



Freedom

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“I cannot swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.”

Barack Obama
Time Magazine 2005

“Please come down and make your home here with my family.”

Dave Waldrop, a Florida Freedman, Seeking to Reunite His extended family. (1867)

“I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I did walk off, believing that to be right.”

Sojourner Truth, describing how she walked away from slavery.

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On August 16th, 1859, Harriet Newby sat down to write her husband Dangerfield Newby a letter. “Dear Husband,” she began, “I want you to buy me as soon as possible, for if you do not get me somebody else will.” Life for her had become “a troubled dream;” she lived in continual fear that she would be sold to meet the plantation owner’s debts. Only the thought of joining her husband again eased her dread. “If I thought I should never see you, she declared, “this earth would have no charms for me.” She closed the letter simply and with love, “Write soon and say when you think you can come.”¹

Harriet’s letter was later found on the body of her husband. Perhaps motivated by the pain and longing in his wife’s letter, he had joined John Brown in the infamous raid at Harper’s Ferry and was one of the first men killed. He was one of thousands of the enslaved black men and women who had hoped to inspire a revolution against slavery that would allow black men and women to live and to love with freedom.

Juneteenth is one of many holidays celebrated throughout the African Diaspora set aside to both mark the end of enslavement, and contemplate the meaning of freedom. For many of the enslaved people of African descent, the end of slavery in the black Atlantic signified the end of brutal whippings, torture, and rape. Emancipation signified an end to the pain associated with the slave auction block, in which mothers and

fathers were sold away from their children. Like Harriet and Dangerfield, men and women who had partnered for life no longer lived under the threat of forced separation. In the United States, Haiti, Jamaica, as in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Barbados, enslaved people of African descent welcomed liberty, and said goodbye to the naked helplessness endemic to not owning one’s self. Collectively, newly freed and self-emancipated men and women in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean helped to bring slavery to an end, and walked proudly into freedom.

Who Freed the Slaves?

The official commemoration of Juneteenth began on June 19, 1866, marking the one year anniversary since Major General Gordon Granger, read from the President’s Order no. 3: The proclamation asserted:

The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves,

and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer. The freedmen are advised to *remain quietly* at their present homes and work for wages.

They are informed that *they will not be allowed to collect* at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”

As the document suggests, the proclamation was compromised by efforts to control African Americans’ movement. Immediately upon emancipation, plantation owners searched for ways to maintain control over African American labor. Former overseers tried to prevent freed men and women from leaving the plantation or from traveling. In fact, many African American men who left plantations in search of families were arrested for vagrancy and ironically forced to do hard labor in prisons across the south.

Like the more well-known Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 ordered by Abraham Lincoln, the notion of freedom as it was articulated by statesmen fell short of the liberty that the enslaved had imagined for themselves. In fact, Lincoln overturned an order by General David Fremont who emancipated slaves in Missouri in September of 1861. He also reversed General David Hunter’s order to free all slaves in South Carolina, Georgia and here in Florida.³ In 1862, Lincoln considered plans to emigrate freedmen and women in the Chiriqui region of Central America. In response, African Americans protested and accused Lincoln of “pandering to the mob spirit.”⁴

As Ira Berlin observed, the Emancipation Proclamation was “a document whose grand title promised so much but whose bland words seemed to deliver so little.”⁵ The document did not emancipate slaves in Tennessee or in union occupied territories in Louisiana and Virginia. It also protected slavery in the border states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri.⁶ Unfortunately, as Berlin explains, Lincoln was a “slow learner,” who would not fully fulfill the promise of emancipation until he supported the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.⁷ Black abolitionist James H. Hudson described the Proclamation as a “halfway measure.” The proclamation,” Hudson wrote “should have been made to include every bondsman on the soil of America; every chain should have been broken, and the oppressed bidden to go free.”⁸

Slave Revolts in the Black Atlantic

Enslaved Africans did not wait for proclamations to lay claim to their freedom. In Brazil, for example, slave revolts were common and, at times, successful. During the 1600s, thousands of enslaved Africans fled plantations and joined the maroon community that came to be known as Palmares. The army destroyed Palmares in 1694, but the city is still celebrated by Brazilians. Between 1670 and 1831, enslaved Africans in Jamaica also launched numerous slave revolts and set up formidable maroon communities that instilled fear in the hearts and minds of the island’s British colonists.⁹ In addition, enslaved Africans in St. Vincent and Grenada launched significant revolts in 1795-1796 that shocked slaveholders throughout the British Empire. Moreover, The Western Liberation Uprising of 1832 in which 20,000 enslaved Jamaicans revolted quite served as an impetus toward Britain’s decision to abolish slavery in 1833 that often is overlooked.

The potential for revolution was also great in Cuba. In 1846, 36 percent of the population was enslaved. Moreover, between 1816 and 1867 more than 595,000 were brought in from Africa illegally. In addition, free persons of color made up 17 percent of the population.¹⁰ In 1844, a conspiracy known as La Escalera was thwarted. In 1864, another conspiracy was discovered in El Cobre, but the rebels were captured and tried in Spain.

Arguably, the spirit of slave resistance fueled Cuban Independence from Spain. The war for Cuban Independence was built with a multiracial army, of free persons of color, whites, and enslaved Africans who challenged western racist ideologies as well as colonialism.¹¹ During the Cuban revolution, Cubans embraced the notion that there were “no whites nor blacks, but only Cubans.”¹²

Enslaved Africans in colonial America also attempted to emancipate themselves. In 1739, for example, close to one hundred enslaved Africans carrying a banner that said “Liberty” ignited what would become the “Stono Rebellion.” Their intention was to march south to Florida, where they hoped to join other self-emancipated Africans who had fled to Fort Mose, and formed an extraordinarily close alliance with the Seminole Indians. Georgia statesmen attempted to use both diplomatic and military threats to cajole the Seminoles into returning Africans to slaveholders in exchange for a bounty. The Seminoles, however, refused to comply, defied the threats, and

ultimately defeated the Georgian state militia.¹³

Often referred to as the most successful revolt, the Haitian Revolution inspired the revolutionary impulse among enslaved Africans throughout the Americas. Indeed, reports regarding the Haitian Revolution distressed slaveholding whites and spurred anti-black violence.¹⁴ In 1804, for example, African Americans celebrated Independence Day by calling attention to the newly independent Haitian nation's victory over its French oppressors. Marching in military fashion, they declared defiantly to white onlookers that they would "shew them San Domingo." The next year, on July 4, 1805, working class white attacked free blacks at the Independence Day festival.¹⁵ That year, Blacks in Rio de Janiero also wore pendants with the depiction of Jean Jacques Dessalines, the emperor of Haiti.¹⁶ Twenty years following the revolution, a still unnerved Jefferson predicted that the Haitian Revolution would stimulate a racial apocalypse. That same year, Robert P. Hayne of South Carolina stated that the first independent black nation could not be discussed in the United States "so as not to disturb peace and safety of a large portion of our union."¹⁷

North American slaveholders continued to live in fear of the threat of slave rebellion throughout the mid nineteenth century. News of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion instilled fears of an influx of belligerent self-emancipated black men and women. Such fears were not restricted to southern states. In 1832, Philadelphia representatives introduced to the House of Representatives legislation that monitored and restricted the movement of blacks into and out of Philadelphia. While the legislation, House Bill 446, was lost, numerous petitions indicated widespread support for immigration laws that would prohibit more blacks from settling in Philadelphia as well as support for the expulsion of blacks with the assistance of the American Colonization Society.¹⁸ Dovetailing periods of economic depression, racial violence against free blacks in the North reached unprecedented levels in the period between 1834 and 1842.¹⁹

Free Blacks Challenge Slavery and Racism

Free black men and women, including David Walker, Hosea Easton, and Maria Stewart fought on behalf of their enslaved brethren. They wrote and delivered incendiary speeches that indicted the American public's hypocritical and inhumane treatment of African Americans in the North and South.

Moreover, they identified and initiated early resistance that people of African descent were biologically and intellectually inferior to whites. In doing so, they challenged the belief that blacks were good only for the use and abuse of their laboring bodies.

In Stewart's mind, African Americans were forced to choose between a living death or risk death for true freedom. Evoking Walker she asked, "Why sit ye here and die?" Arguing against colonization efforts, she asserted, "If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die." Rejecting continued passivity she said, "If we sit here, we shall die." Her statement demands of blacks the willingness to die for the right of full citizenship, even as it suggests that "life" for blacks, under the conditions of either enslavement or perpetual servitude, was a slow death. Instead, Stewart believed that blacks should continue to aggressively and publicly seek social, political, and economic liberation. She concluded, "Come let us plead our cause before the whites; if they save us alive, we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die."²⁰

Stewart conceded that, like her comrade David Walker, the assassinated author of *The Appeal*, her outspoken words could cost her life. As a "true born American," however, she maintained that she was "as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence." As a black woman who spoke with the incendiary combination of venom, rage, and righteousness, Stewart embodied the fear of which Jefferson spoke when he wrote "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever."²¹

While witnessing the restriction of their rights, their eventual disfranchisement, and the defamation of their character in intellectual, social, and popular circles, blacks turned determinedly to the quest for financial independence, self-improvement, and spiritual sustenance. Many blacks sought self-employment as doctors, vendors, or in personal service. Some took up sail-making and other trades while other African Americans worked as common laborers, porters, sweepers, and launderers. In spite of considerable obstacles, blacks also established independent newspapers and journals. *Freedom's Journal*, for example, attempted to provide the public with news of interest to African Americans.²² Faith and Resistance in the Black Atlantic

Throughout the Americas, people of African descent sought strength through faith. Many of the

enslaved Africans were Muslim and retained their Islamic beliefs. In fact, The Spanish issued an order to ban the importation of Muslim Africans into the colonies because they were believed to be particularly resistant to Christianity. The Woloff people from what is now Senegal led the first slave revolt by Africans in the Americas in what²³ is now the Dominican Republic. Wolof had rebelled in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Santa Marta, Columbia and Panama. In the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America, enslaved populations embraced various versions of what we now call Voodoo, Santeria, and Candomble. Others found peace in Christianity and made it their own. In the North, African American churches also became not only sites of spiritual sustenance, but also markers of black independence and empowerment that transcended societal expectations. Historians have documented the important role of religion in the free black communities²⁴ Evangelicalism and, more specifically, conversion offered a means through which African Americans could fashion a positive sense of themselves that belied the disparaging images of blacks as perpetuated in both scientific and popular circles. Within evangelical circles, African Americans were able to participate in a form of religion that truly represented democracy in practice; for no man or woman could be denied conversion and the subsequent promise of redemption.²⁵ Believing themselves to be emboldened by the grace of God, African American Christian leaders encouraged black men and women to critique the “unchristian” behavior of pro-slavery whites. Moreover, black abolitionist literature is replete with examples of men and women who condemned to hell, those who sought to substantiate the idea that there were “distinctions” among the races.²⁶

While blacks prided themselves on their Christian behavior, North American newspapers and journals ridiculed signs of African American middle-class status and piety. Popular journals including the *Democratic Press*, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, and the *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine* lampooned the social gatherings of middle and upper-middle class blacks. Such attitudes reflected and aggravated mass resentment toward black Christians who, at times, fell victim to anti-black violence. As historians have observed, churches were attacked during every race riot.²⁷

Some whites particularly resented the empowering effect of religion on freed men and women. For some white Protestants, the democratic

character of evangelicalism became a source of anxiety. “The Northerner,” Ralph Waldo Emerson observed was “surrounded with church and Sunday school and is hypocritical. How gladly, how gladly, if he dared, he would seal the lips of these poor men and women who speak for him.”²⁸ While Emerson did not speak specifically in reference to blacks, it is plausible that whites also were perturbed by African Americans such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner who had empowered themselves through religion, thus transcending earthly boundaries such as class, social status, and racial prejudice. Public demonstration of African American piety also disturbed many working class whites.²⁹ Moreover, African American leaders realized that their arguably humble efforts to promote religious and societal reform incited racial violence.³⁰

Resistance! Resistance! Resistance!

By the 1850s, Free African Americans were given added incentive to fight for the abolition of slavery. Their status as free blacks was rendered even more precarious by the Compromise of 1850 and its corollary the Fugitive Slave Law.³¹ In the Compromise, congressional leaders agreed to admit California as a free state and to let free white residents in Utah and New Mexico decide whether their states would be designated free or slave.³² The Fugitive Slave Law obliged citizens under penalty of the law to assist U.S. marshals to identify and seize suspected runaway slaves. Those found guilty of helping fugitive slaves were subject to fines and possible imprisonment. Court-appointed commissioners received double pay when they ruled that blacks brought before them were, in fact, fugitive slaves. In addition, captured blacks, whether legally emancipated, self-emancipated, or born free, were left with little means to prove their freed status. Blacks were denied a jury trial and anyone caught helping a fugitive slave could be fined one thousand dollars.³³ Consequently, all African American men, women, and children regardless of their status were vulnerable to capture. Of the new law, Martin Delany observed, “In the history of national existence, there is not to be found a parallel to the tantalising insult and aggravating despotism of the provisions of Millard Fillmore’s Fugitive Slave Bill...”³⁴

The law outraged abolitionists including Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in belligerent response.³⁵ In cities like Boston, The

Fugitive Slave Law set a panic among Boston's Sixth Ward black residents where, for example, the African Methodist Episcopal church alone lost 85 members when they decided to flee to Canada.³⁶ African Americans from Florida had gone with the Seminoles to Oklahoma. But with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, they fled to Mexico. In doing so, 1500 "Black Seminoles joined the Comanche Indians in Texas in an effort to thwart encroaching white settlers."³⁷

Yet the Fugitive Slave Law also marked a period of increasingly insurgent activity among African Americans. The formerly enslaved Samuel Ringgold Ward, for example, asserted in a speech at Boston's Faneuil Hall that "Such crises as these leave us to the right of Revolution, and if need be, that right we will, at whatever cost most sacredly maintain."³⁸ African Americans in Boston formed the League of Freedom to assist fugitive slaves and resist the law.³⁹ Whites also believed that enslaved persons were becoming more resistant. Writing in Virginia, one writer observed, "It is useless to disguise the fact, its truth is undeniable, that a greater degree of insubordination has been manifested by the negro population, within the last few months than at any previous period in our history as a state."⁴⁰

In 1854, the sectional crisis had been inflamed further by the Kansas Nebraska Act. By 1856, enslaved African Americans in Kansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky were engaged in varying forms of guerilla warfare. In Texas, settlers shared rumors that blacks and Mexicans were forming alliances and planning insurrections. Finally in 1857, the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision proclaimed that blacks were "so far inferior, that they have no rights which the white man was bound to respect"⁴¹ Henry Highland Garnet who, as a young man had been inspired by Maria Stewart wrote,

You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embrace and defile them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your vein? Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.⁴²

In 1857, African American physician James McCune Smith spoke on behalf of many African American men and women who were beginning to doubt the power of intellectual efforts to secure social, economic, and political equality for blacks. He wrote,

The reforms which have swept over this land, have been, after all their noise and fury, mere acts of intellection; there has been no heart blood in them, they were brain work all; and intellect does nothing, intellect can do nothing- is a thinker not an actor, and herein lies the secret- why all these reforms ended in talk. They lacked heart and will.⁴³

As the probability of a civil war became apparent, African American men began to forgo intellectual debates with proslavery theorists and lobbied eagerly for the opportunity to fight for their collective freedom and equality "like men." During the Civil War, African American intellectuals such as James McCune Smith and Martin Delany were drawn to the battlefields where they could manifest the revolutionary impulse they had nurtured.

Black Floridians were also active in their efforts to join Union forces during the federal occupation of Florida in March and April of 1862. More than 1000 slaves and freed blacks joined the 33rd, 34th and 21st regiments of the U.S. Colored Infantry.⁴⁴

By the end of the Civil War, African American men believed that their military performance had proved themselves worthy of full incorporation into the polity. Slavery had been annihilated and black men and women, having fought and died for a victorious cause, emerged ready to take their place as full fledged citizens. Such changes in the social, educational, and political landscape, however, disgusted some and angered others.

Freedman Charles Whitsiderecalled that on the day that he was emancipated, the plantation owner said to him, "Charles, you is a free man they say, but Ah tells you now, you is still a slave and if you lives to be a hundred, you'll STILL be a slave, cause you got no education, and education is what makes a man free! _ An Ah knowed he was right."

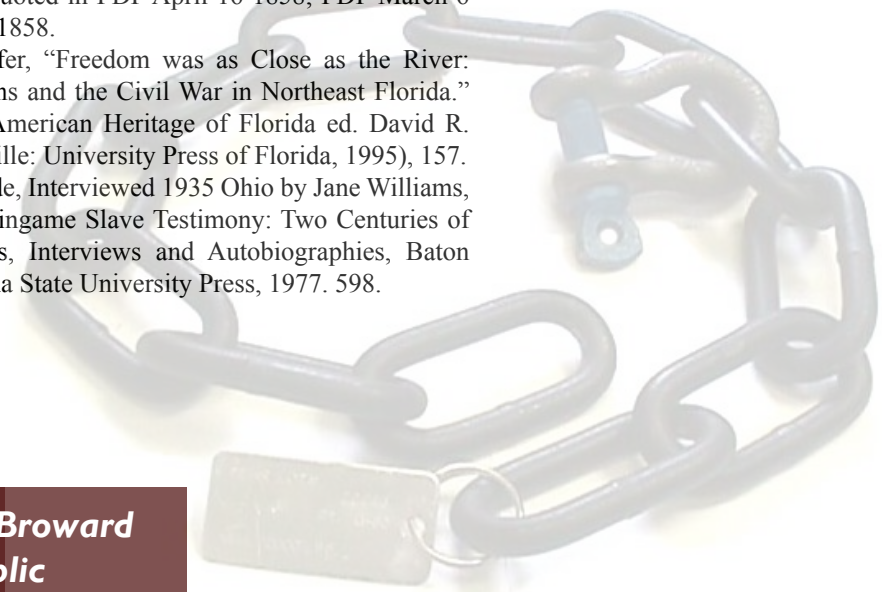
With limited options, Whiteside remained on the farm. However, did not allow the slave owner to define freedom for him. Instead, he sent his children away to be educated “to make them free.”⁴⁵

(Endnotes)

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