

Black History is the First Weapon against White Supremacy (Editor's Commentary)

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My maternal grandfather, Reverend John H Scott, was a hunter, farmer, civil rights activists and local NAACP chapter president. He was one of the first Black people to vote in North Louisiana; an act and conviction that nearly cost his life. In 1962, my grandfather was shot in the arm as he traveled with his wife and young children. In a book that he authored, along with his daughter Cleo Scott Brown, he described his thoughts as he hid in a ditch with blood running down his shirt: "A cause worth living for, is a cause worth dying for" (Scott & Brown, 2003, p. 1).

Almost 100 years before racists shot my grandfather because he was fighting for voting rights in Louisiana, the state elected a Black lieutenant governor named Oscar Dunn in 1868. After Dunn died, in 1871, he was succeeded by P.B.S. Pinchback, another African American who was the president of the state Senate. At the time 7 of 36 seats in the Senate were held by Black men. The House had 42 representatives of African American descent, comprising half the seats. When the governor of the state was impeached, Pinchback became the first Black governor of a U.S. state in 1872.

Pinchback was the last Black governor in the United States until Douglas Wilder became the governor of Virginia more than 100 years later in 1990. The reason for this long gap in Black political activity is because of a cultural genocide of Black voters that occurred in the decades immediately following the premature termination of Reconstruction, followed by Jim Crow laws. The Colfax massacre of 1873 is one example of Black voter suppression through cultural genocide (Cummins, 2010). Because of the success of Black voting, violent White militia decided to murder Black voters. More than 100 Black people were murdered for voting in Louisiana during the Colfax massacre.

A Black person winning a statewide election in the 1870s followed by the near absence of Black people from statewide and national offices for more than a century defies conventional logic because authentic Black history is largely inaccessible. Black history, as traditionally taught, is compartmentalized, superficial and incomplete. The history of Black people, as taught in most schools, is replete with victimization and despair, with isolated flashpoints of individual heroes. In fact, heroes throughout Black history are the rule, not the exception. Conventionally, in the United States, prisoners of war, such as Senators John McCain and John Kerry, are considered heroes. Therefore, the 4 million Black people who endured the inhuman captivity of slavery are heroes, and anyone throughout history who worked to preserve slavery was an enemy of the state.

From this perspective, slavery is not a story of captivity and despair, but of sacrifice, endurance and fortitude. Black people, whether one of the 500,000 who were free prior to the Civil War or the 4 million who were subjected to slavery, had a history and a role in Black liberation. In my book, *No BS (Bad Stats)* (Toldson, 2019), I describe a White teacher in Florida who said, "I teach at a mostly Black school and slavery is a sensitive and painful topic My Black students seem to feel some type of way about a White woman teaching about slavery."

"How are you teaching slavery?" I asked.

I clarified:

Slavery was more than a 'painful period.' It was a period of active resistance for Black people. From the founding of this nation, when Black loyalists and Black patriots fought on both sides of the American Revolution, to the Civil War, when all Black brigades fought for freedom, Black people fought valiantly for their freedom and actively shaped their own destiny.

Right here in the state of Florida, as a Spanish territory in the early 1800s, enslaved Africans escaped southern slave states to form colonies and cooperative agreements with Native

Americans. They even took command of a cache of weapons that the British abandoned after the War of 1812 and defended their “New Land” from invasions and rescued other slaves.

There is documented evidence that, under the command of General Garson, the ‘Negro Fort’ won several battles, including battles that led to the emancipation of local slaves, decades before the Civil War. The presence of the Negro Fort invoked widespread consternation among southern slave owners. Florida is also the home of many Haitians. In Haiti, enslaved Africans, not only won freedom from bondage, but also formed an independent republic through military victory.

Nearby, in South Carolina, Africans escaped enslavement and started sovereign colonies on islands off the coast that predate Plymouth Rock, with African cultural artifacts that have survived to this day. Speaking of South Carolina, it was here that ex-slave Robert Smalls learned to pilot a ship and earned his freedom by commandeering a Confederate warship and delivering it to the Union Army.

Before the Civil War, several hundred enslaved Africans escaped every month and immediately began to shape the Western hemisphere. Some established autonomous maroon colonies, some established roots in other nations, and many joined the abolitionist movements. In fact, when John Brown tipped off the Civil War by attacking Harpers Ferry, he was accompanied by several ex-slaves, including his co-defendant “Emperor” Shields Green.

Therefore, slavery was not simply a ‘painful period’ that ended when White people freed slaves. It was a period whereby through escapes, insurrections, maroon colonies, and the abolitionist movement becoming to radicalized, Black people made slavery untenable (Toldson, 2019, pp. 124-125).

Recently, I was in a meeting with Ernie Green of the Little Rock 9 (Aretha, 2014). After someone mentioned Carter G. Woodson (Woodson, 1933), Mr. Green shared an interesting fact about his life. He said prior to integrating Central High School, he had a teacher at his segregated school named Ms. Gwendolyn Scott. One day, Ms. Scott picked up their assigned history textbook and threw it in the trash. She then passed around a copy of *The Mis-education of the Negro* and said, “We’re learning Black history from now on.”

Mr. Green said learning about slave insurrections inspired him and his friends to join desegregation efforts. At the time, he considered the forced integration of Central High a revolutionary act. Learning Black history emboldened him to participate in a movement that culminated with him forcefully integrating Central High under armed protection, while enduring violent threats and assaults.

Mr. Green's story reminds us that Black history is more than lessons to learn. Black history is the first weapon against white supremacy, and suppressing Black history is an act of war.

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