) and the date was abandoned. Another sign had to be sought. On August 13, 1831, there was "a day-long atmosphere phenomenon, during which the sun appeared bluish-green," and Nat knew that he had found the way again. One week later he met with Hark and Henry to agree on a final plan. The next night they met again, this time with several others; they agreed on their work, and ate a final meal together.

In the dark hours of the morning of August 22, Nat Turner's God pressed him forward at the head of his band of black avenging angels, drove him in search of what seemed the ultimate justice: that "the first

should be last and the last should be first."

According to a black tradition, Nat's final words to his followers were: "Remember, we do not go forth for the sake of blood and carnage; but it is necessary that, in the commencement of this revolution, all the whites we meet should die, until we have an army strong enough to carry out the war on a Christian basis. Remember that ours is not a war for robbery, nor to satisfy our passions; it is a **struggle for freedom.**" Whatever the words, this was the goal.

They began at the Travis household with hatchets and axes, and no life was spared. At that point, with very few exceptions, all whites were the enemy. It was not a matter of "good" and "bad" masters; all were involved in slavery. And the children were the heirs.

Temporarily filled with such resolve, organized into rudimentary cavalry and infantry sections, Nat's men continued down the Barrow Road, storming house after house, destroying family after family: Francis, Reese, Turner, Peeples, Whitehead, each in its turn experienced the terrible slaughter, not alien to the children of Africa.

At the height of the advance, there were apparently some 60 men in Nat Turner's company, including several described as "free." Together, in a breathlessly brief period of solidarity, they were marching to Jerusalem, Virginia, and their leader was now "General Nat."

As time wore on that Monday, there was a growing sense of confusion, disarray, and sometimes drunkenness among some of Nat's men. Often the prophet himself seemed distracted, and rode at the rear of his troops rather than at the front. Added to these internal problems was the tragic fact that General Nat's men "had few arms among them—and scarcely one, if one, that was fit for use."

Before they reached the road to Jerusalem, the alarm had been spread, leaping like fire from one blanched and trembling set of lips to another, echoing in the clashing sound of church bells across the countryside. The alarm struck fear in the heart of some of Turner's band and they deserted. Others, still on plantations, decided that the struggle was now hopeless, and decided to remain with their masters, biding their time.

Nevertheless, Nat had already challenged Virginia, the government of the United States, and all the fierce and chilling fears that raged within the depths of the white community. So vigilante groups, militia companies, and the military arm of the federal government were soon on their way to the battleground. By noon on Monday, in the blazing heat of a cornfield, Turner's insurrectionaries had their first encounter with the white militia and the volunteer companies which had rushed to organize. The blacks were heavily outgunned and, after suffering significant casualties, were forced to retreat.

Still, with less than a third of his army remaining, General Nat maintained his resolve to reach Jerusalem. But the path was blocked each way he moved, fear was rising among his decimated command, and night was now upon them. So they hid and prayed, while isolated members of their company were being trapped, captured, and sometimes murdered in the woods.

By the next day, Tuesday, August 23, the countryside was swarming with hundreds of armed white men from surrounding countries, cities, and military bases in Virginia and North Carolina, and Turner had fewer than 20 rebels remaining. Even in the face of these odds, Nat and his men were determined to fight on, if only they could draw more blacks to their side. Before daybreak they moved to attack a large plantation near their encampment, daring to hope they would attract fresh recruits out of the slave quarters there. Instead, Turner's fighters were repulsed by a defending force made up of the owners and their enslaved blacks.

As the beleaguered black remnant force separated in desperate search for other possibly surviving

companies, all save Nat were killed or captured by the end of the day.

That night he hid and hoped. As hundreds of men and animals searched him out, he dug a hole in the ground and lay there, daring to nurture the dream that he might yet regroup his forces, refusing to believe that the promised time of judgment for Virginia's slave holders had not come (or had arrived in some form unrecognizable to him).

In spite of Turner's desperate hope, there was no regrouping for his troops. He remained in hiding, avoiding capture for six weeks after the attempted revolution.

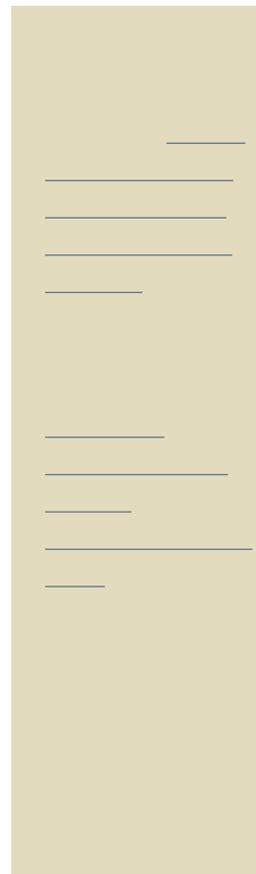
"Not guilty"

On October 30, 1831, Nat Turner was captured. His sign had not come. Charged with "conspiring to rebel and making insurrection," he told his counsel that he wished to plead not guilty, because he "did not feel" that he was a guilty person. Guilt was not a relevant category for an instrument of divine judgment—even if the last sign had not come.

Nat Turner went to the gallows on November 11, 1831, refusing to speak any final word to the crowd gathered to see him die, knowing that it was his living which had been his last, best testimony. Then, in its quiet, secret ways, the black community of Virginia and of the nation took his life into its own bosom and pondered it. They continued to see signs, beginning with the day of his execution, for on that day, according to black tradition, "the sun was hidden behind angry clouds, the thunder rolled, the lightning flashed, and the most terrific storm visited that county ever known."

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The Expatriate Option

Some blacks, like George Liele, had to emigrate to live and minister freely.

Milton C. Sernett

As far as it can be reckoned, George Liele came into this world the same year (1751) as James Madison, future member of the Continental Congress and fourth president of the United States. When Madison was fighting to have the Bill of Rights become part of the Constitution, he did not have George Liele in mind. Yet during the Revolutionary era, black men like George Liele were also striving to secure their own freedoms, both political and spiritual. Liele's life gives a glimpse into this lesser-known struggle in American history.

Free to preach

Of George Liele's early years we know little. But neither did he: "I was born in Virginia; my father's name was Liele, and my mother's name Nancy; I cannot ascertain much of them, as I went to several parts of America when young, and at length resided in New Georgia. ... I cannot justly tell what is my age, as I have no account of the time of my birth."

We do know that for the first 22 or so years of his life, Liele belonged to Henry Sharp, a Baptist deacon in Burke County, Georgia. In that remarkable period of Baptist egalitarianism (sparked by the evangelical awakening of the mid-1700s), interracial fellowships of the twice-born sprouted in the southern colonies.

At the Baptist church both he and his master attended, a sermon convinced him he "was not in the way to heaven but in the way to hell." Liele confessed Christ near the end of 1773 and went up and down the Savannah River preaching the Good News. At Silver Bluff, South Carolina, he planted the seeds of one of the earliest independent African-American congregations, known as Galphin's Mill.

Recognizing Liele's ministerial gifts, Sharp, a British Loyalist, manumitted him shortly before the Revolutionary War. (In fact, many blacks supported the British precisely because slavery had already been abolished in the British Isles and many British held emancipationist views).

Liele's church also acknowledged his preaching among slaves. "The white brethren seeing my endeavors, and that the word of the Lord seemed to be blessed, gave me a call at a quarterly meeting to preach before the congregation." They licensed and ordained Liele as a "probationer."

In the war, Sharp enlisted as a Tory officer and died "by a ball which shot off his hand." His heirs sought to re-enslave Liele and had him jailed for a time. He produced papers showing he was a free man, but to extricate himself, Liele had to borrow money from a British colonel named Kirkland, to whom he became indentured. When the British evacuated Savannah in 1782, Kirkland and Liele made their way to Jamaica.

Liele worked off his debt, received a certificate of freedom, and within two years began to preach in a small house in Kingston. A "good smart congregation," it was organized with four other blacks who had come from America. The congregation eventually purchased property in the east end of Kingston and constructed a brick meeting house.

Liele reported to English Baptists that raising money for the new building was especially difficult in his

circumstances. "The chief part of our congregation are slaves, and their owners allow them, in common, but three or four bits per week for allowance to feed themselves," he wrote. "And out of so small a sum we cannot expect anything that can be of service from them."

The free people who belonged to Liele's church were generally poor, but "they are all willing, both free and slaves, to do what they can." Liele himself farmed and hauled goods with his horses and wagon. He lamented that the businesses kept him "too much entangled with the affairs of the world," but felt it also set a good example.

Improving conditions

Despite initial opposition from some whites, Liele's congregation grew to about 350 members by 1790 and 500 by 1802, including a few whites. Liele accepted Methodists after they had been baptized by immersion but did not receive slaves without "a few lines from their owners of their good behavior toward them and religion."

Nevertheless, as he had in the Savannah area, Liele prized the freedom to preach the gospel and reached those yet under the yoke of slavery. He asked for help to obtain a larger bell—one that could be heard two miles away, for the steeple of the Baptist meeting house. The reason, he said, was "to give notice to our people and more particularly to the owners of slaves that are in our society, that they may know the hour on which we meet, and be satisfied that our servants return in due time."

Next Liele helped organize other congregations, and he promoted free schools for slaves and for free black Jamaicans. On his ministerial burdens, Liele wrote in the early 1790s:

"I have deacons and elders, a few; and teachers of small congregations in the town and country, where convenience suits them to come together; and I am pastor. ... I preach, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, and travel from one place to another to publish the gospel and settle church affairs, all freely."

By the end of the decade, Liele had reason to be more pessimistic. White persecution was rising: one man rode his horse all the way into the church and demanded, "Come, old Liele, give my horse the Sacrament!" Liele stared down the intruder and replied, "No, sir, you are not fit yourself to receive it."

Charged with "seditious preaching," he was thrown into prison in 1797. The original charge was dismissed, but his inability to satisfy debts incurred in the building of his church kept him incarcerated for three years.

Despite growing persecution, crowds overflowed Liele's church, some standing outdoors during worship to hear him preach. When pressed into service during a British call to arms, Liele found it more and more difficult to meet the spiritual needs of "the poor Ethiopian Baptists of Jamaica." Yet the the Baptist presence in Jamaica continued to expand, growing to more than 20,000 within five years of Liele's death.

Meanwhile, his early work in the American South continued to bear fruit. David George, who had helped Liele found the Silver Bluff church, also found ministry outside the U.S. more fruitful; he became a minister in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. Andrew Bryan, one of Silver Bluff's early converts, cared for the church after Liele removed to Jamaica, later founded the First African Baptist Church, one of the earliest independent black churches in the South.

George Liele died in 1828, eight years before James Madison. This son of Africa had discovered in Christianity a freedom superior to the temporal liberty begrudgingly given and ever subject to constraint. Liele was the Lord's free man.

When yet in distress over the state of his unconverted self under the preaching of the Rev. Mr. Matthew Moore, Liele "requested of my Lord and Master to give me a work, I did not care how mean it was, only to try and see how good I would do it." If history be the judge, Liele's work was good. Today we remember him as the first regularly ordained African American Baptist minister and as the founder of the Baptist tradition in Jamaica.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

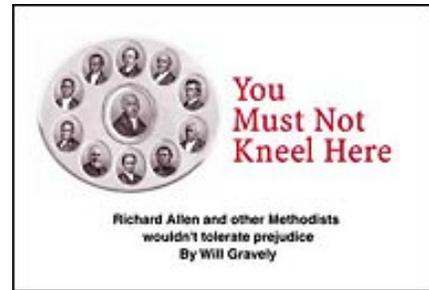
Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

You Must Not Kneel Here

One April Sunday, Richard and fellow black Methodists decided they wouldn't stand for prejudice anymore.

Will Gravely

No major Protestant denominational family in post-Revolutionary America was immune from interracial strife. Whites and blacks confronted each other over who could govern, who could be pastor, who could own church property, and who could discipline congregants. For generations those rules were set by whites, who told the Africans (as they were collectively designated) only whites could govern. Only whites could discipline. Only whites could manage church property.



Richard Allen changed the rules. The first Christian bishop of African descent in North America, he founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, one of America's first truly independent black denominations.

Preaching in his sleep

Allen's desire to preach had come with his conversion in his late teens. "I was constrained to go from house to house, exhorting my old companions and telling to all around what a dear Savior I had found," he wrote in his autobiography. But he was still enslaved. "Slavery is a bitter pill, notwithstanding we had a good master." Fortunately, he wrote, "a door was opened up unexpectedly for me to buy my time and enjoy my liberty."

Joining a Methodist class meeting, Allen convinced white circuit rider Freeborn Garrettson to preach at his unconverted master's house. Like Allen's owner, Stokeley Sturgis, the New Yorker Garrettson had been a slaveholder until his own conversion four years earlier led him to free his chattels. Garrettson's sermon from the Book of Daniel—"Thou art weighed in the balance, and art found wanting"—convicted Sturgis. Within two months, he contracted to grant Allen and his brother their freedom upon payment of 60£, or \$2000 continental money.

By August 1783, at age 23, Allen was a free man with one desire: to proclaim the gospel. "Sometimes I would awake from my sleep, preaching and praying," he recalled. Such ministry cost money, which he earned by cutting wood, making shoes, and other odd jobs. "My usual method was, when I would get bare of clothes, to stop travelling and go to work," he said.

When the Revolutionary War ended, he was licensed as a preacher with the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). Not quite a circuit rider, he was more a circuit walker, who traveled until his feet became so "sore and blistered ... that I scarcely could bear them to the ground." He went first to Delaware, then into New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, and perhaps as far south as Virginia and the Carolinas. He was even invited by Bishop Francis Asbury to travel regularly with him in the slave states, though Allen declined for a variety of reasons.

In February 1786, Allen came to Philadelphia to preach at the 5 a.m. service at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. He intended to stay only a week or two in the new nation's capital. It became his base

for the rest of his life.

"You must not kneel here."

Allen's first preaching mission in Philadelphia, "seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long forgotten people," as he put it, "was much blessed." He attracted 42 members to form a Methodist society and began to consider "erecting a place of worship for the colored people."

Immediately he ran into opposition, both from "the most respectable people of color" and then from the white elders of the city's MEC. Biding his time, Allen continued to keep together his African-American recruits to Methodism by holding prayer and exhortation meetings. But even that provoked conflict with the clergy at St. George's.

An alternative emerged with the formation of The Free African Society (FAS) of Philadelphia, which provided religious services. When its worship became too Quaker in style, Allen left the society. Still, when the group decided to build an African church, Allen endorsed the project, provoking further complaints from the white Methodists.

His loyalty to Methodism was not reciprocated, particularly at St. George's. The construction of a gallery at the church forced a shift in the seating pattern for "the colored people." Allen, William White, and Absalom Jones figured they would sit in the seats above those they had used before. As the service began, they knelt in prayer, only to have Jones pulled up by one of the trustees.

"You must get up—you must not kneel here," the trustee demanded.

Jones asked him to wait until after prayer.

"No you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away," he repeated.

When Jones again requested he wait until after prayer, another trustee came, and the two began to pull White and Jones off their knees just as the prayer ended.

"We all went out of the church in a body," Allen recounted, "and they were no more plagued with us in the church."

Allen's party refused to return, and instead publicly supported the African Church project. Elder John McClaskey threatened the group with expulsion. The FAS membership, largely fed up with Methodism, chose to align with the Protestant Episcopal denomination, with Jones as the rector of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Allen refused to sever his ties to Methodism: "I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination [that] would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodist." But he was adamant about not going back to St. George's Church where his people "were considered as a nuisance."

In May 1794, he and ten other black Methodists agreed to open "a house to meet in for religious worship ... separate from our white brethren." He bought the frame of a blacksmith shop, moved it to his lot, and refurbished it in time for Bishop Asbury to preach the dedicatory sermon on June 29, 1794, for Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Five years later, after many arguments over whether or not the Philadelphia MEC conference owned the Bethel property, Asbury ordained Allen a local deacon. The ordination recognized Allen's impressive pastoral gifts, but not fully. Technically he remained under the supervision of the white elders and was

not permitted to administer the Lord's Supper, nor could he marry or baptize beyond Bethel Church. The MEC's General Conference confirmed Asbury's action, but its delegates considered the innovation too controversial to announce in its ***Book of Discipline***.

Allen's limited ministerial authority did not detract from Bethel's growth, his own livelihood, or his public reputation in Philadelphia. Bethel's membership grew from 32 to more than 700 in eleven years. In 1801 he published two editions of *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns*, which reappeared in a pocket sized version in 1808.

He was active in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's efforts to help newly freed African Americans find apprenticeships, and he often assisted in reclaiming blacks from slave-catchers. (Allen himself was once arrested as a fugitive slave, but he sued the claimants, forcing the slaveholder into debtors' prison for three months.) In 1799 he signed Jones's petition to Congress calling for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The same year, Allen's funeral sermon praising the late George Washington for releasing his slaves in his will earned public notice.

Blocking the aisle

Relations with the MEC were stable until 1805, when James Smith became elder at St. George's. A new dispute arose over his powers, especially in cases of congregational discipline at Bethel. Smith demanded the Bethel keys and church records, threatening expulsion of the congregation. Allen and his trustees immediately went into action, distancing themselves from the denominational hierarchy.

"Our only design," Allen claimed in a letter of explanation, "is to secure to ourselves our rights and privileges, to regulate our affairs, temporal and spiritual, the same as if we were white people."

Contests around disciplinary controversies, lawsuits, and threats continued for a decade. The last stage of separation was at hand. The final act of the drama was on New Year's Eve, 1815.

Using an excommunicated member of Bethel as his ostensible host, white elder Robert Burch announced he would take charge of Bethel's pulpit. Allen's members responded by standing in the aisles, physically blocking Burch's access. When Burch petitioned the state Supreme Court to regain control, the judges rejected his claim and granted independence to Allen's congregation.

The organizing general conference of the AME denomination convened in Philadelphia, where Allen was ordained elder, then consecrated as bishop. He remained the senior pastor of "Mother Bethel" while superintending the denomination.

As Allen aligned himself and the denomination with other African Methodists who had taken steps toward independence, his reach extended beyond the city of Philadelphia. Numerical growth and territorial expansion were slow, but the church moved west, and into Canada and Haiti. When the "Gallery Incident" was related at the General Antislavery Convention in London in 1843, 12 years after his death, Allen's legacy extended to an international audience.

His autobiography, published posthumously, ended with a hymn that speaks of his legacy, Bethel Church:

Bethel surrounded by her foes,
But not yet in despair,
Christ heard her supplicating cries;
The God of Bethel heard.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

Baptist Power

How the largest African-American denomination in the world got its start.

Carolyn McCulley

They can arguably be termed the most authentic "protestants" in modern church history. Only a handful of black Baptist churches were allowed to exist before the Civil War, but they were known for their arguments for the "brotherhood of man" and against the institution of slavery. From this sprinkling of churches came a thriving denomination that a mere century later produced the Revs. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson—products of the black Baptist tradition of activism.

In the 1700s, white Baptists rarely evangelized slaves, although records show occasional examples of black members. First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, notes that 19 African Americans held membership as early as 1772.

The first black Baptist institution, however, came from the South when slave owners permitted the ministry of slave preachers. The first of these was Harry Cowan of North Carolina, a servant of Thomas L. Cowan, who gave his slave "privilege papers" so he could preach anywhere on his four plantations.

George Liele, who preached powerfully on plantations in South Carolina and Georgia, expanded this institution by helping to establish the earliest independent black Baptist churches (see "[The Expatriate Option](#)," p. 32). But Liele and his companions were the exception. Generally, black slaves were not allowed to have their own churches, pastors, or preachers.

This oppression intensified after Nat Turner (himself a Baptist preacher) led his 1831 rebellion (see "[God's Avenging Scourge](#)," p. 28). Within a year, Virginia legislators prohibited any black, free or slave, from conducting religious meetings. Other southern states followed suit.

In the North, black Baptists faced fewer challenges, and they organized churches in Boston in 1805, New York in 1808, and Philadelphia in 1809. The most progressive group, however, came from Ohio, beginning the first missionary movement in the area and organizing (in 1834) the first association of black Baptist churches, the Providence Baptist Association.

Only a few years later, black Baptists were trying to unify across state lines, beginning in 1840 with the American Baptist Missionary Convention. Such cooperation was driven in large part by a desire to evangelize Africa.

"They were quite motivated to go back to their own extended families in Africa," says Leroy Fitts, author of ***A History of Black Baptists***, "but it was very slow progress."

Many cooperative missions followed until the dream of national unity was realized in the formation of the National Baptist Convention in 1895, and within a few years, it would exceed 2 million members, producing black leaders like Booker T. Washington and key black institutions like Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C. Even though suffering a split in 1915, it is today the largest African-American denomination in the world.

A freelance writer based in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Carolyn McCulley has written for publications ranging from Christianity Today to the Washington Post.

Black Christianity Before the Civil War: A Gallery - The Fruit of Freedom

When given even a limited opportunity to grow, these African-American Christians blossomed.

Mark Sidwell

Forgotten Poet **Phillis Wheatley**

c.1753-1784

'Twas mercy brought me from my **Pagan** land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a **Savior** too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

So wrote the first major black poet in American history and one of the nation's first major female poets, Phillis Wheatley.

She was born in Gambia, West Africa, stolen from her parents at age 7, enslaved, and brought to America. Boston tailor John Wheatley purchased her as a personal servant for his wife, Susannah. Phillis displayed a ready intelligence, learned English quickly, and soon began reading and writing poetry.

The Wheatleys were members of the famed Old South Meeting House in Boston, where Phillis attended church and was baptized at age 18. She achieved some renown with the publication, in England, of her ***Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*** (1773). Though she had been examined by "18 of the most respectable characters in Boston" (to prove that she, a black women, really wrote the poems), no American publisher would publish her. Only with the help of evangelical philanthropist Selina, Countess of Huntington, did her poems come to the public's attention. As a result of her obvious gifts, her owners eventually gave her freedom.

Her poetry reflects the neoclassical style of the day but also reveals the circumstances of her life, especially her race and her faith. Perhaps her most famous poem was "On Being Brought from Africa to America," quoted above. Later she won the notice of General George Washington with a poem she dedicated to him.

She also memorialized the work of evangelist George Whitefield, a pioneer in preaching to blacks. Wheatley, in her poem "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," imagined the evangelist offering salvation through Christ to his hearers:

Take him, ye **Africans**, he longs for you,
Impartial Savior is his title due:
Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.

Phillis married John Peters in 1778. For years she suffered from poor health and financial woes. Though she was the first African American to publish a book and is today considered the founder of the African

American literary tradition, she died virtually penniless, living in obscurity on the outskirts of Boston. Many of her poems did not see publication until years after her death.

Pastor to Whites
Lemuel Haynes

1753-1833

To the late twentieth century, when Christians vigorously debate the question of racial reconciliation and how to achieve it, Lemuel Haynes represents a significant symbolic "first"—the first black pastor of a white congregation.

The illegitimate son of a black father and a white mother, Haynes grew up as an indentured servant to the Rose family in Massachusetts. The Roses included young Lemuel in their church attendance and family devotions, resulting in Haynes's increasingly "fearful apprehensions," especially upon seeing the Northern Lights, which to him was a "presage of the day of judgment." Then "one evening, being under an apple tree mourning my wretched condition ...," he wrote, "I found the Savior."

The Roses also gave him an education and treated him, Haynes said later, like one of their own children. At the end of his period of indenture, he served in the Continental Army during the Revolution, and then, with the support and encouragement of the Roses and others, he was ordained to the ministry.

Haynes spent the largest part of his pastoral career at Rutland, Vermont (1788-1818), where he led the town's Congregational church through the Second Great Awakening. In 1803, for example, spiritual excitement spread through the congregation. So many young people attended an "inquiry meeting" at a private home, the floor collapsed and everyone fell into the cellar (no one was hurt). He recorded 103 conversions that year, and another 109 a few years later.

Haynes also gained note for his public opposition to Universalism, the belief in the ultimate salvation of all people. When Universalist leader Hosea Ballou came to Rutland, Haynes, at Ballou's invitation, responded at the conclusion of the Universalist's remarks. Haynes granted that Universalism was an ancient doctrine; it went back, he said, to the Garden of Eden where the serpent told Eve, "Ye shall not die." Haynes then gave a satirical sermon, "Universal Salvation—A Very Ancient Doctrine," which went through 70 published editions between 1805 and 1860.

In this and other controversies, Haynes showed himself a quick-witted opponent. For example, two young Universalists confronted Haynes one day and asked, "Father Haynes, have you heard the good news?"

"No, what is it?" he replied.

"Why, the devil is dead," one replied.

Haynes looked at them sadly, placed his hands on their heads, and said, "Oh, poor fatherless children! What will become of you?"

The church at Rutland dismissed Haynes in 1818 after 30 years of ministry. The immediate causes were Haynes's political views (he was a Washingtonian Federalist). Only in this bitter dispute did the pastor's race become a question to the congregation. It was, Haynes reflected ruefully, as though after 30 years the congregation had suddenly discovered its minister was black.

Twentieth century writers have sometimes acidly commented on the minister's apparent silence on the question of slavery. But in the 1980s, Ruth Bogin found in Harvard's Houghton Library an unpublished manuscript by Haynes titled "Liberty Further Extended." Written during the American Revolution, the essay

decried slavery: "Liberty," wrote Haynes, "is equally as precious to a **black man**, as it is to a **white** one, and bondage equally intolerable to the one as it is to the other."

Missionary to Native Americans **John Stewart**

c.1786-1823

It is little wonder, given the history of their mistreatment at the hands of whites, that many Native Americans were suspicious of missionaries preaching what seemed to be a "white man's religion"—even when a black was the missionary. And yet because of the perseverance of this man, John Stewart, many eventually adopted his religion.

Stewart was born free in Virginia around 1786 and moved to Ohio in 1807. Loneliness and alcohol made him miserable and led him to contemplate suicide. Instead of death, however, he found life in converting to Christ and joined the Methodists.

Then, Stewart said, he heard a voice telling him, "Thou shalt declare my counsel faithfully." Feeling impelled to preach to Indians, Stewart journeyed to northern Ohio to the Wyandots, a branch of the Hurons driven south by the Iroquois League. Once a thriving people, the Wyandots had been reduced to about 700 when Stewart arrived at their reservation on the Upper Sandusky River in 1816.

There he met another black, Jonathan Pointer, who knew the Wyandot language. He told Stewart it would be "folly" to preach to the Indians. Nonetheless, the indifferent Pointer agreed to interpret Stewart's sermons—though it was later reported back to Stewart that Pointer regularly inserted commentary such as "So he says. I do not know whether it is so or not, nor do I care."

Stewart also encountered opposition from Indians themselves. One chief, Two Logs, said blacks were not worth listening to: "The Great Spirit never created Negroes," he said. "They were created by the Evil Spirit."

Still, by degrees, Stewart won the trust of the Wyandots, and he saw conversions. Matthew Peacock, the first chief to convert, recalled that when Stewart first came, "We treated him ill, and gave him little to eat, and trampled on him, and were jealous of him for a whole year." But after many years of Stewart's ministry, Peacock said the Wyandots had changed their minds: "We were convinced that God had sent him to us."

Stewart died, apparently from tuberculosis, in 1823. Twenty years later, the federal government moved the Wyandots to Kansas as part of its Indian relocation policies. But Stewart had made his mark—the first black missionary to Native Americans and the first Methodist home missionary in America.

Exhorter Extraordinaire **Jarena Lee**

1783-c.1850

Her story is filled with gaps. Her maiden name is unknown, and the year of her death is uncertain. But her legacy is well known: Jarena Lee is the first significant female black preacher in America.

Born a free black in New Jersey, at age 7 Lee became a maid in a household 60 miles from home. She was converted around the age of 20 during a Richard Allen sermon. Troubled by the sin of malice at the time, she prayed, "Lord, I forgive every creature." Instantly she felt that "not only the sin of malice was pardoned, but all other sins were swept away together."

Feeling she was called to preach, she approached her pastor, Richard Allen. He discouraged her, pointing out that the Methodists did not permit women preachers.

Instead Jarena married a minister, Joseph Lee, in 1811. The next few years proved difficult for her. She was often lonely, ill, and felt unfulfilled, sublimating her desire to preach by counseling those whom "the Lord would send" to visit her house. She bore six children, but only two survived, and then she suffered the loss of her husband.

She returned to Allen's church and again proclaimed herself called to preach, reasoning to herself, "Why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man?" This time Allen supported her, permitting her to become an "exhorter" and "evangelist," though not a "preacher."

Lee spoke in homes, school houses, and—when ministers would allow—meeting houses. Her itinerancy ranged over the northeastern United States and as far west as Ohio. She preached hundreds of sermons, often to racially mixed audiences. Later, she compiled and published her [memoirs](#) in 1833, one of the first autobiographies by a black woman in America.

Mark Sidwell holds a Ph.D. in church history, and is author of Free Indeed: Heroes of Black Christian History (Bob Jones University Press, 1995).

Priest of Brotherly Love **Absalom Jones**

c.1746-1818

Early on, Absalom Jones got in the habit of thinking of others ahead of himself. While serving as a slave in Philadelphia, he secured the help of several Quakers and his father-in-law, and bought his wife's freedom. Only then, six years later in 1778, did he buy his own.

Jones became active in Saint George's Methodist Episcopal Church, and with Richard Allen, was a key player in the emerging black church of Philadelphia. Jones was one of the blacks who left St. George's when they weren't allowed to sit where they pleased. With Allen and other blacks, he nursed and buried many of the nearly 4,000 who died in Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic (while many whites, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, fled to the safety of the countryside).

Jones and Allen eventually split over denominational loyalties but continued to work together in founding the black counterpart of the Masons, and opposing the Fugitive Slave Law and the African Colonization Society (whose solution to the racial problem was to ship blacks back to Africa).

In the meantime, Jones became a deacon and, in 1804, the first black priest in the Episcopal Church. In 1794, he had helped found Saint Thomas African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia to encourage blacks to live a pattern of life he had modeled: "To arise out of the dust and shake ourselves, and throw off that servile fear, that the habit of oppression and bondage trained us up in," he wrote. "And in meekness and fear, we would desire to walk in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free."

—The Editors



CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

Shaking in the Multitude

The Rev. Richard Williams was to preach at Bethel Church, where I with others were assembled. The text he took is in Jonah, 2d cap. 9th vers,—"Salvation is of the Lord." But as he proceeded to explain, he seemed to have lost the spirit; when in the same instant, I sprang, as by an altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet, when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams had taken.

I told them that I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam's race, but that I had lingered like him and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord and warn those who are as deeply guilty as were the people of Ninevah.

I now sat down, scarcely knowing what I had done, being frightened. I imagined that for this indecorum, as I feared it might be called, I should be expelled from the church. But instead of this, the bishop [Richard Allen] rose up in the assembly and [said he] believed that I was called to that work, as any of the preachers present. My fears of having given an offense and made myself liable as an offender subsided, giving place to a sweet serenity, a holy joy of a peculiar kind, untasted in my bosom until then.

[A couple of weeks later in a private home:] My congregation consisted of but five persons. I commenced by reading and singing a hymn, when I dropped to my knees by the side of a table to pray. When I arose I found my hand resting on the Bible. I opened the Scripture, as it happened, at the 141st Psalm, fixing my eye on the third verse, which reads, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips."

My sermon, such as it was, applied wholly to myself, and added an exhortation. Two of my congregation wept much, as the fruit of the labor this time. In closing I said to the few that if any one would open a door, I would hold a meeting the next sixth-day evening, when one answered that her house was at my service.

Accordingly I went, and God made manifest his power among the people. Some wept, while others shouted for joy. One whole seat of females, by the power of God, as the rushing of a wind, were all bowed to the floor at once, and screamed out. Also a sick man and woman in one house, the Lord convicted them both; one lived, and the other died.

[Six months later, among Methodists:] There were doctors, lawyers, and magistrates present to hear me speak, yet there was mourning and crying among sinners, for the Lord scattered fire among them of his own kindling. The Lord gave his handmaiden power to speak for his great name, for he arrested the hearts of the people, causing shaking amongst the multitude, for God was in the midst.

—*A condensed excerpt from The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee (1833)*

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

The Christian History Link: The Dignity of Faith

What does the experience of black Christians before the Civil War have to say to American Christians (both black and white) today?

Albert J. Raboteau

Most of us would recall the early centuries of the Church as the era of persecution, when thousands of Christians became confessors or martyrs by suffering or dying for their faith at the hands of the Roman authorities.

And, in a discussion of the topic, we probably would mention the modern waves of persecution that swept over Christians under the antireligious regimes of Communist states in Eastern Europe.

Few, I think, would identify the suffering of African-American slave Christians in similar terms, as a prime example of the persecution of Christianity within our own nation's history. And yet the extent to which the Christianity of American slaves was hindered, proscribed, and persecuted justifies applying the titles **confessor** and **martyr** to those slaves. Like their ancient Christian predecessors, they bore witness to the Christian gospel despite the threat of punishment and even death at the hands of fellow Christians.

For example, slave Christians suffered severe punishment if they were caught attending secret prayer meetings which whites outlawed as a threat to social order. And yet they endured suffering rather than forsake worship.

In 1792 Andrew Bryan and his brother Sampson were arrested and hauled before the city magistrates of Savannah, Georgia, for holding religious services. With about 50 of their followers they were imprisoned and severely flogged. Andrew told his persecutors "that he rejoiced not only to be whipped, but would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ."

Eli Johnson claimed that when he was threatened with 500 lashes for holding prayer meetings, he stood up to his master and declared, "I'll suffer the flesh to be dragged off my bones ... for the sake of my blessed Redeemer."

Slaves suffered willingly because their secret liturgies constituted the heart and source of slave spiritual life, the sacred time when they brought their sufferings to God and experienced the amazing transformation of their sadness into joy.

This paradoxical combination of suffering and joy permeated slave religion, as the slave spirituals attest:

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Nobody knows but Jesus,
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The mystery of their suffering took on meaning in the light of the suffering of Jesus, who became present to them in their suffering as the model and author of their faith. If Jesus came as the suffering servant, the slave certainly resembled him more than the master.

One source that sustained Christian slaves against temptations to despair was the Bible, with its accounts of the mighty deeds of a God who miraculously intervenes in human history to cast down the mighty and to lift up the lowly, a God who saves the oppressed and punishes the oppressor. One biblical story in particular fired the imagination of the slaves and anchored their hope of deliverance: the Exodus.

Questioned by her mistress about her faith, a slave woman named Polly explained why she resisted despair: "We poor creatures have to believe in God, for if God Almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I heard of his delivering his people from bondage I know it means the poor African."

In the midst of dehumanizing conditions so bleak that despair seemed the only appropriate response, African Americans believed that God would "make a way out of no way." Enslaved, they predicted that God would free them from bondage. Impoverished, they asserted that "God would provide." Their belief in God did not consist so much in a set of propositions as it did in a relationship of personal trust that God was with them: "He will be wid us, Jesus, be wid us to the end."

Compassionate humanity

We might expect that their identification with the biblical children of Israel, with Jesus, and with saints and martyrs might have pushed the slaves toward self-righteousness and racial chauvinism. Instead it inspired compassion for all who suffer, even occasionally for their white oppressors.

William Grimes, for example, a slave who refused to lie or to steal, was unjustly accused and punished by his master. "I forgave my master in my own heart and prayed to God to forgive him and turn his heart," Grimes reported.

When slaves forgave and prayed for slaveholders, they not only proved their humanity, they also displayed to an heroic degree their obedience to Christ's command "Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute and spiritually use you."

Christianity taught the slaves that God had entered into the world and taken on its suffering, not just the regular suffering of all creatures that grow old and die, but the suffering of the innocent persecuted by the unjust, the suffering of abandonment and seeming failure, the suffering of love offered and refused, the suffering of evil apparently triumphant over good. They learned that God's compassion was so great that he entered the world to share its brokenness in order to heal and transform it. The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus began and effected the process of that transformation.

It was compassion, the love of all to the extent of sharing in their suffering, that would continue and bring to completion the work of Christ. All of this of course is paradoxical. All of this is of course a matter of faith.

American slaves accepted that faith. And in doing so they found their lives transformed. No, the suffering didn't stop. Many died while still in bondage. And yet they lived and died with their humanity intact. That is, they lived lives of inner freedom, lives of wisdom and compassion. For their condition, evil as it was, did not ultimately contain or define them. They transcended slavery because they believed God made them in his image with a dignity and value that no slaveholder could efface.

Albert Raboteau is professor of religion at Princeton University and author of *Slave Religion* (Oxford, 1978).

Slaves' open scorn for white religion is one of the most consistent and vehement themes in their narratives. The idea of a "good Christian slaveholder" was a moral impossibility.

The enslaved black Christians were especially critical of white preachers, many of whom were hired by plantation owners to preach a religion that sanctioned slavery. The southern white evangelical defense of slavery on biblical grounds was a joke. No elaborate polemics or moral arguments were required to convince black Christians to unmask the evils of slavery and racial prejudice.

The most important lesson for black Christians today is to discern that our enslaved spiritual ancestors maintained the vital link between spiritual formation and social ethical transformation in the quest for justice and freedom.

The most important lesson for white Christians is to acknowledge the error and futility of trying to separate spirituality from social ethics, based on wrongful interpretations of the Bible and contrived to preserve racial privilege and deny responsibility for the pursuit of racial justice in both church and society.

Cheryl Sanders is professor of Christian ethics at Howard University School of Divinity, senior pastor of Third Street Church of God, Washington, D.C., and author of Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People (Fortress, 1995).

Need for Community

The black church has provided a place of unity and cohesion for the black community. It is one of the only institutions that we have always had some control over. Even in the slave quarters, religion and the church were instruments God used to maintain a semblance of neighborhood and community.

Though I agree with integration, I also think it is one of the worst things to have happened to the black community. The moment we were able to assemble where we desired, we lost the continuity that made us a community and began to assimilate into the broader culture. In so doing, we lost a lot of what it meant to be African-American and Christian.

The church was the centrifugal force of the black community. In the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, many the individuals who were successful in the music industry had the roots in the black church. Likewise, a number of black athletes also attribute their initial encounters with sports to church-organized athletics.

The only way that the church will be able to recapture its vitality is to reassess its role as the spiritual fountain from which the black community can once again drink freely. We have made significant strides in the arenas of politics, societal acceptance, and the like. But we have lost our edge as the place to build the lives of our people in a holistic manner.

I see so many young blacks who express a limited sense of God consciousness. I remember when I was younger and coming up, there was a certain level of respect that was afforded our elders. If we were playing marbles and were approached by someone coming from church, we immediately made room for them and even stopped what we were doing until they passed by. Not so today. Our youth have a limited understanding of the Spirit and of the place that the church plays in the very survival of the community.

My contention is that the black church must diligently seek to re-emerge as the fuel for the community if it is to be taken seriously in the new millennium.

Robert L. Stevenson Jr. is director of research for the Los Angeles Black Church History Project at Fuller Seminary.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 62: Bound for Canaan: Africans in America

Faith and Justice

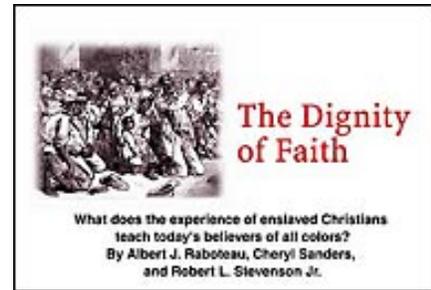
What does the experience of black Christians before the Civil War have to say to American Christians (both black and white) today?

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Most of us would recall the early centuries of the Church as the era of persecution, when thousands of Christians became confessors or martyrs by suffering or dying for their faith at the hands of the Roman authorities.

And, in a discussion of the topic, we probably would mention the modern waves of persecution that swept over Christians under the antireligious regimes of Communist states in Eastern Europe.



Few, I think, would identify the suffering of African-American slave Christians in similar terms, as a prime example of the persecution of Christianity within our own nation's history. And yet the extent to which the Christianity of American slaves was hindered, proscribed, and persecuted justifies applying the titles **confessor** and **martyr** to those slaves. Like their ancient Christian predecessors, they bore witness to the Christian gospel despite the threat of punishment and even death at the hands of fellow Christians.

For example, slave Christians suffered severe punishment if they were caught attending secret prayer meetings which whites outlawed as a threat to social order. And yet they endured suffering rather than forsake worship.

In 1792 Andrew Bryan and his brother Sampson were arrested and hauled before the city magistrates of Savannah, Georgia, for holding religious services. With about 50 of their followers they were imprisoned and severely flogged. Andrew told his persecutors "that he rejoiced not only to be whipped, but would freely suffer death for the cause of Jesus Christ."

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One source that sustained Christian slaves against temptations to despair was the Bible, with its accounts of the mighty deeds of a God who miraculously intervenes in human history to cast down the mighty and to lift up the lowly, a God who saves the oppressed and punishes the oppressor. One biblical story in particular fired the imagination of the slaves and anchored their hope of deliverance: the Exodus.

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In the midst of dehumanizing conditions so bleak that despair seemed the only appropriate response, African Americans believed that God would "make a way out of no way." Enslaved, they predicted that God would free them from bondage. Impoverished, they asserted that "God would provide." Their belief in God did not consist so much in a set of propositions as it did in a relationship of personal trust that God was with them: "He will be wid us, Jesus, be wid us to the end."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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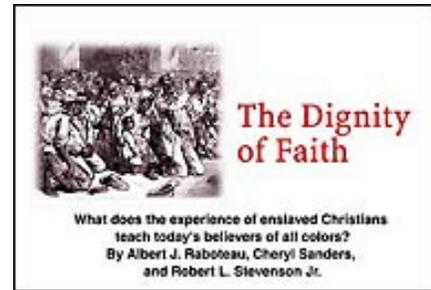
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Black Christianity Before the Civil War: Recommended Resources

The enslavement of an estimated ten million Africans over a period of almost four centuries in the Atlantic slave trade was a tragedy of such scope that it is difficult to imagine, much less comprehend."

So begins Albert Raboteau in *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, 1978), the benchmark work on slave Christianity. But he and other scholars have done much to help readers comprehend and imagine life for African Americans before the Civil War—without downplaying the overwhelming tragedy of the situation.

Uniquely religious

As W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington both noted, the story of the black church and black America are unalterably linked. It would be impossible to write about the black experience without reference to Christian faith. But until Raboteau's book, there were few noteworthy tomes specifically on black religion. There are more now, but scholars still lament the breadth of such works.

Some of the better books are collections of primary source material, most notably *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Duke, 1985), edited by Milton C. Sernett. He argues that such a work "does not constitute a history of Afro-American religion," but merely serves to enable readers "to think about Afro-American religious history." It certainly does that.

A more specific collection is *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans* (HarperCollins, 1994). The prayers here are less historically important, but they do serve to show the vitality of black spirituality firsthand.

The main evangelical publishers have issued disappointingly few books on black Christianity, historical or otherwise. But based on recent releases, they might be starting to come around. InterVarsity Press recently issued a few introductory works to the black experience, including *No Easy Walk* (1998) by Harry Louis Williams II. Baker has a similar introduction: *Breaking Down Barriers* (1998) by Dwight Perry.

The bigger picture

Two of the most exciting and comprehensive resources about early African-American experience are not books. One is the Microsoft's *Encarta Africana* (1999), a multimedia CD-ROM co-edited by Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Kwame Anthony Appiah. With more than 3,000 articles, it's being hailed as the culmination of Du Bois's dream of such a compendium of knowledge.

The other is *Africans in America*, a PBS documentary series with an incredibly comprehensive supplementary website and book (Harcourt Brace, 1998). Great emphasis is placed on Christianity's role in black life, and the website (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/>) includes hundreds of primary source documents, photos, and interviews with scholars to extend its narrative.

Among the nonelectronic media, however, Vincent Harding's *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Harvest/ HBJ, 1981) is grand and thorough—and perhaps the most dynamic

narrative on the subject. ***Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*** (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988) and ***Remembering Slavery*** (New Press, 1998) are primary source collections that will both educate and haunt their readers.

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Resources:

BOOKS

Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember, edited by James Mellon, is a collection of interviews, narratives, writings, and other primary source material from freed slaves. It includes a chapter on slave religion.

Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* is the benchmark work on slave Christianity. Now more than 20 years old, it's well written, comprehensive, and a classic. If you're going to get any book on the subject, get this one.

Milton Sernett's *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865*, is now out of print. But booksellers like Amazon. com can probably still track down a used copy of this important work.

More recently, Raboteau authored *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African- American Religious History*. His book *African- American Religion*, part of Oxford University Press's "Religion in American Life" series, was just released in March 1999.

Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans, edited by James Melvin Washington, obviously has a broader time frame than we examine here, but its section on slave prayers excellently captures the spirituality at work here.

Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom, edited by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, is the Library of Congress's companion volume to the Smithsonian Institution's radio documentary by the same name. The book contains the complete transcripts of interviews with former slaves (some of which you can hear on the radio production— tapes are available).

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Among the better books explicitly on spirituals are Richard Newman's *Go Down, Moses: A Celebration of the African-American Spiritual* and *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* by Arthur C. Jones and Vincent Harding.

One excellent (and readable) book Ted Olsen used in researching this topic was *Black Abolitionists* by Benjamin Quarles.

Bibb's Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave is still in print.

The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives includes The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southhampton, VA (1831), The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave (1831), The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, American Slave (1845), Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave (1848), Narrative of the Life of Henry Bibb, an American Slave (1849), Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom or The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery (1860), and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs (1861).

Harding's *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* is available at Amazon.com

Rebels on the Plantation, 1790-1860, a new book by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, has received great reviews. In it, the authors argue that slave rebellions were nowhere near as infrequent as previously thought. Slaves often rebelled, they say, and ran away at every possible opportunity.

For more on African-American Baptists, see *A History of Black Baptists* by Leroy Fitts.

Gravelly's Gilbert Haven, *Methodist Abolitionist; A Study in Race, Religion, and Reform, 1850- 1880* is available through Amazon.com.

For more on the AME church's history and what it has done more recently, see James T. Campbell's *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*.

Check out Mark Sidwell's *Free Indeed: Heroes of Black Christian History*, which looks at some important African- American Christians from colonial America to the rise of Pentecostalism. Sidwell is also the editor of the anthology *Faith of Our Fathers: Scenes from American Church History*.

Cheryl J. Sanders is the author of *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* and *Saints in Exile: The Holiness- Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture*.

Albert J. Raboteau is the author of *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African- American Religious History and Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (the most well- regarded text on the subject).

Conversations With God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans, edited by James Melvin Washington, obviously has a broader time frame than we examine here, but its section on slave prayers excellently captures the spirituality at work here.

DVD / CDROM

In 1998, PBS ran an excellent documentary titled *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery*. It's truly one of the best (if not the best) video series on the topic we've ever seen, and dedicates a lot of time to the role Christianity played in the slaves' lives as well as to the stories of black Christians in the North (like Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church). The four-part documentary is now available on video. But its companion pieces may be even better. The book, by the same title, weaves together primary source documents, short stories (by renowned author Charles Johnson), and narratives and comes up with one of the most innovative book formats we've seen. It's incredibly riveting, too. And one cannot overly praise the series' companion website, either (more on that below).

Microsoft's Encarta *Africana* is a multimedia CDROM co-edited by Harvard's Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah. With more than 3,000 articles, it's being hailed as the culmination of W.E.B. DuBois's dream of such a compendium of knowledge.

Alfred Woodward narrates *Underground Railroad*, a 1998 video made by the History Channel. It covers a few facts we weren't able to cover here, such as why, in the early days of American slavery, some slaves fled south to freedom—into Florida, where they sought protection among the Native Americans.

AUDIO

Other interviews with former slaves, taken in the 1920s and '30s, can be heard at Remembering Slavery, the Smithsonian Institution's companion site to its radio documentary.

After the Civil War, spirituals experienced a temporary challenge. Free blacks wanted to forget the songs as a relic of a horrific past. The African-American middle class was attempting to embrace European culture and hymnody. And few whites had even heard spirituals. But thanks to the Fisk Jubilee Singers at Fisk University, who brought the form into the larger popular culture, the form was saved. You can hear some of the spirituals from the early 1900s from a 1918 hand cranked victrola online if you have the RealAudio player.

LINKS:

The best online resource about African Americans before the Civil War—perhaps the best resource on the subject period— is PBS's companion site to its documentary *Africans in America*. The narrative is informative, but its true strength lies in its "resource bank," which includes one of the best-ever collections of images and primary-source

documents. There's also an excellent teacher's guide. I can't count how many times we visited this site while researching this issue.

The North Star: A Journal of African- American Religious History, an academic journal sponsored by Columbia University's Barnard College, also provides information on events, new publications, research collections, and other resources in the field of African-American religious history.

Slave narratives abound on the Web, and some of the sites are truly excellent: *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology* contains some of the interviews the Works Progress Administration took with of more than 2,300 former slaves, and includes photos of several of the interviewees.

Another ambitious project is *North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920*, which plans to include, for the first time in one place, "all the narratives of fugitive and former slaves published in broadsides, pamphlets, or book form in English up to 1920." In fact, its plans are even broader than that, as it also includes biographies of former slaves published during the same period. Other slave narratives are available at Duke University's Slave Voices exhibit, which includes scans of the original documents. Excerpts from famous and not so- famous narratives, including a section regarding slave religion, are also available.

An anonymous slave's story, published in 1857 in Putnam's Monthly, is online courtesy the University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center.

The Library of Congress's African- American collections are available for perusal at The African- American Mosaic Exhibition. Unfortunately, its four main areas— Colonization, Abolition, Migrations, and the WPA— seems limiting.

If you like your history listened to rather than read, check out National Public Radio's site complementing PBS's *Africans in America*. Here you'll find stories and programs NPR ran about the history of slavery in America around the time the documentary aired in 1998. To see what PBS is doing these days regarding African- American history as well as other great resources on the topic, check out its site *The African- American Journey*, devoted to "the experiences and accomplishments of African Americans."

A hypertext version of Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Negro Spirituals" article has some formatting errors, but otherwise it's done well.

The University of Texas has put online an excerpt of from Eileen Southern's book *The Music of Black Americans: A History*.

You can see the images of the first edition of Bibb's narrative, including the cover, the frontispiece, and the title page online. The text of the narrative is at the University of Virginia's site.

The National Park Service has a "Special Resource Study" guide about the Underground Railroad.

National Geographic also has an interactive guide to the Underground Railroad.

Nat Turner was not the only black Christian who sought the armed overthrow of white tyranny. Denmark Vesey, an African Methodist lay leader who bought his freedom in 1799, planned a rebellion after reading Joshua 6:21 and Zechariah 14:1-3. But the uprising, planned for July 14, 1822, was revealed by fearful slaves. Of the 131 African Americans arrested in the plot, 35 were executed and 43 were deported. Vesey himself was hanged and his Charleston, South Carolina, church was closed until 1865. You can read an article Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote about Denmark Vesey in the June 1861 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, available online.

First African Baptist Church of Savannah has its own website, appropriately named www.oldestblackchurch.org.

Mother Bethel AME Church has its own web site, including a virtual tour of the church and its history.

The AME's 1840 conference resolutions, including those regarding slavery, is available online.

The Library of Congress's wonderful exhibition *Religion and the New Republic* has a section on "The Emergence of the African- American Church" (you'll have to scroll down a bit to get to it), including images regarding the founding of the AME church.

For more on John Stewart, see a lengthy biography of him posted on a site devoted to all things Wyandot.

Moccasin Trails to the Cross by Thelma Marsh is available in four parts. We interviewed Mark Sidwell for our issue on Fundamentalism (Issue 55).

The article, *Here We Stand: A fundamentalist historian answers the critics of fundamentalism*, is online at christianhistory.net.

Robert Louis Stevenson Jr. has his own web page at Fuller Seminary, where he is director of research for the Los Angeles Black Church History project.