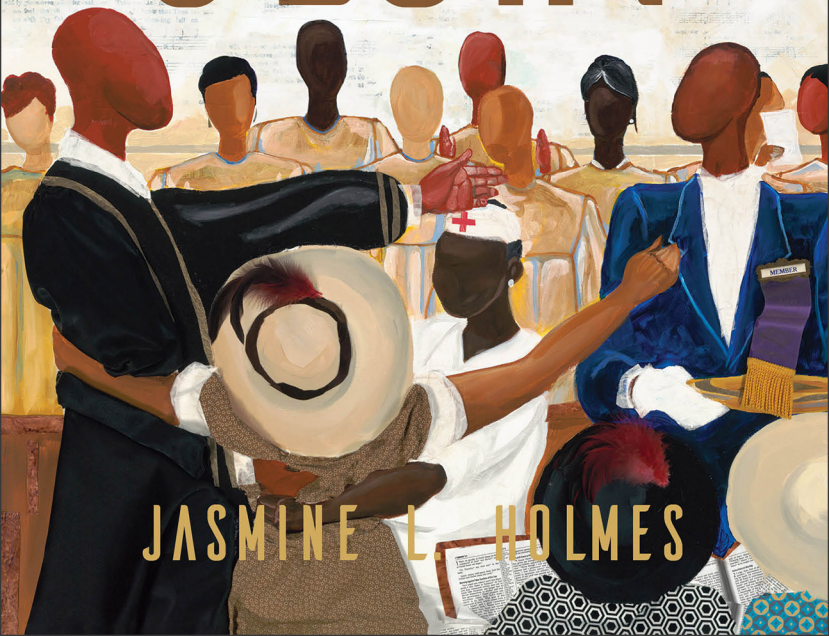


How Proclaiming *the Truth of Black Dignity*  
Has Shaped American History

# CROWNED WITH GLORY



JASMINE L. HOLMES

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If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

—Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?  
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly  
beings  
and crowned him with glory and honor.

—Psalm 8:3–5 ESV

# INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, at the start of the pandemic, when a national outcry arose about critical race theory being taught in schools, I stood in front of a classroom full of seniors and almost lost my cool.

At that point, I had been a teacher for nine years, nearly all of it conducted in mostly white spaces. Eight of those years were spent in either all-white classrooms or with one or two Black students per year.

My own education was very white. Despite being home-schooled, the majority of my extracurriculars and co-op spaces were white. My church was mostly white. My friends and my preteen love interests were all white too.

I was used to being the only Black girl in the room, and then I grew up and became the only Black girl *and* the only adult in many a classroom.

That day shouldn't have been all that different. I had been tasked to talk to them about the Founding Fathers and slavery. English major though I was, my teaching journey led me to begin teaching less English and more history, fueled by my own voracious reading and research as well as admins who were kind enough to let me follow my interests. Their teacher knew I had

been doing a lot of research about slavery and the Founding Fathers for a book I was working on, and she asked me to share some of my findings with her class.

I talked about how these men who boasted of liberty were also slaveholders; how they created a system withholding those rights from the enslaved while speaking of the inherent rights of all men. And I'm going to be honest with you—my research failed me. Combining the last-minute invitation and my overestimating my ability to take emotion out of this conversation, I floundered.

The students responded to my talk with statements like, “No one knew slavery was wrong back then.” “Some slaves were just really happy living with their masters.” “What were they even supposed to do if they got free?” “Slavery was just a normal part of life.”

Afterward, I went to my car and sobbed.

I'd *never* cried after a class before.

Not once.

Not when I was teaching fifth grade and little Timmy threw something at me. Not when I asked a tenth grader to hand me his phone and he stood toe to toe with me in my third trimester and said, “Make me.” Not even when I threw up in the trash can outside of a senior thesis class just as the period dismissed and all the students saw me.

But this time, I called my husband and told him, “I felt like I was defending my humanity in front of those kids.”

That was the day I felt the full exhaustion of being a Black teacher in white spaces. It was also the day I felt the full extent of my own ignorance about our nation's history, and the ignorance that had been passed on to the next generation. That day I hit the wall of being the only Black teacher in the school and decided I needed to find the answers to the questions that stumped me.

I finished out the school year, got pregnant over Christmas break, and wept that summer when I finally quit because I didn't

want to leave. I loved teaching. I miss it just about every day. But I felt like I loved teaching more than it loved me.

That still hurts.

I was no longer teaching by the time I read bell hooks's seminal teacher work, *Teaching to Transgress*. She described going to her all-Black elementary school this way:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our “minds.” We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial. Within these segregated schools, black children who were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care. Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission.

“For Black folks,” hooks wrote, “teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in anti-racist struggle. Indeed, my all-black grade schools became locations where I experienced learning as revolution.”

Later, hooks comments, “To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure.”<sup>1</sup>

Her memories of her education fit beautifully into the history of Black educators in this country at the turn of the century. The dust of the Civil War had settled, sweeping away much of the Black progress of Reconstruction. Finally vested with the freedom and citizenship they had long fought for, the formerly enslaved were learning to grapple with life in the Jim Crow South. Slavery had been abolished, but a strict racial hierarchy remained, and stepping out of line was deadly.



Against this backdrop, Black leaders began the important work of educating the next generation of Black citizens. Prominent schools like M Street in Washington, DC, and The Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in Georgia cropped up to answer the call. They employed a rigorous curriculum steeped in the classics, and in many cases (like with Nannie Helen Burroughs National Training School for Women and Girls), they also offered trade education alongside their liberal arts curriculum.

For the first time in American history, Black leaders were having open conversations about how education should look for future generations. Black American teachers faced the unique task of teaching a generation that had shifted from a state of legislated illiteracy to one that included the opportunity for a thorough education.

And yet, even as these young Black students crowded into classrooms for the first time in history, they studied textbooks calculated to keep them in their place. Historian LaGarrett J. King writes:

Central to this approach of racial subjugation were K-12 social studies textbooks written by White historians and educators who used history as a means to explore ideas of U.S. citizenship. It was common in these textbooks to underscore Black persons as inferior and second-class citizens. Early social studies textbooks emphasized that the “Black skin was a curse” (Woodson, 1933 p. 3) through narratives that purported that Black people were naturally “barbarians,” “destitute of intelligence,” or “having little humanity” (Brown, 2010; Elson, 1964; Foster, 1999). The racializations of Blackness were used as justifications for the paternalistic attitudes White citizens had towards African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

While finally empowered with the education so long withheld from them, Black children were taught by that very edu-

cation that their Blackness was a curse. The shadow of white supremacy loomed large, even over educational institutions founded and upheld by the Black elite. And something needed to be done about it.

## A New History

In 1890, attorney and teacher Edward A. Johnson wrote *A School History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1890*. It was one of the first books of its kind—a history book written by a Black man for Black students. His preface begins:

To the many thousand colored teachers in our country this book is dedicated. During my experience of eleven years as a teacher, I have often felt that the children of the race ought to study some work that would give them a little information on the many brave deeds and noble characters of their own race. I have often observed the sin of omission and commission on the part of white authors, most of whom seem to have written exclusively for white children, and studiously left out the many creditable deeds of the Negro. The general tone of most of the histories taught in our schools has been that of the inferiority of the Negro, whether actually said in so many words, or left to be implied from the highest laudation of the deeds of one race to the complete exclusion of those of the other.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson’s message, put in modern terms: representation *matters*.

He wasn’t the only one to realize the importance of representation. In 1912, Leila Amos Pendleton became what many consider the first Black female historian by writing her own textbook, *A Narrative of the Negro*. Her preface declares:

In presenting this narrative, as a sort of “family story” to the colored children of America, it is my fervent hope that they may

hereby acquire such an earnest desire for greater information as shall compellingly lead them, in maturer years, to the many comprehensive and erudite volumes which have been written upon this subject.<sup>4</sup>

Later in the text, she expounds:

I came, therefore, to the irresistible conclusion in my mind that color is an accident affecting the surface of a man and having no more to do with his qualities than his clothes—that God had equally created an African in the image of his person and equally given him an immortal soul; and that an European had no pretext but his own cupidity, for impiously thrusting his fellow man from that rank in the creation which the Almighty had assigned him, and degrading him below the lot of the brute beasts that perish.<sup>5</sup>

Pendleton and Johnson were not alone in their quest to present Black children with accurate history that reflected their personhood. Gertrude Mossell, Laura Eliza Wilkes, Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Delilah Beasley, Elizabeth Ross Haynes, Drusilla Dunjie Houston, Carter G. Woodson, and others used their time in the classroom as a catalyst for their passion for Black history. Aside from Woodson, none of these were historians in the academic sense, but they were laypeople who understood the power of Black history to solidify the Black personhood of their students in a time where that personhood was up for debate.

Representation mattered, they argued, not because Black Americans are *better* than their white counterparts, but because leaving out Black accomplishment and contribution tells a lie by omission. Black contribution has always been part of the American story.

The historical testimony serves to illuminate the personhood, the *imago Dei*, of these figures. The goal is not to paint

the Black lives chronicled here as vested with more honor than their white counterparts but to remind the reader that they haven't been vested with less.

The routine disregard of Black image bearers in textbooks was not incidental—it was by design.

African American educators during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century understood that traditional textbooks “slander[ed] people of African descent, caus[ed] Black children to disidentify with their history and heritage, and distort[ed] their humanity.” Therefore, African American educators during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century had a philosophical and political agenda in their approach to writing African American history textbooks. That purpose was to tenaciously challenge the prevailing ontological conceptions of African Americans. In other words, historical narratives helped frame the material conditions of African Americans in U.S. society. Textbooks became an important battleground for the fight for personhood status because African American educators believed that metaphorical and real acts of violence (physical, legal, and symbolic) began with school knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

After years of enslavement and dehumanization, Black American children were faced with an education system bent on trying to put them in their place. It's against this backdrop that Black historians took up the charge to uncover a history so long buried and obscured.

Education professor Chara Bohan shares that there was a concentrated effort on behalf of Southern educators to shift the historical narrative in the Confederacy's favor.

After the Civil War, from the 1870s through the 1910s, public schooling became more widespread in the South, and Confederate sympathizers wanted to ensure that their children received an “appropriate” education on Southern history and culture. To

that end, Southern states developed statewide adoption policies for textbooks. This allowed the state textbook committees to control content by demanding changes or threatening to cancel book contracts unless the publishers acquiesced. Today, most of the states with statewide textbook adoption policies are still in the South.<sup>7</sup>

Put a different way: after Reconstruction, public education focused on white comfort and obscured the nation's history of white supremacy to the point of erasing Black American testimonies and experiences from their textbooks.

As Johnson wrote in the preface to his work, both the tearing down and omission of Black people from the narrative undermines Black personhood. If students never see figures who look like them in their textbook, they're inclined to think that it's not just the textbook but God himself omitting Black people.

And nothing could be further from the truth.

More than highlighting Black accomplishments, these historians felt it important to point out American shortcomings.

America holds a legacy of enslavement right alongside that of the enslaved advocating for their freedom; of crimes against Black bodies alongside a legacy of Black bodies resilient enough to demand their birthright by God's grace; of dainty, demure ideals of white femininity alongside the brutal sexual abuse of Black women; of bootstraps-tugging manhood amid the nepotism inherent in white supremacy and the disenfranchisement of generations of Black Americans.

America is complex, bearing its shame in tandem with its accomplishments, its pride right alongside its shortcomings.

By modern standards, Edward A. Johnson and Leila Amos Pendleton's history books are incredibly patriotic. They detail the contributions of Black citizens to the formation of America with unflinching honesty about the odds these citizens faced in their efforts to take part in the American dream.

Both wrote in the spirit of James Baldwin's famous quote from *Notes of a Native Son*:

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright. I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done.<sup>8</sup>

My moral center for this work is rooted in the Word of God. I realize these pages are not chock-full of extensive exegesis nor are the endnotes crawling with biblical commentaries, but my goal here is implicitly Christian: I have written of Black Christians who understood their rights came from the Word of God, defended those rights in word and deed, and forged citizenship for themselves in a country that claimed to be founded on them.

Because the Bible told them to do so.

Because the Word of God told them they were crowned with glory and honor, as the psalmist writes (Psalm 8:5), endowed with dignity by their Creator.

It's a simple aim, but so complex. During the cultural moment in which I pen these words, it feels more complex than ever. But my times are no more fraught than those of the men and women I have chronicled here. And I owe it to their legacy to continue speaking the truth in love.

When we tell the story of America, we *are* telling the story of something exceptional—and not always in a good way. But the image bearers who composed the story of America are more important than the often exaggerated lore of the country.

Students from every tribe, tongue, and nation deserve to know these stories—back then, now, and always.

This work is not born out of the hurts I experienced as a teacher but out of the hope that propels me to continue to teach. It is born out of the same aim of Pendleton and Johnson before me: to uphold Black humanity as brimming with identity, dignity, and significance that is rooted in humankind’s status as human beings made in God’s image.

I am no longer in the business of defending my humanity. I’m in the business of proclaiming it. And a long line of Black voices has stood before me proclaiming the same truth. We have been born of a country founded on the inherent dignity and rights of the white population that systemically denied the rights of the Black population, but this has not stopped us from walking in the truth of those rights or that dignity.

Proclaiming this dignity is a gospel issue, and as a believer, I am bound to proclaim it, whether in the pages of a book or in a classroom full of kids.

I hope to step back into the classroom someday. And whether my students look more like me than they used to, I hope I come armed not just with this resource but with a cacophony of voices that have been reclaiming the history so long obscured. I’m throwing my words into the ring, but there is so much more to be said by historians, sociologists, theologians, and others.

Here’s one teacher’s contribution to the story we must continue telling.

# Give Me Liberty

Nat Turner and David Walker were both prophetic anti-slavery voices. One was born into slavery, one free—one used his pen to fight against slavery, and one took to the sword. But both men “struck a blow for liberty,” in the words of nineteenth-century historian Leila Amos Pendleton.

Nat Turner and David Walker—two very different, very polarizing figures who fought for the dignity of the *imago Dei* very differently from some of the more “respectable” revolutionaries and abolitionists. They believed, as men like patriot-turned-activist James Forten did, that men and women were endowed with rights that should be protected and fought for. In Walker’s case, that fight was idealistic—he wrote his *Appeal* in hopes that his thoughts would spur others to action. In Turner’s case, his fight was very real and physical.

In his *Confessions*, Nat Turner tells the story of one of his very first visions. He was in the fields in the heat of the day,



harvesting corn for his enslaver. He pulled back a corn husk and saw blood speckling the corn “like dew from heaven.”

For as the blood of Christ had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners, and was now returning to earth again in the form of dew—and as the leaves on the trees bore the impression of the figures I had seen in the heavens, it was plain to me that the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Appeal*, David Walker also takes a prophetic tone as he lambastes the corporate greed of American chattel slavery and calls on the enslaved to free themselves from the chains of bondage. He is one of the utilizers of the African American Jeremiad: a biblical exhortation that follows the example of the weeping prophet Jeremiah, who held Israel accountable for her disobedience to God.

If David Walker emulated the prophet Jeremiah in the tone and tenor of his own jeremiad—his *Appeal*—then Nat Turner emulated the prophet Ezekiel in his visions of the destruction of the slaveholders of Southampton, Virginia.

## Turner’s Sign

Nancy watched her little boy grow up in a world where she could not protect him.

Her own history had been lost to the waves of the Middle Passage, swallowed in a sea that claimed 1.5 million Black bodies on the treacherous voyage to American shores. Whether or not she shared her journey with her little boy, she did share what it had meant to be free—and what it had meant to have that freedom taken away from her.<sup>2</sup> She shared her dreams for her little boy—her visions of his future as a Moses to his people. And like Moses’s mother Jochebed, who entrusted her

son to the river rather than see him slaughtered at the hands of her own enslavers, Nancy entrusted her son's future to the Lord.

From an early age, the boy knew that he had been set apart for greater things. One of his earliest recollections was recounting a memory that could not have been his own—something that happened long before he'd been born.<sup>3</sup> As the years went on, everyone who knew him marked him as a remarkable child destined for great things. Given the rare gift of education, the boy became a man, buried himself in the Bible, and became known far and wide as a preacher with a powerful, prophetic voice.

He had read the words of Jeremiah the prophet, lamenting the injustices that cowed Israel in the face of foreign gods.

Therefore I am full of the fury of the LORD; I am weary with holding in: I will pour it out upon the children abroad, and upon the assembly of young men together: for even the husband with the wife shall be taken, the aged with him that is full of days.

And their houses shall be turned unto others, with their fields and wives together: for I will stretch out my hand upon the inhabitants of the land, saith the LORD.

For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely.

They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. (6:11–14)

His enslaved Virginia upbringing cried “Peace, peace”—the status quo was good enough; he had a kind enough master; he was well fed and taken care of; he was free to read the Bible and preach its truth to the enslaved . . .

But there was no peace.

One day, he was working in the fields when he heard a loud voice from heaven, which, as he related, 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 on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.”

He was to wait for a sign. And when the sign appeared, he was to be ready to act on every hope that his mother had poured into him.

Three years later, on February 13, 1831, late in the afternoon, the moon blotted out the light of the sun. As the man stared up at the solar eclipse, darkness covering the fields, “the seal was removed from his lips,” and he was ready to communicate “the great work laid out for him to do.”<sup>4</sup>

Nat Turner had received his sign.

## Liberty or Death

Twenty-five years before Nat Turner was born in a slave cabin in Southampton, Virginia, another Virginian gave a speech that would change the course of American history.

America was on the verge of war.

Of this, Patrick Henry was sure.

And it was with the full force of this assurance that he stood at the Second Virginia Convention in 1775 at St. John’s Church in Richmond, Virginia. The speech he gave would be an important marker on the road to the Revolutionary War, and Henry would go down in history as one of Virginia’s most illustrious sons.

Henry “rose with an unearthly fire burning in his eye”<sup>5</sup> that belied the calm tone of his voice when he first began to speak. By the time he got to the words by which many know him, though, his voice was brimming with passion.

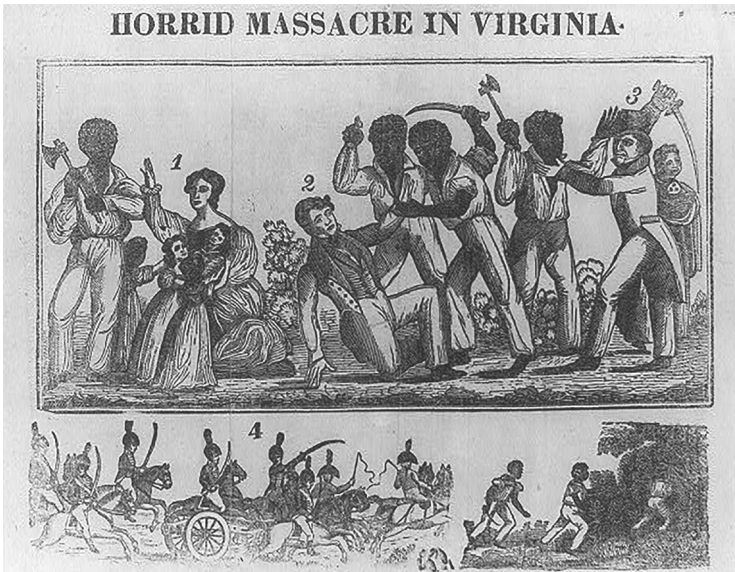
It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!<sup>6</sup>

When Patrick spoke that final clause—*Give me liberty or give me death*—he beat his chest as though he were driving the dagger in himself. One onlooker reported that by the time he was done, “men looked beside themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

The prestigious lawyer would go down in history as one of America’s best orators, a fate that was likely sealed with this very speech. The willingness to die for freedom became a litmus test for the truest patriots—would they settle for a vacant, vapid peace, or would they fight until their dying breath for the real thing? Would they be lulled into calm by the chains of enslavement, or would they buck against those chains, even if it meant giving up their lives in the process?

Many know the answer that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry gave. These men were clearly willing to risk it all for liberty. These three Virginians—the first president of the United States, the third president and drafter of the Declaration of Independence, and the eventual governor of Virginia—made history in the days following this dynamic oration by blazing a trail toward a country founded on the principles of the liberty that they were willing to die for.

And, to a man, they blazed this trail away from the “chains of slavery” while enslaving men, women, and children on their plantations back home.



Nat Turner's Rebellion—the Southampton Insurrection, August 1831

## Another Son of Virginia

Patrick Henry's home was not thirty miles away from where Nat Turner was born into slavery in 1800, just one year after Henry died. Young Nat's Virginia roots were just as deep as Washington's, Jefferson's, and Henry's before him. But instead of sprouting from the tree of free white American citizens who were encouraged to take up arms to defend their freedom, Turner was a descendant of the Black Americans who were routinely discouraged from doing the same.

From a young age, due to his mother's stories, Nat had a deep awareness that freedom was a birthright not meant to be confiscated.

Unlike many enslaved men, Nat was taught to read as a child, and he employed himself to reading the Bible. There, he saw the words that Patrick Henry quoted in the stirring conclusion of his speech:

They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6:14)

He would have read the bone-deep weariness of the weeping prophet as he cried out against the unrighteousness of Israel. And he would have seen the wrath that God was about to pour out against that unrighteousness: “Their houses shall be turned unto others, with their fields and wives together” because they have ignored the hurt they have caused (vv. 12, 14).

Turner saw the injustices that Jeremiah railed against writ large in his own enslavement. He watched children being ripped from their parents and sold away, never to be reunited. He saw enslaved wives taken from their husbands and taken into white men’s beds. He saw harsh punishments inflicted on anyone who dared to stand up against the brutal status quo that defined American chattel slavery.

Nat Turner and Patrick Henry were both surrounded by people who told them to wait and see how things panned out. In Patrick Henry’s case, by the time he rose to give his fateful speech, other delegates had cautioned against acting too rashly in rebellion to Great Britain; they had suggested that perhaps more peaceful measures could continue to advance the important conversation about American freedom. Perhaps, they said, everyone should wait.

Patrick Henry got up and declared that the time for talking was over.

And when Nat Turner saw that solar eclipse in February of 1831, he declared the same. “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery. Forbid it, Almighty God!”

Forbid it indeed.

## Speaking in Henry's Tradition

Before that solar eclipse, back when Nat Turner's budding rebellion was still hidden in his heart, David Walker was echoing Patrick Henry's warrior sentiment. Just a few years older than Turner, he had been born into freedom and made his home in the thriving Black middle class of Boston, Massachusetts. He made his living selling secondhand clothes, but writing is where he poured his passion.

Walker was the Boston correspondent for *Freedom's Journal*, America's first Black-owned newspaper. Though the *Journal* was short-lived, its enduring legacy remains in the writing of men like Nathaniel Paul, Samuel Eli Cornish, and David Walker himself. But Walker had another project burning in his chest: *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*.

A staunchly religious member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Walker aimed his appeal at the enslaved of the South. He referenced the revolution of which Henry partook, using his tract to lambaste the hypocrisy of the incomplete freedom that it purchased.

I must observe to my brethren that at the close of the first Revolution in this country, with Great Britain, there were but thirteen States in the Union, now there are twenty-four, most of which are slave-holding States, and the whites are dragging us around in chains and in handcuffs, to their new States and Territories to work their mines and farms, to enrich them and their children—and millions of them believing firmly that we being a little darker than they, were made by our Creator to be an inheritance to them and their children for ever—the same as a parcel of *brutes*.<sup>8</sup>

Where Patrick Henry delivered his speech to the future powers that be of the nation in which Walker was born, Walker

delivered his jeremiad to those that Henry overlooked in his own quest for freedom from tyranny.

And Walker aimed his pen directly at another son of Virginia in his text: Thomas Jefferson.

Has Mr. Jefferson declared to the world, that we are inferior to the whites, both in the endowments of our bodies and our minds? It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains.<sup>9</sup>

Doubtless, Walker had heard of Thomas Jefferson's book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1784, enjoying a "wide and impassioned readership."<sup>10</sup> In this work, as well as in his *Essay on the Anglo-Saxon Language*, Jefferson waxed eloquent on the inferiority of Africans. In an assumption that belied Walker's articulate future rebuttal of these prejudices, Jefferson wrote of the superior qualities of his "Saxon" readers:

Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan [orangutan] for the black women over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?<sup>11</sup>

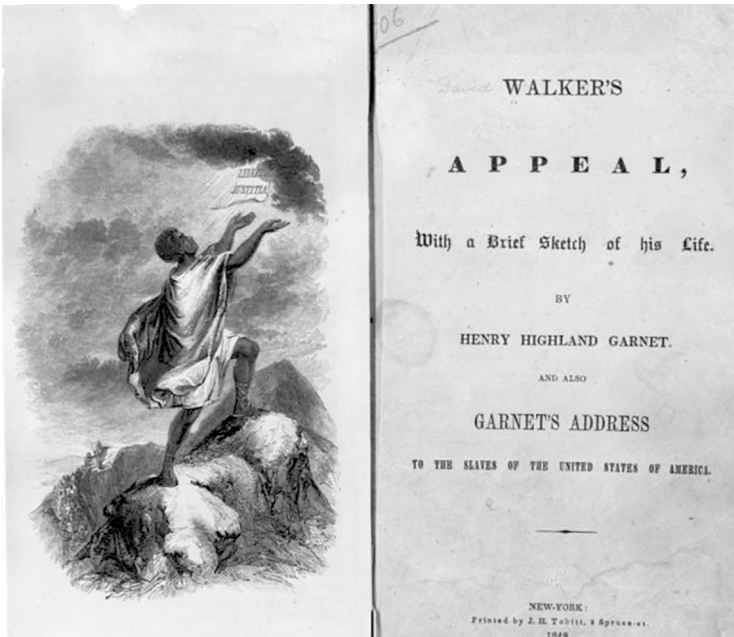
Notably, Jefferson and Henry had something in common besides their Virginian heritage, Revolutionary War mindsets, and the ownership of the enslaved: both felt that slavery was a contradiction to the freedom that they espoused. In Jefferson's case, he felt that slavery brutalized the enslaver; in other words, it was beneath the noble Saxon to barter in flesh.



In Henry's case, he wrote of slavery: "I will not, I cannot justify it. However culpable my conduct, I will so far pay my devoir to virtue as to own the excellence and rectitude of her precepts and lament my want of conformity to them."<sup>12</sup>

It was wrong—but it was convenient.

When Patrick Henry spoke about the convenience of slavery, America was responsible for anywhere from 4 to 6 percent of slavery fueled by the Middle Passage. By the year 1860, "two-thirds of all New World slaves lived in the American South."<sup>13</sup> This "convenience" amounted to four million enslaved souls at the dawn of the Civil War. This "convenience" was so lucrative that by the 1860s, there were more millionaires per capita in the Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the United States.<sup>14</sup> It was so convenient that the slave trade generated more wealth



*Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life*, by David Walker. New York: Printed by J. H. Tobitt, 1848, title page and frontispiece.

than the nation's banks, railroads, and factories combined. Is it any wonder that Frances Ellen Watkins Harper called American chattel slavery "a fearful alchemy by which this blood can be transformed into gold"?<sup>15</sup>

This convenience outpaced the rights of men like Nat Turner, their wives, and their children. These earnings were more important than the liberty of the enslaved in a nation that claimed to prize liberty above all else.

It was men like Nat Turner and David Walker—men who did not even merit American citizenship according to their nation's laws<sup>16</sup>—who held America accountable to her promises of liberty.

Was the Founding Fathers' patriotism outdone by an enslaved man?

### **Walker, Turner, and the *Imago Dei***

Walker understood that the principles of liberty that the Founding Fathers purported to believe flew directly in the face of the Black bodies that they enslaved. If man is endowed with inalienable rights by his Creator—and those rights are being systematically withheld from Black men—was Walker's manhood somehow in question?

Walker likely had Mr. Jefferson in mind when he declared:

Are we MEN!!—I ask you, O my brethren, are we MEN? Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we? Have they not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we? Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours?—What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself? How we could be so *submissive* to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves or not, I never could conceive. However, this is shut

up with the Lord, and we cannot precisely tell—but I declare, we judge men by their works.<sup>17</sup>

Again and again in his *Appeal*, Walker returns to the fact that the oppression of slavery is occurring to people who have been “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” But those rights were being infringed upon day in and day out by the brutality of slavery.

And David Walker had had enough.

Let no man of us budge one step, and let slave-holders come to beat us from our country. America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears:—and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*? They must look sharp or this very thing will bring swift destruction upon them. The Americans have got so fat on our blood and groans, that they have almost forgotten the God of armies. But let them go on.<sup>18</sup>

If that last sentence sounds like a threat (a twenty-first-century Walker might have said, “Keep messing around and find out”), that’s because it was. “If there is an *attempt* made by us,” he wrote later, “kill or be killed.”<sup>19</sup>

Walker’s *Appeal* threw the Southern states into a frenzy. Between 1791 and 1804, the enslaved of Haiti had fought for their own liberation—and won. The newly minted United States of America quaked at the idea of the enslaved taking up arms against them; even as they had just taken up arms against the British to liberate themselves.

David Walker declared:

For although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring other destruction upon them, for not infrequently will he cause them

to rise up one against the other, to be split, divided, and to oppress each other, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand.<sup>20</sup>

And that message was terrifying.

It was so terrifying, in fact, that a price was put on David Walker's head. His pamphlet was banned in several states, its dissemination yet another reason why slaveholders discouraged literacy among the enslaved. In their minds, Walker's radical ideas could stir up rebellion.

### **The Wrath of Image Bearers**

The night of August 21, 1831, a white woman named Lavinia Francis crouched in the woods behind her home.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she watched the torches of the amassing groups of enslaved rebels that were pouring across the Southampton countryside. Her husband was dead. And even though she was eight months pregnant, she was sure to have met the same fate if one of the enslaved men had not taken pity on her. Red Nelson, who knew the family, had hidden Lavinia himself, urging her to stay quiet while his compatriots murdered every living member of every white household they came upon.

Men, women, and children.

Nat Turner killed ten-year-old Putnam Moore, his own legal owner, and had given orders that his followers were to kill *every white person they saw*. By the time they made it to Lavinia's home, they had already killed an infant.

At least on that first night, Nat was committed to showing no mercy.

Ezekiel 9:4–6 likely inspired this approach:

And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the

foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity:

**Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women:** but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house.

When all was said and done, Turner and his men killed more than fifty white slaveholders in Southampton. Figures like Lavinia—who were spared by the kindness of one and not the intention of the many—would be held up as proof of the bloodlust and carnage of the rebels who would have surely killed her, had she not escaped.

Newspapers and government leaders placed the blame for this rebellion squarely on the Boston abolitionists, with the governor of Virginia calling out the “incendiary publications” of Walker and William Lloyd Garrison by name. *The Liberator*, a popular abolitionist paper, was termed “diabolical” and its editor an “instigator of human butchery.” Boston’s mayor was flooded with demands to silence Garrison and shut down his paper, some suggesting that he deserved the death penalty for inciting slaves to kill innocent whites.<sup>21</sup>

The theme of instigation would come up again and again in conversations about Nat Turner’s rebellion. Surely, it was in teaching him to read that his first owner had made a critical error, some thought. Surely, thought others, it was in the revolutionary ideas bandied about by radical abolitionists.

It seemed to occur to very few that Nat Turner was, as David Walker had so eloquently written, a MAN. And as a man, he possessed those “unalienable Rights” that founded the very

country that enslaved him. As a man, he could ask the very same question that David Walker asked: “What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself?” As a man, he could cry out with the same thunderous voice that Patrick Henry had used, “*Give me liberty, or give me death.*”

It occurred to very few that, as an image bearer, Nat Turner could see the unchecked power of white enslavers and hearken to the Bible’s harsh stance on the oppressor. Nat Turner could look at the white people of Southampton and note that not a single man, woman, or child sighed or cried “for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezekiel 9:4).

It occurred to very few that Nat Turner did not need David Walker’s *Appeal* or William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* or even the Declaration of the United States of America to tell him that he had inalienable rights; he found those rights in the Scriptures.

## **A Man Possessed**

Nat Turner was thirty-one when he died. He was hanged, then skinned, then beheaded, to make an example of his rebellion. One imagines that Virginians were shocked that an enslaved man had walked into his enslaver’s home in the middle of the night and killed his entire family.

But at least one Virginian might not have been surprised, had he lived to see the day.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote:

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained . . .<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere, Jefferson wrote, “But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”<sup>23</sup>

Note Jefferson’s words: “Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” How long could “the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land”<sup>24</sup> expect to thrive without returning the “ten thousand recollections” of those injuries coming back onto white America’s head?

Jefferson knew that a reckoning was coming.

And Nat Turner took his part in that reckoning, knowing that the cost would be his own life.

*Give me liberty*, the hatchet-wielding revolutionary’s actions cried, *or give me death*.

## Where Are the Heroes?

Nat Turner’s violent quest for liberation turns many a modern reader’s stomach. Understandably. Men, women, and children were slaughtered in his pursuit of justice. But the enslavement that led Turner to this violent uprising should turn a modern reader’s stomach as much as it turned David Walker’s. And if students of history are taught to believe that Patrick Henry was a son of America in his battle cry of liberty or death, then they must also recognize that Nat Turner is a son of America in *his* same battle cry.

One need not lift Turner up as a hero to understand his actions, considering the oppression of image bearers all around him. But if readers wish to lionize the Founding Fathers of yore, consistency might demand they not see Turner as a villain either.

If taxation without representation is enough inducement to incite a rebellion, then surely the selling of men, women, and children away from their families, the indiscriminate brutalization of their bodies, the barring of their voices from the very

representation that their white countrymen fought for, is worth throwing some tea into the harbor.

Nat Turner isn't held up here as a figure to follow but rather as an illustration to heed. If liberty lovers take oppression seriously, then they must acknowledge that justice will not sleep forever. And when it awakes, woe to whoever is standing in the way.

In a 1969 interview with Dick Cavett, James Baldwin responded to a question about Black leaders who want to “burn it down, demolish it” (“it” being the American establishment). Baldwin famously answered:

If any white man in the world says give me liberty or give me death, the entire white world applauds. When a black man says exactly the same thing—word for word—he is judged a criminal and treated like one, and everything possible is done to make an example of this bad nigger so there won't be any more like him.<sup>25</sup>

Baldwin posited that if white Americans truly understood the oppression that had beleaguered Black Americans for centuries, Nat Turner would be a hero.

Indeed, in the past, Black historians have been far less disapproving of Turner than their white counterparts. In *A Narrative of the Negro*, Leila Amos Pendleton compared him to Joan of Arc, and declared that “the time had come to strike a blow for the freedom of his people.”<sup>26</sup> In *A School History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1890*, Edward A. Johnson wrote:

Nat kept up his courage to the last, and his neck in the noose, not a muscle quivered or groan was uttered. He was, undoubtedly, a wonderful character. Knowing as he did, the risk he ran, what an immense courage he must have had to undertake this bold adventure.<sup>27</sup>

Johnson records the lives of several others who “struck” for freedom: Avery Watkins, a Black preacher in North Carolina



who was hung over a private conversation endorsing Turner's revolt; Madison Washington, an enslaved man who commandeered a cargo ship en route from New Orleans to Virginia and gained the freedom of all 135 souls on board; the *Amistad* captives who killed the captain of the ship that abducted them; Denmark Vesey, a pastor from the Caribbean who modeled a slave rebellion after the Haitian Revolution.

In fact, in 1739, before Patrick Henry even stood up to declare his now-famous ultimatum, over one hundred enslaved South Carolinians took part in the Stono Rebellion. Their banners declared "Liberty!" before the American soldiers made it their battle cry.

The enslaved did not need Patrick Henry to teach them how to advocate for liberty. They did not need Thomas Jefferson to declare their inalienable rights. They didn't even need David Walker to rally them to cry out against the chains that bound them.

Just like Jefferson, Washington, Henry, and others, enslaved men and women knew the truth of their dignity *because it was inherent in them* as people made in the image of God. Nat Turner's visions told him what so many enslaved image bearers already knew: that the just God of the universe created them and invested them with a value beyond that of chattel.

James Baldwin said it in 1969, but it was true in 1869, 1769, and 1619:<sup>28</sup> the desire to rebel and claim their freedom was not *new* for the enslaved; it was new for the enslavers.

In 1927, Blues singer Blind Willie Johnson recorded the song James Baldwin referenced in his answer to Cavett, "If I Had My Way I'd Tear This Building Down."

"Well, if I had my way / I had-a, a wicked mind / If I had-a, ah Lord, tear this building down."

The Negro spiritual had first been sung in the fields by the enslaved, their voices lifting to heaven in a rebellion that did not always culminate in hatchets, guns, or swords—a rebellion that

didn't even always culminate in running to freedom. Sometimes, the rebellion came just in the singing—in the double meaning of the songs that rose toward heaven.

Sometimes, those songs gave secret messages of escape.

Sometimes, those songs gave secret messages of hope.

Sometimes, those songs gave secret messages of anger: *If I had my way, I'd tear it all down.*

In his poem “Warning,” Langston Hughes wrote about the “docile” Negroes of the South and warned, “Beware the day they change their mind.”

*Their* mind.

Because people made in the image of God were made to stand on equal footing alongside each other before the God of heaven. They were made to bow to him and him alone, not made to bow to and be cowed by the brutality of their fellow image bearers. And whether in a pamphlet, in a newspaper, in a speech, in the Bible, or from the voice of God himself booming from heaven, this knowledge cannot be hidden from image bearers forever.