



# **INDEPENDENCE DAY**

## **(Honoring Those Who Helped Gain Our Independence)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, July 4, 2010**

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**Lecture - Hebrews 11:32-40; 12:1**

#### **I. Introduction**

Throughout human history states, cities, tribes and other entities have set aside special days to honor their founders and to celebrate and commemorate their beginnings, culture and history. In some societies, these days are designated civic or national holidays and, in others, they are considered sacred days. Independence Day (July 4<sup>th</sup>) in the United States of America is a national holiday that was established by the federal legislature and President to celebrate our country's birthday.

Annually, on the Fourth of July, Americans of every age, background, gender, and race gather in civic centers, parks, stadiums, backyards, and family rooms to celebrate the Nation's birth. Usually, the day is filled with food, drink, fireworks, music, parades, and sports. The backdrop for these celebrations is steeped in history, colored by pride and filled with a spirit of patriotism and independence (Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon's 2009 Independence Day Cultural Resources unit includes an exhaustive discussion of the etymology of the word "Independence" and other related terms).<sup>1</sup>

Although these celebrations and commemorations usually focus almost entirely on only the positive aspects and traits of highlighted national leaders and the stated occasion, real opportunities also exist to examine the uncelebrated warts of the nation's birth and national culture. Viewing the nation through the latter lens may often lead to discoveries of change, growth, greatness, resilience, and hope that few even knew existed. Real history includes both beauty and ugliness. What a nation does with its ugliness sometime will be more determinative of its national character and civic health than will all of its other major accomplishments.

To illustrate the importance of this period of recognition, celebration, commemoration and self-reflection, today's Lection scripture focuses our attention on a letter written to a community of

Christians (Jews and non-Jews) who were admonished to remember the faith of the early believers-- their contributions and sacrifices, and the purpose of their service. Their stories point to a catalogue of failures and successes, strengths and weaknesses, sufferings and triumphs, rewards and punishments, and states of bondage and freedom.

While Independence Day in the United States is basically celebrated as a civic holiday, its placement on the African American Lectionary's liturgical calendar provides the Black Church with an opportunity to help African American Christians recall, celebrate and draw strength from the contributions that their ancestors have made to the development, life and culture of this nation. It also provides the Black Church with an opportunity to examine the seeming inherent contradiction in the nation's founders' decision to declare its independence by relying upon lofty arguments regarding the natural rights of man, even though each of the nation's original colonies was mired in the ugly practice of African slavery.

## **II. Historical Background and Documents**

### **(a) Birth of a Nation**

Nations, similar to humans, do not always have easy or perfect births. Frequently, there are complications. At times, they are even aborted before true nationhood and independence are achieved. Even when they are able to survive the treacherous aspects of the birth canal or they miraculously arise from the ashes of another civilization's demise, they do not always emerge unscathed. Nations, similar to humans, are sometime born of mixed pedigree and are forced to spend years overcoming their challenges that began at their birth.

The Thirteen Original Colonies and the American nation they birthed in 1776 were not any different. For many of its inhabitants, America's "spacious skies," "amber waves of grain," "purple mountain majesties" and "fruited plain" have not been always "beautiful."<sup>2</sup> On their way to nationhood, the Thirteen Original Colonies and the United States experienced the birthing pains of "indentured servantry, Indian wars, slavery, and a revolutionary war with their motherland." The scars from these experiences had lingering complications—even until today. Moreover, despite the lofty words contained in the new nation's founding documents, the "blessings of liberty" did not immediately accrue to all of its inhabitants; and, many of those inhabitants were not treated, under either the founding documents or the political practices of the new nation, as if they were endowed with the unalienable rights of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."<sup>3</sup>

More than two hundred and thirty years after the first Fourth of July the offspring of many of those individuals are still seeking the independence that the founding fathers said was a natural right of every individual.

### **(b) Declaration of Independence**

Most Americans probably do not recall the details or particular steps that the Thirteen Original Colonies took to sever ties with their mother country--the State of Great Britain. Contrary to popular belief, the formal act of independence did not start on July 4, 1776.

First, there were colonial protests, denial of colonial requests and failed negotiations between the colonies and the King of England and his representatives. Then, the Virginia delegation of the Continental Congress, on June 7, 1776, presented the Congress with a resolution providing for a declaration of independence by the “United Colonies,” calling for the severance of all political ties with Britain. That resolution was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 2, 1776.<sup>4</sup>

The Congress, on June 10, 1776, also established a committee, which included Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, to draft a “declaration” aligned with the resolution. The document, commonly known as “The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America,” was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776.

According to Congressional records, John Hancock, President of the Congress, signed, on behalf of the Congress, a copy of the document on July 4, 1776. A copy of the original document, engrossed on parchment, was not signed by most members of the Continental Congress until August 2, 1776. The remaining absent members signed on a later date.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner himself, included a scathing charge against the King of England in his draft of the Declaration of Independence for the institution and maintenance of slavery in the Colonies. However, to appease the Southern states, that clause was removed before the Declaration was adopted. The deleted clause read as follows:

*He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, & murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.*<sup>6</sup>

Because the above clause was deleted, the Declaration of Independence that was adopted on July 4, 1776 did not include any reference to slavery or slaves.<sup>7</sup>

### **(c) The New Constitution**

On June 11, 1776, even before the Declaration of independence was adopted, the Continental Congress, as part of the birthing process of the United States, created a committee to draft a confederacy document to provide for the new government. On July 12<sup>th</sup> of that year, the

committee sent a draft set of Articles of Confederation to the Congress. That body debated the draft articles for more than a year.

One of the primary issues being debated was "...whether taxes should be apportioned according to the gross number of inhabitants counting slaves or excluding them..."<sup>8</sup> On November 15, 1777, Congress approved a draft of the Articles of Confederation and sent them to the states for ratification. The Articles became law on March 1, 1781, after they were ratified by the last state.

Even before they went into effect, the Articles were determined by many to be inadequate. As a result, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was called. Ultimately, that body approved a draft constitution and adjourned on September 17th of the same year. The new constitution was eventually submitted to the Continental Congress, and that body submitted it to the several states for ratification. It took several years for all of the original states to ratify the document. The remaining states ratified the Constitution as they were settled and created by Congress.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the agitation and requests from those who abhorred slavery, the new Constitution did not free the slaves and it did not grant them any voting rights. To obtain that independence, a civil war would have to be fought. Moreover, in a nod to Southern plantation owners, Article I, Section 2, of the new Constitution provided:

...  
Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within the Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other persons.<sup>10</sup>

With its Declaration of independence and new Constitution in place, the United States of America was a brand new nation, and her free inhabitants were ready to freely celebrate their new found independence on each succeeding Fourth of July. Yet, her vast body of enslaved citizens had no such right. They still longed for independence. And the Native American (Indians) also had little to celebrate during this period in history.

### **III. The National Birth Defect**

#### **(a) Before Slavery**

Many Americans labor under the misunderstanding that all Africans who came to these shores prior to 1863 came as slaves, after the founding of the first English settlement, Jamestown. Historians say otherwise.

According to Dr. John Hope Franklin and other modern historians, twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown on a Dutch frigate in 1619. They were not slaves—as were many whites, they were indentured servants. Mr. Franklin writes:

*They were listed as servants in the census counts of 1623 and 1624, and*

*as late as 1651 some blacks whose period of service had expired were being assigned land in much the same way that it was being assigned to whites who had completed their indenture. During its first half-century of existence Virginia had many black indentured servants, and the records reveal an increasing number of free blacks.*<sup>11</sup>

History also shows that by 1640, because of the need for human labor, many Virginians had begun to morph the African indentured servant practice into a type of perpetual bonding, requiring their African servants to remain in service for the term of their natural life. There is no credible evidence showing a similar practice for white indentured servants. Acknowledging this, Professor Franklin indicates that "... within the first generation of Virginia's existence, African servitude was well on the way to becoming African slavery."<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, this march towards slavery provided the affected Africans with a desire for independence. While there are few personal records or other evidence to confirm the thinking of the Jamestown Africans whose liberty was taken by these practices, it is reasonable to assume that, under these circumstances, they too longed for independence.

### **(b) All Have Sinned**

Formal slavery was authorized by statute in Virginia in 1661.<sup>13</sup> Although the oldest English colony, Virginia was not the only colony to soil its hands with the dehumanizing institution of slavery. All Thirteen Original Colonies and each of the Thirteen Original States authorized legalized slavery.

According to Dr. Franklin, "...slavery in Maryland was not recognized by law until 1663; it came into existence shortly after the first settlements were made in 1634."<sup>14</sup> The Carolinas (North and South) and Georgia followed suit and embraced slavery early during their settlement. Eventually the slave population outnumbered the white population in the Carolinas; and, it almost equaled the white population in early Georgia.<sup>15</sup>

The Middle Colonies (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware) also subscribed to the institution of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Finally, during the Colonial period of American history, all of the New England Colonies (New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut) legitimized the institution of slavery and installed it within their borders.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while the white inhabitants of the Thirteen Original Colonies as early as July 4, 1776 had reason to celebrate their new country and new independence, the hope of and prayers for independence still ran deep in the hearts and minds of the African slaves -- from Georgia to Rhode Island.

In short, slavery was America's birth defect—a nation founded on the notion that all humans had the natural right to personal liberty; yet, the benefits of that principle did not accrue to people with black skin. Slaves did not enjoy the luxuries of personal liberty nor did Native Americans. Even "free" blacks were not really free. Unlike their white counterparts, they were forced to carry papers to prove they were not slaves. And, they, unlike their white counterparts, had to

worry that any slave trader had the power to snatch their freedom and thrust them into a life of perpetual bondage. These were some of the complications that resulted from the defective birth of the new slave Nation. Surely, “free” blacks also longed for independence.

#### **IV. Other Visions of Black Independence**

Historians and other researchers have uncovered mounds of evidence that clearly show blacks wanted freedom—so much so that many of them risked and lost their lives trying to escape to independence:

*The earliest slave rebellions go back to the seventeenth century, when there were several instances of rebellion aboard ship before the slave cargoes reached America. On the Kentucky, more than forty slaves were once put to death for staging an uprising in mid-ocean. Such slave revolts occurred so often during the Middle Passage that they were rated an occupational hazard by the traders. Once ashore, the danger did not cease.*<sup>18</sup>

Other slaves sought independence by running away. One such runaway slave, Henry Bibb of Bedford, Kentucky, responding to a letter from his former master, said:

*You may perhaps think hard of us for running away from slavery, but as to myself, I have but one apology to make, which is this: I have only to regret that I did not start at an earlier period ...*<sup>19</sup>

Some slaves also bargained and contracted with their owners to obtain their own freedom and the release of members of their family:

*Enterprising slaves were able to amass sufficient capital to purchase their freedom ... Lunsford Lane of Raleigh, for example, spent his spare time making pipes, raising chickens, and engaging in other tasks in order to realize his ambition of becoming free.*<sup>20</sup>

Although initially rebuffed, still other slaves served in and supported the Revolutionary Army, confederate Army, Union Army and other military efforts:

*[B]lacks frequently participated in wars against the French and the Indians, thus developing a tradition of military service that was alive at the time of the War of independence ... blacks took up arms against the British ...*<sup>21</sup>

In many instances, military and war services were offered because slaves and “free” blacks hoped for independence for their governments and freedom for themselves and their fellow bondsmen. Unfortunately, their visions of personal independence would not begin to bud until the start of the American Civil War. Yet, they persisted with their hopes and dreams.

#### **V. Notions of Independence In Word and Song**

Even a cursory review of Black literature and music provides overwhelming proof that African Americans have always had strong visions of freedom and independence. From early slave songs to modern day protest songs, the quest for freedom and independence has been part of the Black psyche and Black music that every Black American, old or young, knows or has heard. Some of that music and literature depict a strong nationalistic spirit; and, some highlight the hopes, faith and pain that slavery and discrimination have engendered among Black Americans. An example of a song that depicts a Black nationalistic spirit is:

*The old flag never touch'd the ground, boys, The old flag never  
Touch'd the ground;--Though shot and shell fell all around, boys,  
The dear old flag was never downed. --- The old flag never touch'd  
The ground, boys, Far to the front 'twas ever found; ---She's been  
In many a fix Since Seventeen Seventy Six, But the old flag has  
Never touch'd the groun ...tho' she's been in many a fix Since  
...Seventeen Seventy Six ...old flag has never touch'd the ground.<sup>22</sup>*

This song, by James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson, was written to honor Sergeant William Carney, a “heroic flag bearer of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts U.S. Colored Troops...”<sup>23</sup>

Two songs depicting dissatisfaction with slavery and second class citizenship and evidencing a spirit of independence are:

#### **Steal Away**

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus! Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here. My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder; The trumpet sounds within my soul; I ain't got long to stay here. Steal away, Steal away, Steal away to Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Oh, Freedom**

Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom over me. And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my lord and be free. no more moaning, no more moaning, no more moaning over me. And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, the song “We Shall Overcome,” national hymn of the American Civil rights Movement, depicts a similar call for freedom and independence:

#### **We Shall Overcome**

We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome some day. Oh, deep in my heart I do believe. We shall overcome some day. We'll walk hand in hand. We'll walk hand in hand. We'll walk hand in hand some day. Oh, deep in my heart I do believe. We shall overcome some day.<sup>26</sup>

Black literature is also replete with a similar spirit of freedom and independence. Some examples are found in the following verses from poems by Frances E.W. Harper and George Horton:

### **Bury Me In A Free Land**

Make me a grave where'er you will.  
In a lowly plain, or on a lofty hill;  
Make it among earth's humblest graves,  
But not in a land where men are slaves.<sup>27</sup>

### **Slavery**

Is it because my skin is black,  
That thou should'st be so dull and slack,  
And scorn to set me free?  
Then let me hasten to the grave,  
The only refuge for the slave,  
Who mourns liberty.<sup>28</sup>

Since 1776, African Americans have been of two mindsets when it comes to celebrating the Fourth of July and the principles of freedom and independence that are embodied in our Nation's founding documents--the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. This double-mindedness exists because the Nation has seldom accorded Blacks the same rights that it has accorded members of the white race. Therefore, some Blacks have questioned whether African Americans have any reason to celebrate the Fourth of July.

Still, African Americans have volunteered and fought to maintain the independence of this Nation in every war the Nation has ever faced—even when they themselves did not have that same independence. Consequently, the Nation has never questioned the patriotism of the African American race, even when some of the Nation's leaders, because of discrimination and racism, sought to keep Blacks out of military service.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The following excerpts from one of Paul Laurence Dunbar's literary pieces concerning the Fourth of July capture the dichotomy Fourth of July celebrations pose for African Americans. Mr. Dunbar, in 1903, writing in response to Black disenfranchisement and violent, unprovoked attacks on Black citizens, indicated:

### **The Fourth of July and Race Outrages**

Belleville, Wilmington, Evansville, the Fourth of July, and Kishineff,  
a curious combination and yet one replete with a ghastly humor.  
Sitting with closed lips over our own bloody deeds we accomplish  
the fine irony of a protest to Russia. Contemplating with placid eyes  
the destruction of all the Declaration of Independence and the  
Constitution stood for, we celebrate the thing which our own action  
proclaims we do not believe in.<sup>29</sup>

Further in his Fourth of July missive Mr. Dunbar protests that:

Every wire, no longer in the South alone, brings us news of a new hanging or a new burning, some recent outrage against a helpless people, some fresh degradation of an already degraded race. One man sins and a whole nation suffers, and we celebrate.<sup>30</sup>

Mr. Dunbar ends his Fourth of July missive with: "... *there be some who on this festal day kneel in their private closets and with hands upraised and bleeding hearts cry out to God, if there still lives a God, "How long, O God, How long?"*"<sup>31</sup>

This question still lingers in the mind of many African Americans, providing the Black Church with a continued opportunity to teach current and future generations about the greatness of their ancestors, the price of independence and what can be done now to continue the liberation efforts of African Americans. Through the Lection's focus on *independence*, lessons of faith, freedom, liberty, honor and forgiveness can be had.

To punctuate the moment, churches could hold:

(1) a **Service of Silence**, where no words would be spoken. The entire service would consist of a silent meditation. Its purpose would be to honor the sacrifices made by our ancestors that allow us to live in hope and change today; and

(2) a **Fourth of July Song Fest**, where the entire music program would consist of Chants, Spirituals, Gospel, Blues, Jazz, RAP, and Hip Hop musical renditions that chronicle and celebrate the African American race's longstanding quest for freedom and independence for this Nation and itself.

As evidenced by the Civil Rights Movement, the instruments of silence (in that case through non-violence) and music are two of the strongest weapons possessed by our people. Those instruments have been skillfully used by Black leaders and the Black masses in their historical struggles to attain freedom, liberty and independence.

The Black Church's use of silence and music to celebrate those efforts could be very powerful. Here, I am reminded of the silence Jesus displayed on the cross. His silence served both as a deafening protest and a powerful exposure of the evil at hand. It also underscored His great sacrifice for human liberty and independence. It is the same freedom and independence, flowing from the God-ordained rights of man, that the Fourth of July holiday was established to celebrate and upon which the Declaration of Independence purportedly was based.

### Notes

1. Bernice Reagon, Independence Sunday, Cultural Resources, [The African American Lectionary](#), July 5, 2009. Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=93> accessed 21 January 2010

2. "America the Beautiful." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. # 607.
3. "Declaration of Independence." Concise Dictionary of American History. 1962. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983. p. 283.
4. Ibid., p. 281.
5. Ibid., pp. 282-283.
6. Franklin, John H. and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. From Slavery to Freedom. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. p. 83.
7. Ibid., pp. 83-84.
8. Ibid., p. 65.
9. Ibid., p. 65; pp. 237-238.
10. Ibid., p.238.
11. Ibid., p. 65.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 65.
14. Ibid., p. 67.
15. Ibid., pp. 69-72.
16. Ibid., pp. 72-75.
17. Ibid., pp. 75-78.
18. Hughes, Langston and Milton Meltzer. A Pictorial History of the Negro in America. New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1964. p. 30.
19. Franklin, John H. and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. From Slavery to Freedom. p. 163.
20. Ibid., pp. 168-169.
21. Ibid., p. 84.
22. Harris, A. Middleton. The Black Book: 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York, NY: Random House, 2009. pp. 34-35.
23. Ibid., p. 34. See also, Hughes, Langston and Milton Meltzer. A Pictorial History of the Negro in America. p. 177.
24. "Steal Away To Jesus." Negro Spiritual. African American Heritage Hymnal. #546
25. "Oh, Freedom." Negro Spiritual. African American Heritage Hymnal. #545
26. "We Shall Overcome." African American Heritage Hymnal. #542
27. Gates, Henry L. and Nellie Y. McKay. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997. p. 417.
28. Collier, Eugenia W. and Richard A. Long. Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry. London, England: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985. p. 43.
29. Gates, Henry L. and Nellie Y. McKay. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. p.905.
30. Ibid., p. 906.
31. Ibid., p. 906.

## Let America Be America Again

by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.

I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home--  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay--  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where *every* man is free.  
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,

America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath--  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain--  
All, all the stretch of these great green states--  
And make America again!