All Men are Created Equal

Symbols, Slaves and the Making of American Freedom Kirsten Hilson, Dr. Matthew Clavin

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Background

The American Republic was founded on the idea that all men are created equal and are entitled to inalienable rights including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". However, from its founding in 1776 to the end of the Civil War in 1865, millions of African American people were held in bondage in the South. The contradiction between American freedom ideology and slavery was not lost on the enslaved and the growing abolitionist movement. This project seeks to discover how those in slavery and their northern abolitionists allies interpreted and responded to rhetoric and symbols of American freedom.

Methodology

For this research, I examined primary sources, such as letters, books, and newspapers from the nineteenth century, searching for instances of slaves and abolitionists reacting to or using American symbols or ideologies to support slave resistance. To accomplish this, I explored a variety of different databases and special collections at The University of Houston, Texas A&M University, Baylor University, and the University of Texas.

Results

- Former slaves and abolitionists frequently employed the famous saying, originally spoken by Patrick Henry, "Liberty or Death!" during the Revolutionary War to justify acts of resistance such as running away and even acts of armed resistance. By employing this adage, anti-slavery advocates drew parallels between the oppression of slaves by planters to the oppression of the American colonist by the British Empire.
- In his book, The Underground
 Railroad Records, abolitionists and
 historian William Still recorded tells
 the story of John Henry, a fugitive
 slave who was caught by his master
 only to successfully escape sale at
 the auction block. In a personal letter,
 Henry writes of his thoughts during
 his escape:

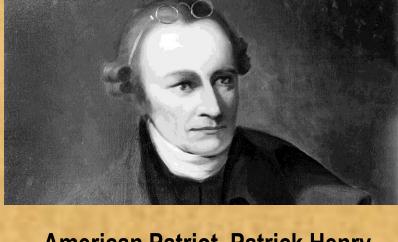
God be willing. Before 10 o'clock the next morning, on the 12th, a beautiful Sept. day, I arose early, wrote my pass for Norfolk left my old Den with a many a good bye, turned out the back way to 7th St., thence to Main, down Main behind 4 night waich to old Rockett's and after about 20 minutes of delay I succeed in Reaching the State Room, My Conductor was very much Excited, but I felt as Composed as I do at this moment, for I had started from my Den that morning for Liberty or for Death providing myself with a Brace of Pistels.

Yours truly J. H. Hill.

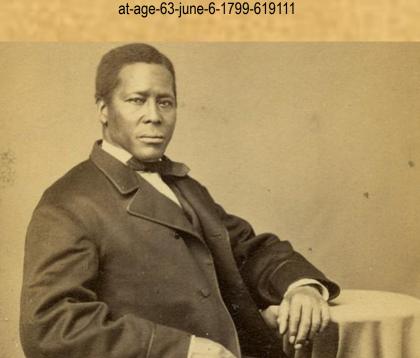
An article published by the New Orleans' Daily Delta in February 1846 recounts an incident in which a plantation slave resisted slavery by inciting an insurrection using the words "Liberty or Death".

NEGRO REVOLT AND LOSS OF LIFE.—On Friday morning an insurrection of the negroes took
place on the plantation of Messrs. Hewitt, Heran
& Co., about ten miles below the city, on the line of
the Mexican Gulf Railway. As far as we can gather from the various statements afloat, we believe the following particulars are as correct as can be obtained at present. A negro man belonging to Mr. Hewitt had been refractory for some time past, Friday last, about noon, he committed another hult and became abusive. The overseer ordered him to be whipped, and called the driver to lay him down by force for that purpose. The negro replied to this that no white man should ever whip him and live. This appeared to be the signal for an outbreak, for the driver then refused to perform his duty. The overseer finding himself powerless and in danger, went for assistance to the adjoining plan-tation of Mr. Sydney Story, and returned with Mr. Batts, his overseer, each being armed. On entering the plantation they found the negroes, about seventy in number, had quit their work, and many of the men were grouped together, as if in consultation. The two overseers approached, and demanded of them to return to their work forthwith, or all should be punished. Just at this moment Mr. Story entered, having a sword cane in his hand. The overseers had scarcely ceased speaking when the negro driver bid them defiance, and, calling to the others, he shouted-"Now let us kill them all-Liberty or Death!" Here a general melee commenced, and each of the whites were wounded by the hoes which the negroes used. Mr. Batts was clinched by the driver, when Mr. Story drew the sword from his cane and stabbed the latter, but he would not let go his hold, and the other overseer

then fired and shothim dead on the spot. The cars

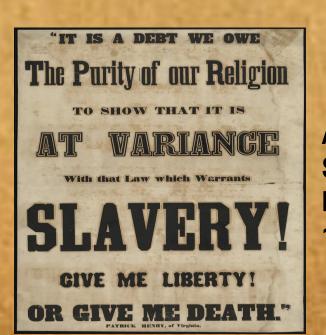


American Patriot, Patrick Henry politico.com/story/2018/06/06/patrick-henry-dies-in-virginia-



Photograph of William Still, conductor on the Underground Railroad.

kpbs.org/news/2012/feb/13/underground-railroad-william-still-story.

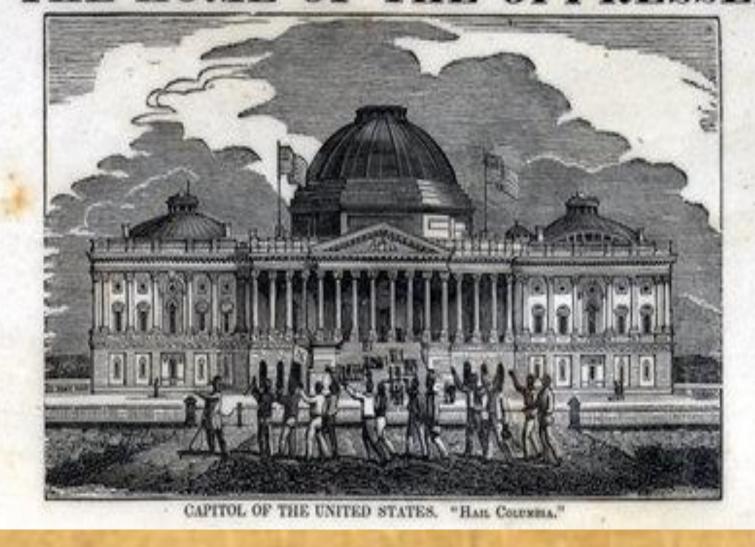


Anti-Slavery Broadside 1857.

Results (cont.)

Abolitionists also used symbols of freedom such as the capitol or the Declaration of Independence to highlight the conflict between American symbolism and American reality.

"THE HOME OF THE OPPRESSED."



https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/24/a-capital-under-slaverys-shadow/

Shackled Slaves marching through Washington D.C.,

The abolitionist press frequently employed irony to convey the contradiction between American ideals and American reality. One publication lists to this picture as:

"One would think that slavery and the slave trade were the last things to have a legal and protected existence in the capital of a boasted free nation But there they are---unpaid toil, whips, chains, dungeons, separations, murders, and all!"

Frederick Douglass'

speech, in which he

praises the founding

freedom but in doing

slavery exists on US

fathers ideals of

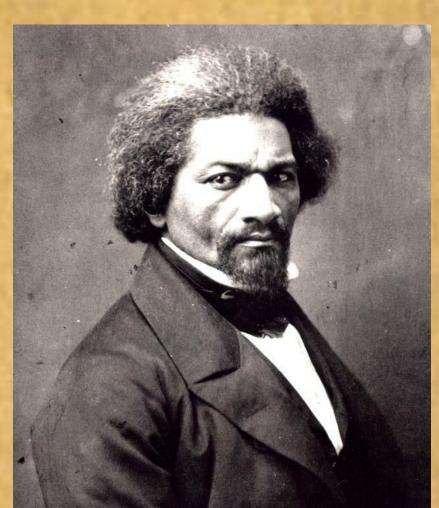
so highlights the

falseness of their

meaning while

Fourth of July

National holidays such as the Fourth of July were used as events to reveal the hypocrisy of celebrating the nation's freedom while millions were held in bondage. The most famous example of this is



Frederick Douglass
et.com/2018/2/1/20639206/george-will-frederick-doug
champion-of-american-individualism

CELEBRATION OF THE NATIONAL AND-

AS THE 4TH OF JULY COMMS ON BUNDAY, THIS

TRAR, IT WILL BE CELEBRATED, BY OUR SOCIETY,

ON MONDAY THE STH, AT COMPTHIAN HALL, AT

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WILL

AN OBATION WILL BE DELIVERED BY FRED-

APPROPRIATE SPERCERS WILL BE MADE BY

MUSIC BY MESSES. CLARES AND EDWARD

OUR' FRIENDS IN THIS COUNTY, AND IN

SUSAN F. PORTER, Prest.

Rochester L. A. S. Society.

THERE WILL BE A BOUNTIFUL REPRESE-

MENT TABLE PROVIDED, IN THE lower Corin-

thian Hall, WHERE ALL WISHING TO DINE CAN

IT IS HOPED THAT THE COUNTRY FRIENDS

BOGS, CHICKENS, CREAM, PRUIT AND CAKE.

Advertisement for

Frederick Douglass'

Fourth of July Speech

sponsored by the

Rochester Ladies Anti-

Slavery Society in

Rochester, New York.

Published in Frederick

Douglass' Newspaper,

June 24, 1852

WESTERN NEW YORK, GENERALLY, ARE VERY

WILLIAM C. BLOSS, ESQ., REV. OVID MINER,

BE READ BY S. D. PORTER, Esq.

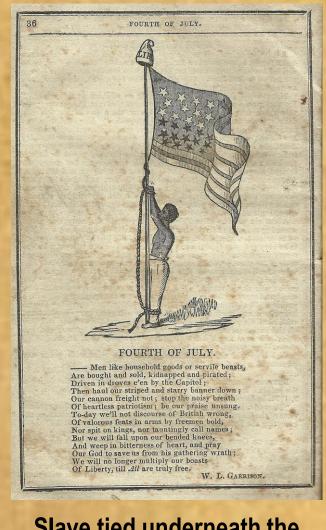
AND LINDLEY MURRAY MOORE, Esq.

CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND.

JULIA GRIPPITER, Sec'y.

10 o'CLOCK, A. M.

BRICK DOUGLASS.



Slave tied underneath the American Flag, published in the Anti Slavery Almanac 1843

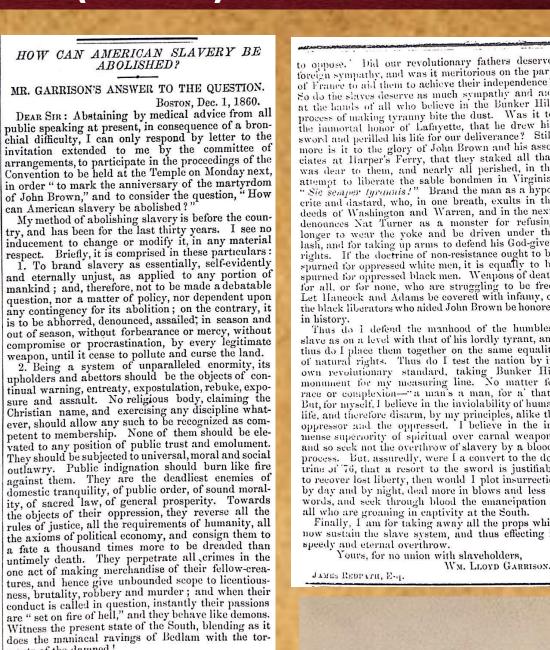
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Frederick Douglass's famous July
4th oration, "What to the
American Slave is the Fourth of
July" as printed in Frederick
Douglass' Newspaper, July 9
1852.

"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July. "I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brassfronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages."

Results (cont.)

Abolitionists frequently claimed that because the **Founding Fathers and** American patriots who fought in the Revolutionary War were entitled to the pursuit of liberty, that they were justified in inciting a violent Revolution against their oppressors. **Abolitionist extended these** "inalienable rights" to those who were being held in slavery and believed they too had the right to incite insurrection for the purposes of securing their liberty. Pictured on the left is an article published in the National Anti Slavery Standard by famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in which he invokes the patriots of 1776 to justify violence and revolution as an acceptable form of abolition.





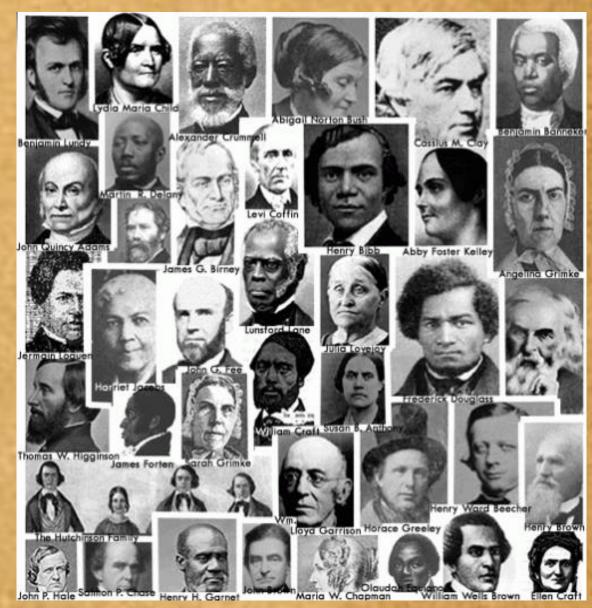
William Lloyd Garrison, famed Abolitionist and editor of the Anti Slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lloyd_Garrison

Photo of American Revolution

Conclusion

Throughout this research, it has been found that enslaved African Americans and their abolitionist allies used symbols and rhetoric of American freedom to both encourage and justify violent slave resistance.



Faces of Abolitionism abagond.wordpress.com/2013/03/25/american-abolitionists/

Acknowledgements

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