

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 4: 1776-1820)”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was finalized and sent to the printer. We had officially declared our independence. It took seven years to secure that independence through a revolutionary war. And it took eleven years to figure out how this new country was going to work.

The United States Constitutional Convention convened in 1787. There was general agreement among the delegates that they wanted three different branches of government – legislative, executive, and judicial. There was substantial disagreement about various other matters, including whether slaves should be counted when determining how many representatives each state would have in Congress. At this point, about 20% of the country were black slaves. 90% of those slaves were in the South. If the slaves *weren't* counted, then the southern states would end up with fewer representatives in Congress. If the slaves *were* counted, then the southern states would have many more representatives. The southern delegates who wanted to maintain the practice of slavery didn't want the North to have too much power; the northern delegates who wanted to restrict or eventually end slavery didn't want the South to have too much power. After contentious debate they settled on this: the number of representatives a state had would be determined by the total number of free people plus 3/5 of the total number of enslaved people in that state. It was called the “Three-Fifths Compromise.”

The delegates at the Constitutional Convention also decided that there should be no federal laws prohibiting the importation of more slaves from Africa until at least twenty more years had passed. They decided that if a slave escaped to another state, that state should be legally obligated to return that slave to his or her owner, even if slavery was illegal in the state where the slave had escaped to. And they decided to give individual states the right to determine who was allowed to vote. So the importation of more slaves from Africa would continue, no state could guarantee freedom to a slave who had escaped, and states that wanted to keep blacks in bondage could easily do so. All of these measures were written into the United States Constitution, which was ratified by the states in 1788.

Another revival was underway, the Second Great Awakening. Baptist and Methodist evangelists spread the gospel far and wide. Some churches were willing to give blacks leadership roles. One freed slave named Harry Hosier became an outstanding preacher whose sermons were popular among both blacks *and* whites. In 1784 he became the first black to preach to a white congregation. The Methodists gave him a license to preach, but never ordained him or gave him the right to vote in church meetings.

Two black preachers, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, were licensed to preach at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. They attracted many blacks to the church. But this became an issue, so the church's governing board restricted the pews on the main floor to just whites. Blacks could sit against the back wall, in the balcony, or outside. In 1787 Allen and Jones left St. George's in protest and founded their own church – and took most of the black members of St. George's with them.

In 1789, the Presbyterian Church in the United States was established as a denomination. By this point there were many Presbyterian churches in Virginia, and a *lot* of Presbyterians owned, traded, or managed slaves. One *church* even owned its own slaves, and raised money for church expenses by hiring them out to local planters. But other Presbyterians were proclaiming the gospel to slaves. Some promoted slave literacy. And a few Presbyterian pastors in the north started preaching against slavery.

Down in Georgia, in 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin: a machine that quickly separates cotton fibers from their seeds, a task that was very time-consuming when done by hand. Clothing could now be produced much more efficiently, which would greatly help Georgia's troubled economy – but *only* if there was a sufficient supply of cotton to feed the gins. Many hands were needed to gather it – which meant many slaves. *Hundreds of thousands* of slaves were imported from Africa in the early years of the American republic. Plantation owners became very wealthy ... and the slave population *tripled*.

That same year, Congress adopted the Fugitive Slave Act. It expanded upon the fugitive slave clause in the Constitution and made it easier for slaveowners to recover runaway slaves. This created an industry of bounty hunters – people who were paid to hunt down and capture escaped slaves. Even some free blacks who had never been slaves were captured and taken into slavery. Northern states responded by requiring evidence that blacks who were captured truly had been slaves. One of Martha Washington's slaves escaped in 1796, while George was President. The Washingtons quietly tried to get her back, but when she resisted they decided not to risk a public outcry. She spent the rest of her life in New Hampshire, where she got married, had children, learned how to read, and became a Christian.

In New York City, in 1800, many black Christians walked out of John Street Methodist Church – the oldest Methodist congregation in America – after experiencing numerous acts of discrimination. They formed a new church, which they called “Zion,” named for the hill in the heart of Jerusalem. This church quickly grew and gave birth to other black churches in the city. Many of these had white pastors, because while the Methodists were licensing a few blacks to preach, *no* blacks were being ordained.

Black churches like this were forming in cities throughout the colonies, typically in response to discrimination in the churches run by whites, where blacks could not vote or hold leadership positions, and had to sit in a separate area. By 1800, the black church in Savannah, Georgia had 700 members.

In Virginia in 1800, a slave named Gabriel attempted to launch a revolt. He was a literate blacksmith, and he had heard about a massive slave revolt in Haiti in the Caribbean, which was being talked about all over the colonies: hundreds of thousands of slaves had revolted against their French masters on a massive scale – and, after a bloody war, had actually *won*. The French were forced to leave; Haiti declared its independence and set up its own government, run by blacks who had been former slaves. Gabriel probably hoped to accomplish something similar, but the Governor got wind of his plan, called out the militia, and the rebellion was stopped before it could begin. Gabriel and 25 other slaves were arrested and hanged. Growing increasingly alarmed about the potential for mass revolt, Virginia and other states passed a series of laws restricting the education and assembly of slaves. Virginia also told free blacks they had to leave the state, or else they would be turned into slaves.

In 1803 the United States expanded dramatically when we purchased the Louisiana Territory from France. This territory stretched from New Orleans all the way up to what is now Montana. There were already some 30,000 slaves working on sugar plantations in Louisiana at the time of the purchase. The United States had previously acquired the Northwest Territory, the area around the Great Lakes.

Slavery was prohibited in the Northwest Territory, but allowed in the Louisiana Territory. The division between North and South was expanding. By 1804, all the Northern states had abolished slavery.

1807 marked the 20th year of the U.S. Constitution. Encouraged by President Thomas Jefferson – who called the international slave trade “violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa” – Congress passed a law forbidding the importation of slaves on January 1, 1808 – the very first day they could do so. But the slave trade *within* the states continued. In 1810 the United States annexed what was called “West Florida” – the region we know as Mississippi, Alabama, and the area around Baton Rouge. Many new cotton plantations were created – and massive numbers of slaves were purchased from places like Virginia and brought to the Deep South.

In 1811, a few hundred slaves near New Orleans revolted against the brutal conditions on the sugar plantations. It was the largest slave revolt in the States yet. Two whites and 95 blacks died. About half of those 95 were killed by the militia; the other half were caught and executed without trial.

In 1816 Richard Allen, the black preacher who had left St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church nearly 30 years earlier, gathered leaders from numerous black Methodist churches around Philadelphia and Baltimore to discuss the discrimination that they were all continuing to experience in the church. Some of them decided it was time to leave. A new denomination was created – the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) – the first Christian denomination in the United States founded by blacks.

That same year, Robert Finley, a Presbyterian pastor, founded the American Colonization Society, which launched an effort to relocate free blacks to West Africa. It was an interesting idea that won support from some abolitionists, who felt that blacks might have better chances for real freedom and prosperity in Africa than in the United States, and also from many slaveowners, who were eager to get rid of the free blacks so they could no longer support the slaves. The Presbyterian Church agreed that this was a good idea; in 1818 our General Assembly encouraged all Presbyterians to “patronize and encourage” the Society. The Assembly also said “We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; [and] as utterly inconsistent with the law of God.” It called on all Christians “as speedily as possible to efface this blot on our holy religion” and “to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom.” But that same Assembly also said that slaves were too “ignorant” and too “vicious” to be freed at the present time. Slaves, they said, needed to be *educated* before they could be *liberated*.

Meanwhile, slaves who had learned the faith were organizing secret “underground” churches on many plantations. They wanted to talk about Moses and sing about Jesus – not just hear verses like 1 Peter 2:18: “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.” They wanted the *gospel* – the *good news* of Jesus Christ.

In 1819, the United States acquired Florida from Spain. This meant that Florida could no longer be a destination for runaway slaves. Bounty hunters now had jurisdiction there. That hope was gone.

But God has a way of opening doors. Concerned citizens kept looking for ways to help slaves out of their dire plight. No place in the United States was safe. But to the north, in what would become Canada, *freedom* was waiting. Abolitionists, free blacks, some clergy, and some churches conspired to create a network of secret escape routes for runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad had been born.

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