

vance on July 5, and the speeches generally dealt with the need to apply the Declaration of Independence to all people, regardless of color. Some have praised Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address for transforming America and the mission of the Civil War by rhetorically elevating the Declaration of Independence to constitutional status.* But Lincoln's actions were anticipated by Osborne and other black abolitionists who had seized upon the abolitionist implications and sacred status of the Declaration for decades before the Civil War.

In Osborne's jeremiad vision, the Declaration is a compact for all Americans, including those of African descent, whose "forefathers fought, bled, and died to achieve the independence of the United States." Osborne urges black political unity to "contend for the prize" in America and resist the efforts of the emigrationists to foreclose their birthrights here.

The following speech was delivered by Peter Osborne, a Connecticut community leader, in the New Haven African Church on July 5, 1832. The address as presented here was taken from the *Liberator* for December 1, 1832.

FELLOW CITIZENS, on account of the misfortune of our color, our Fourth of July comes on the fifth. But I hope and trust that when the Declaration of Independence is fully executed, which declares that all men, without respect to person, were born free and equal, we may then have our Fourth of July on the fourth. It is thought by many that this is as impossible to take place, as it is for the leopard to change his spots; but I anticipate that the time is approaching very fast. The signs in the North, the signs in the South, in the East and West, are all favorable to our cause. Why, then, should we forbear contending for the civil rights of free countrymen? What man of national feeling would slumber in content under the yoke of slavery and oppression, in his own country? Not the most degraded barbarian in the interior of Africa.

If we desire to see our brethren relieved from the tyrannical yoke of slavery and oppression in the South, if we would enjoy the civil rights of free countrymen, it is high time for us to be up and doing. It has been said that we have already done well, but we can do better. What more can we do? Why, we must unite with our brethren in the North, in the South, and in the East and West, and then with the Declaration of Independence in one hand and the Holy Bible in the other, I think we might courageously give battle to the most powerful enemy to this cause. The Declaration of Independence has declared to man, without speaking of color, that all men are born free and equal. Has it not declared this freedom and equality to us too? What man would content himself and say nothing of the rights of man with two millions of his brethren in bondage? Let us contend for the prize.

*See, for example, Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 38–39.

Let us all unite and with one accord declare that we will not leave our own country to emigrate to Liberia,* or else, to be civilized or Christianized. Let us make it known to America that we are not barbarians; that we are not inhuman beings; that this is our native country; that our forefathers have planted trees in America for us, and we intend to stay and eat the fruit. Our forefathers fought, bled and died to achieve the independence of the United States. Why should we forbear contending for the prize? It becomes every colored citizen in the United States to step forward boldly and gallantly defend his rights. What has been done within a few years, since the union of the colored people? Are not the times more favorable to us now, than they were ten years ago? Are we not gaining ground? Yes—and had we begun this work forty years ago, I do not hesitate to say that there would not have been, at this day, a slave in the United States. Take, courage, then, ye African-Americans! Don't give up the conflict, for the glorious prize can be won. ■

20 WHY SIT YE HERE AND DIE?

Maria W. Stewart



Maria W. Stewart was among the first native-born American women to leave extant copies of their public speeches. Speaking in public was widely regarded as unwomanly in the nineteenth century, and women's political opinions were both devalued and proscribed by law and social practice. Stewart resisted these pressures, asking, "What if I am a woman?" in her Boston farewell address of 1833. A person of deep religious conviction, she believed that the injustices to which she responded would have led even St. Paul to relent in his proscription of women's speech. If he knew "of our wrongs and deprivations," she argued, "he would make no objection to our pleading in public for our rights."

Maria Miller was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803. Orphaned at the age of five, she was "bound out in a clergyman's family" as a servant until the age of fifteen. In 1826, she married James W. Stewart, a shipping agent, in Boston, a center for black political activity. The Massachusetts General Colored Association, dedicated to agitation on both lo-

*In 1821, the American Colonization Society purchased land in Africa for the establishment of a colony that was named Liberia from the Latin word *liber*, meaning "free." Monrovia, its capital, was named in honor of President James Monroe (1758–1831), a member of the society.

cal and national issues, was founded in the year of their marriage. Locally produced black publications, such as Freedom's Journal, offered their readers news of "whatever concerns us as a people . . . interwoven with all the principal news of the day." Boston's David Walker (1785-1830), whose 1829 tract, *Walker's Appeal*, called for armed self-defense and militant resistance to slavery and oppression, was a friend and mentor to Maria Stewart. James Stewart died in 1829, and Walker followed him (perhaps by poisoning) the following year. Grief-stricken, Maria Stewart underwent a powerful religious experience. Rooted in her newly deepened faith were a sense of "holy indignation" at the plight of African Americans and a commitment to speak out in public against the injustices that beset them. In the fall of 1831, Stewart approached William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, with a manuscript urging African Americans to "sue for your rights and privileges" and to "know the reason that you cannot attain them." Writing shortly before the execution of Nat Turner, she stated defiantly, "We are not afraid of them that kill the body and after that can do no more."⁸

Highly unusual for her time, Stewart spoke in public on political topics before "promiscuous" audiences composed of both men and women. Black males in one of her audiences reportedly threw tomatoes at her when she upbraided them for failure to adhere to Christian principles (Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 115). In her four Boston addresses of 1832 and 1833, Stewart denounced colonization schemes ("Before I go, the bayonet shall pierce me through"), yet invoked pride in the African heritage (Richardson, Maria W. Stewart, 17).

The following speech was her second public lecture in Boston, delivered on September 21, 1832, at Franklin Hall, the meeting site of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. She offers poignant description of black women's labors and frustrations in domestic service, grounded in her own experience. She also makes it clear that black women labored under a double burden of racism and sexism. Denied education and prohibited from occupational advancement, she argues, African American women in the North were generally relegated to menial servitude that was little better than slavery.

The text comes from Marilyn Richardson, Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 45-49. See also Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 112-16.

Why sit ye here and die? If we say we will go to a foreign land, the famine and the pestilence are there, and there we shall die. If we sit

⁸Maria Stewart, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* (1831), quoted in Richardson, *Maria W. Stewart*, 40.

here, we shall die. Come let us plead our case before the whites: if they save us alive we shall live—and if they kill us, we shall but die.

Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—"Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman? And my heart made this reply—"If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!"

I have heard much respecting the horrors of slavery; but may Heaven forbid that the generality of my color throughout these United States should experience any more of its horrors than to be a servant of servants, or hewers of wood and drawers of water [Joshua 9:23]! Tell us no more of southern slavery, for with few expectations, although I may be very erroneous in my opinion, yet I consider our condition but little better than that. Yet, after all, methinks there are no chains so galling as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge. O, had I received the advantages of an early education, my ideas would, ere now, have expanded far and wide; but, alas! I possess nothing but moral capability—no teachings but the teachings of the Holy Spirit.

I have asked several individuals of my sex, who transact business for themselves, if providing our girls were to give them the most satisfactory references, they would not be willing to grant them an equal opportunity with others? Their reply has been—for their own part, they had no objection, but as it was not the custom, were they to take them into their employ, they would be in danger of losing the public patronage.

And such is the powerful force of prejudice. Let our girls possess whatever amiable qualities of soul they may; let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself; let their natural taste and ingenuity be what they may; it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants. Ah! why is this cruel and unfeeling distinction? Is it merely because God has made our complexion to vary? If it be, O shame to soft, relenting humanity! "Tell it not in Gath! publish it not in the streets of Askelon!" [2 Samuel 1:20]. Yet, after all, methinks were the American free people of color to turn their attention more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement, this would be the result: prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say, unloose those fetters!

*Though black their skins as shades of night
Their hearts are pure, their souls are white.*

Few white persons of either sex, who are calculated for anything else, are willing to spend their lives and bury their talents in performing mean, servile labor. And such is the horrible idea that I entertain respecting a life of servitude, that if I conceived of their [sic] being no possibility of my rising above the condition of servant, I would gladly hail death as a welcome messenger. O, horrible idea, indeed! to possess noble souls aspiring after high and honorable acquisitions, yet confined by the chains of ignorance and

poverty to lives of continual drudgery and toil. Neither do I know of any who have enriched themselves by spending their lives as house-domestics, washing windows, shaking carpets, brushing boots, or tending upon gentlemen's tables. I can but die for expressing my sentiments: and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I am a true born American, your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit flies my breast.

I observed a piece in the *Liberator* a few months since, stating that the colonizationist had published a work respecting us, asserting that we were lazy and idle. I confute them on that point. Take us generally as a people, we are neither lazy or idle, and considering how little we have to excite or stimulate us, I am almost astonished that there are so many industrious and ambitious ones to be found, although I acknowledge, with extreme sorrow, that there are some who never were and never will be serviceable to society. And have you not a similar class among yourselves?

Again. It was asserted that we were "a ragged set, crying for liberty." I reply to it, the whites have so long and loudly proclaimed the theme of equal rights and privileges, that our souls have caught the flame also, ragged as we are. As far as our merit deserves, we feel a common desire to rise above the condition of servants and drudges. I have learnt, by bitter experience, that continual hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind, the ideas become confined, the mind barren, and, like the scorching sands of Arabia, produces nothing, or like the uncultivated soil, brings forth thorns and thistles.

Again, continual and hard labor irritates our tempers and sours our dispositions; the whole system becomes worn out with toil and fatigue; nature herself becomes almost exhausted, and we care but little whether we live or die. It is true, that the free people of color throughout these United States are neither bought nor sold, nor under the lash of the cruel driver; many obtain a comfortable support; but few, if any, have an opportunity of becoming rich and independent, and the enjoyments we most pursue are as unprofitable to us as the spider's web or the floating bubbles that vanish into air. As servants, we are respected; but let us presume to aspire any higher, our employer regards us no longer. And were it not that the King eternal has declared that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God, I should indeed despair.

I do not consider it derogatory, my friends, for persons to live out to service. There are many whose inclination leads them to aspire no higher, and I would highly commend the performance of almost anything for an honest livelihood, but where constitutional strength is wanting, labor of this kind, in the mildest form, is painful. And doubtless many are the prayers that have ascended to Heaven from Africa's daughters for strength to perform their work. Oh, many are the tears that have been shed for the want of that strength! Most of our color have dragged our as miserable existence of servitude from the cradle to the grave. And what literary acquirement can be made, or useful knowledge derived, from either maps, books, or charts, by those who continually drudge from Monday morning until Sunday noon! O ye fairer sisters, whose hands are never soiled, whose nerves and muscles are

never strained, go learn by experience! Had we had the opportunity that you have had, to improve our moral and mental faculties, what would have hindered our intellects from being as bright, and our manners from being as dignified as yours? Had it been our lot to have been nursed in the lap of affluence and ease, and to have basked beneath the smiles and sunshine of fortune, should we not have naturally supposed that we were never made to toil? And why are not our forms as delicate, and our constitutions as slender, as yours? Is not the workmanship as curious and complete? Have pity upon us, have pity on us, O ye who have hearts to feel for other's woes; for the hand of God has touched us. Owing to the disadvantages under which we labor, there are many flowers among us that are

... born to bloom unseen
And waste their fragrance on the desert air.


My beloved brethren, as Christ had died in vain for those who will not accept his offered mercy, so will it be vain for the advocates of freedom to spend their breath in our behalf, unless with united hearts and souls you make some mighty efforts to raise your sons and daughters from the horrible state of servitude and degradation in which they are placed. It is upon you that woman depends; she can do but little besides using her influence, and it is for her sake and yours that I have come forward and made myself a hissing and reproach among the people [Jeremiah 29:18] for I am also one of the wretched and miserable daughters of the descendants of fallen Africa. Do you ask, why are you wretched and miserable? I reply, look at many of the most worthy and most interesting of us doomed to spend our lives in gentlemen's kitchens. Look at our young men, smart, active and energetic, with souls filled with ambitious fire; if they look forward, alas! What are their prospects? They can be nothing but the humblest laborers, on account of their dark complexions; hence many of them lose their ambition, and become worthless. Look at our middle-aged men, clad in their rusty plaids and coats, in winter, every cent they earn goes to buy their wood and pay their rent; the poor wives also toil beyond their strength, to help support their families. Look at our aged sires, whose heads are whitened with the frosts of seventy winters, with their old wood-saws on their backs. Alas, what keeps us so? Prejudice, ignorance and poverty. But ah! methinks our oppression is soon to come to an end, yea, before the Majesty of heaven, our groans and cries have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth [James 5:4]. As the prayers and tears of Christians will avail the finally impotent nothing, neither will the prayers and tears of the friends of humanity avail us anything, unless we possess a spirit of virtuous emulation within our breasts. Did the pilgrims, when they first landed on these shores, quietly compose themselves and say, "The Britons have all the money and all the power, and we must continue their servants forever?" Did they sluggishly sigh and say, "Our lot is hard, the Indians own the soil, and we cannot cultivate it?" No, they first made powerful efforts to raise themselves and then God raised up those illustrious patriots, WASHINGTON and LAFAYETTE, to assist and defend them. And,

my brethren, have you made a powerful effort? Have you prayed the legislature for mercy's sake to grant you all the rights and privileges of free citizens, that your daughters may rise to that degree of respectability which true merit deserves, and your sons above the servile situations which most of them fill? ■

21

LET US ALONE

Nathaniel Paul

 Born in New Hampshire, Paul (c. 1793–1839) assumed the pastorate of Albany's First African Baptist Church in 1820. He campaigned both against slavery and against racial discrimination while arguing that blacks could diminish white prejudice through temperance, educational achievement, and diligent labor.

But in 1830, frustrated with black progress and prospects in the United States, Paul emigrated to the Wilberforce Colony in Upper Canada. Two years later, he was sent to England to raise funds. In 1833–1834, Paul and William Lloyd Garrison toured Britain to campaign against the efforts and claims of the American Colonization Society, whose representative, Elliot Cresson, was then engaged in a British fundraising tour.

On July 13, 1833, Paul appeared with Garrison at an anticolonization meeting in London's Exeter Hall, where he delivered the following address. Through the persuasive efforts of Paul and other visiting black American lecturers who soon followed him, writes Peter Ripley, "British antislavery leaders came to recognize that a black abolitionist presence was essential to the development of British abolitionism" (Witness for Freedom, 44).

The text of Paul's speech was published in *Speeches Delivered at the Anti-Colonization Meeting in Exeter Hall, London* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1833), 12–15, and was reprinted in Dorothy Porter, *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 286–91. See also C. Peter Ripley, *Witness for Freedom: African American Voices on Race, Slavery, and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

I n rising to address an audience of this description, I shall not offer an apology, because I consider it to be unnecessary. Nature has furnished me

with an apology in the complexion that I wear, and that shall speak in my behalf. (Cheers.)

Allow me to say that Mr. Garrison* has, for many years past, devoted himself exclusively to the interests of the slaves and the free people of color in the United States of America. He requires, however, no commendation from me, or from any other gentleman whatever; "the tree is known by its fruits," and "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh." But if there be any necessity for calling evidence in favor of that gentleman, there is an abundance, demonstrating that he has acted a most disinterested part on behalf of those whose cause he has espoused. It has been his lot to make large sacrifices, in order that he might be enabled to pursue the object of his heart's desire. He might have swum upon the tide of popular applause, and have had the great and the noble of our country on his side, who would now have been applauding him, instead of persecuting him as the disturber of the peace and tranquility of the nation, if he had not lifted up his voice on behalf of the suffering slaves. (Hear, hear.) To my certain knowledge, when he commenced his career, it was under the most unfavorable circumstances. No one stood forward in his defense, and he was under the necessity of adopting and pursuing a system of the most rigid economy, in order that he might be sustained while he was engaged in the important work he had undertaken.

But it is not merely the sacrifice that Mr. Garrison has made, or the rigid system of economy that he has adopted, that speaks on his behalf, but the sufferings that he has endured likewise recommend him to the attention of every philanthropist. This gentleman has suffered forty-nine days incarceration in a prison in the city of Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, because he had the hardihood to engage in defense of the suffering slaves in that State. The fact of Mr. Garrison's imprisonment has been loudly sounded throughout this country. The agent of the American Colonization Society has seen fit to represent Mr. Garrison as a mere pamphleteer, as the editor of a Negro newspaper in the United States, and as a convicted libeller. This is the manner in which this gentleman has been spoken of in this country, by the agent of the American Colonization Society. And does that agent suppose that by such mere slang he can lower Mr. Garrison in the estimation of the British public? The simpleton reminds me of another of whom I have heard, who, for some cause or other, became exceedingly exasperated at the moon, and stood the whole night angrily shaking his fist at it, but could not teach it. (Cheers.)

I make no complaint against the agent of the American Colonization Society for stating the fact that Mr. Garrison was convicted, and thrown into prison in the United States; it is a fact, and he had a right to the advantage of it whenever he saw fit. I only blame him because, in stating it, he did not tell the cause why—who the persons were at whose instigation it was done—

*Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) was editor of the *Liberator* and a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society.