There Is a River

The Black Struggle for Freedom in America

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Rebels, Resistants, and Outlyers

Building the River’s Power

I have nothing more to offer than what George Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them. I have ventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause.

Courtroom Testimony,
Anonymous Black Insurrectionist, 1804

It was a new century and we were a long way from home.

In America we were still largely people of the coasts and the rivers, people of the verdant fields, forests, and mountainsides, but this was not the land, these were not the waters, not the hills which had been the dwelling places of our fathers and mothers from the beginning of human time. Instead we were here as unwilling accomplices in the intrusion upon the spirits of other men’s forebears, prisoner companions to the desecration of the mounds of the natives of these lands, worker captives in a place which was itself being taken captive.

We were a long way from home. Yet all of America had become our home. In the cities and settlements of the Atlantic coast, from Boston to Savannah, we were the dark and dangerous presence. In New York and Norfolk, in Philadelphia and Charleston we were on the wharves unloading the ships, watching—with what mixed feelings in our hearts?—the new bewildered children of Africa arrive. We were the carpenters and the cooks, the ironworkers and the porters, the chimney sweeps and the coopers, the butchers, sailors, and blacksmiths.

Back in the limitless rural area where the vast majority of Americans lived, we also lived and worked. In the darkness of the mornings we
walked out from our cabins into the vast expanse of cotton, fields of tobacco, rows of corn; weeded in the paddies where the endless acres of rice plants awaited our coming. Often the crops and the earth reminded us of our homeland, but we were a long way from home.

We were by the rivers again, but not the Gambia and the Sierra Leone, not the Congo and the Niger. Instead we worked the crops and built the houses and guided the boats along rivers whose very names evoked the unquiet spirits of the land: Roanoke and Potomac, Chattahoochee and Allegheny, Mississippi and Tennessee. And we followed the rivers and the paths, helped slash new roads into the countless acres of land being wrested from the natives of this place.

We moved with the nation across the Appalachians and found new homes in places like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, and out in the Indiana Territory and down in the flatlands of the Mississippi Territory. (Soon after, when the victorious revolution of Africa's children in San Domingo helped to convince Napoleon to sell the Indian land the French had claimed as their own, we moved there with the white slaveholding settlers and found children of Africa already in the territory called Louisiana.) We were everywhere, but in some places there were only lonely scatterings of blackness, for our locus was the South, and the South had now extended westward beyond the Mississippi River.¹

We were far from home, yet some of us were not sure if we were near or far. For some had been in North America, living and enduring here with the people from England and Ireland and Scotland and Europe, for five and six generations. At the same time, with every movement of a slave ship into the Eastern harbors, new African captives arrived, bearing word and proof of a homeland, lending credence to the stories passed on through the generations, affirming the songs sung in the brush arbors of the night. Where was our home?

The new century cast into painful relief all the strange complexities and profound dilemmas which time and the increasingly long exile had brought to our situation and our struggle. By 1800 there were somewhat more than one million children of Africa living in the new nation, comprising approximately twenty percent of the population. Most of us—some 900,000—were held in legal slavery. The rest occupied that limbo assigned to men and women who live as “free” in a society committed to their slavery.²

The situation was crowded with hard choices, with brutal tensions that bore directly on the nature and status of black struggle. As a people they had been in America for generations, but there seemed no end to slavery. Indeed, the cotton mills of England had now found new life in the use of steam, and the cotton fields of America promised fantastic new
yields with the coming of the cotton gin. Neither of these developments carried any hope of relief for Africa's children at the outset of the new century. Neither seemed to clarify the direction black struggle should take. Meanwhile the voluminous laws which supported black bondage were constantly being reproduced, reshaped, and redefined. The purchase of Louisiana in 1803 soon provided new lands for slavery, new impetus for the slave trade, new justifications for the nation's commitment to our bondage.  

Indeed, in these turn-of-the-century years tens of thousands of new Africans were poured into the cauldron of American slavery. Even in the North, where some sixty percent of the small black minority lived as "free" people, and where slavery was on its way to legal death, the dilemmas were similarly harsh. For in 1800 there was no state in which black people could educate their children, earn a living, find proper housing, exercise voting rights—in short, exist in dignity—without constant, often brutal struggle against the white majority and its laws and customs. And when the beleaguered Northern blacks tried to raise their voices on behalf of their kinsmen in the South, they encountered even more evidence of the depths of white racism.

Thus in 1800 the outspoken black community of Philadelphia, under the leadership of Absalom Jones, sent a petition to Congress calling for legislative action against the African slave trade as well as for laws which would gradually abolish slavery. It was put forward in a respectful tone, a quiet call for justice. In Congress the usual treatment for all antislavery petitions from white constituents was to refer them to a committee and kill them. However, in response to this black petition Harrison Gray Otis, a Massachusetts congressman, opposed even that negative form of recognition. To acknowledge this word from black people, he said, "would have an irritating tendency, and must be mischievous to America very soon. It would teach them the art of assembling together, disputing and the like, and would soon . . . extend from one end of the Union to the other." After a two-day debate, devoted largely to the promulgation of views like those of Otis, the House voted 85–1 to offer "no encouragement or countenance" to such messages from the children of Africa in America.

As the new century began, it often appeared as if the future lay wholly, securely, with white men like these, deniers of black rights, opponents to the development of black humanity. On the surface, the new age seemed only to have reinforced the old bondage now spreading across the land. But white surfaces concealed many things, especially the insistent black river, steadily moving, beating against and beneath the walls of slavery. In 1800, rising from under the surface, black people made it clear again
that men and women born into slavery were not necessarily born to be slaves. That was the testimony from Henrico County, Virginia, where a group of Africans had been born into bondage but had grown to love freedom. The three brothers had been given names which perhaps revealed the quiet, radical hope of their family: Solomon, Martin, and Gabriel—Biblical monarch, religious leader, angel of God. According to the law of Virginia and America, they were slaves, property of a tavern keeper named Thomas Prosser. Still, by the time they reached their twenties, these tall, sturdy young men knew they were meant to be free, and they were prepared to wage hard and decisive struggle for that costly freedom, not only for themselves but for others as well.4

In the spring of 1800, as the sharp, sometimes fiercely divisive sounds of the white Federalist and Republican debates echoed through the states, the Virginia brothers and their comrades began to organize among their people, and the leadership passed finally into Gabriel’s hands. At twenty-four he was the youngest—and the tallest, standing well over six feet. With his dark complexion, prominent scars, and Ethiopian features, he was a striking figure. Later he was described by the Virginia authorities as possessing “courage and intellect above his rank in life.” White authorities did not know Gabriel’s rank in life, but his fellow Africans evidently did, for by the summer he and his two brothers had gathered an impressive cadre of comrades for the proposed struggle. Under the cover of funerals and other black religious gatherings, and in the hours after sundown when the exiled African community reaffirmed its integrity through singing and praying and loving and planning and escaping—in those times and hours, Gabriel presented his plan. It was strategically simple and seemed sound. Several hundred men would make a surprise midnight attack on Richmond to capture arms, burn warehouses, and perhaps take the governor as hostage, thereby inspiring a general uprising among thousands of Africans.5

In addition to their own fierce determination to be free, Gabriel and his two brothers had been spurred on by two rather different models, and they systematically shared this inspiration with all potential recruits. Wherever they gathered, the three young men spoke of the brilliant example of the Africans of San Domingo, and of God’s assistance to the children of Israel. Martin was a preacher, and he backed up Gabriel’s love of Toussaint with his own encouragement from the Scriptures. When doubts were raised, it was Martin who told the people that “their cause was similar to [the] Israelites,” and he read the Bible to them: “God says, if we worship him. . . five of you shall conquer an hundred and a hundred a thousand of your enemies.” For his own personal statement, Martin simply said, “I can no longer bear what I have borne.”6
The men they recruited realized that they were being called to make a fundamental break with their own past, to offer a radical challenge to white society, and therefore to risk their lives and the lives of their families. In the course of organizing, one of the group’s lieutenants (who later testified against the others) told a potential recruit named King, “The negroes are about to rise, and fight the white people for our freedom.” King’s response was chilling and direct: “I was never so glad to hear anything in my life. . . . I could slay white people like sheep.” At the same time some sensed the need for their struggle to maintain an essential continuity with the African past. So a key recruiter named George proposed that the conspirators make full use of the peculiar gifts of those native-born Africans who had remained close to the cultic practices of the homeland, suggesting that “he hire his own time, travel down country to what he called the ‘piping tree,’ and enlist the ‘Outlandish people,’ for they were supposed to deal with Witches and Wizards and this would be useful in Armies to tell when any calamity was about to befall them.”

The fate of this proposal is not known, but there is evidence that Gabriel did not take the traditions of Africa as seriously as did others in his group. Indeed, in black lore there is a suggestion that such a move as George proposed would have saved the plot from its untoward ending. But Gabriel had his mind set: they would move at midnight on August 30, 1800, carrying a flag with the motto “Death or Liberty”—the battle cry of San Domingo. Although it was later said that Gabriel had planned “to subdue the whole of the country where slavery was permitted, but no further,” we are not certain how well the bold leader understood the nature of the forces which could ultimately be brought to bear against his insurrection, including the troops of the national government.

By the end of August widespread organizing had evidently gone on among the black community of Henrico County and the surrounding areas. Many of the rebels held regular transport jobs as boatmen and as carriage and wagon drivers, and so enjoyed a mobility that was of great importance to their organizing work. When the time for the attack came, accounts of what finally happened vary, but certain matters are sure: at noontime on the appointed day it began to rain, and soon the worst storm in living memory broke over the area. The invasion of the city was called off by Gabriel when it was clear that several rivers and creeks on the way to Richmond would not be fordable, and that the planned operations would be impossible in the storm.

No one knows how many men and women were gathering when the word of delay was given; estimates range from dozens to more than a thousand. However, before the rain had stopped, the mission was betrayed by informers, and white search parties were soon scouring the
countryside. Although his two brothers were captured early in the search, Gabriel managed to escape for a time. Finally, near the end of September, he was apprehended at Norfolk, while hiding on board a coastal schooner, the Mary. By this time most of his fellow leaders had been captured and executed, along with many persons whose involvement was at best peripheral. Nevertheless, Gabriel refused to confess or to discuss the planned insurrection, even when confronted by Gov. James Monroe. One morning in October, he went to his death without flinching.

Even in his failure, the Virginian had deeply stirred the black river of struggle. His name was on the lips of his people in many parts of the state and elsewhere. That was why Monroe could write from Richmond, “It was distinctly seen that [the plot] embraced most of the slaves in this city and neighborhood,” and that “there was good cause to believe that the knowledge of such a project pervaded other parts, if not the whole state.”

_Did it reach Southampton County, not far away, where a child named Nat was born on Benjamin Turner’s plantation? And what of Charleston? Did Denmark Vesey, just purchasing his freedom, hear of Gabriel and the price he had paid?_

Although the fear of widespread black rebellion was akin to an occupational disease among Southern white officials, Monroe did not speak from idle anxiety. Not only did he recognize seething radical power and possibilities when he faced a man like Gabriel, but he must have known of other disquieting events. In the weeks following the trials there was word of “a series of small, insurrectionary actions” throughout Virginia. For example, it was reported that in Hanover County black people had been “very riotous and ungovernable” following the discovery of Gabriel’s conspiracy. Some black men had gone so far as to break into a jail “and set free two insurrectionists who were handcuffed and chained to the floor.” After they had been set free, the prisoners themselves attacked the guard, knocked him down, stamped on him, then escaped. It was against such a background that Monroe concluded his letter: “Unhappily, while this class of people exists among us we can never count with certainty on its tranquil submission.” His opinion was widely shared throughout Virginia, while as far away as the territory of Mississippi, Gov. Winthrop Sergeant informed his fellow slaveholders of Gabriel’s attempt, “warning them to be watchful of a similar uprising in the vicinity.”

Actions like those attempted by Gabriel caught most attention and fired the imaginations of blacks and whites alike, but always, behind and beneath those larger, organized attempts were the subterranean acts of individual defiance, resistance, creative rebellion, sabotage, and flight.
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This anonymous, pulsating movement persisted wherever there was slavery in America. It rose out of the broad base of all the men, women, and children who offered their personal, rudimentary challenges to the system. One time it was manifested in the decision of a solitary person to kill his master on a dark road as they traveled home at night. Another time it came when a group of black men determined that white patrolmen had broken up their social gatherings once too often and chose to resist to the death.13

Most often the efforts at resistance were on a small scale; only by accident did they leap into wider significance. Such an incident occurred in York, Pennsylvania, where in the spring of 1803 a black woman was convicted of attempting to poison two white persons. But after her conviction, other blacks in the town made several attempts to burn major sections of York to the ground; within three weeks eleven buildings were destroyed. Only after the militia and special patrols were called out, and a curfew was enforced against the black population, did the black fire cease in York.14

In the minds of the keepers of America’s law and order, all such fires had to be watched carefully. This was no time to take lightly rebellious black action anywhere, for the revolution in San Domingo was still erupting, and everywhere in white America it was a source of conversation and fear. The African revolutionaries on the island were successfully resisting all Napoleon’s efforts to break their will. Indeed, by the spring of 1803 their implacable resistance had utterly destroyed some of France’s finest—and most cruel—military forces, and driven them from San Domingo. This totally unexpected turn of events helped convince the French ruler that his vision of an American empire must be abandoned. (As a result, he was willing to sell the entire Louisiana Territory to the United States, doubling the nation’s area in one stroke.) But few whites anywhere seemed able to hear the indomitable General Dessalines when he and his comrades in leadership on San Domingo declared in 1803: “Towards those men who do us justice, we will act as brothers.” Neither the white Americans, who had no special desire for African brothers, nor the French, who still hoped desperately to find a way to reassert their domination over these black revolutionaries, were able to absorb such words. Instead, most whites could only tremble when on January 1, 1804, the revolutionaries declared the creation of Haiti, a new independent African nation, and Dessalines put forth its motto: “Independence or Death! Let these sacred words serve to rally us... let them be signals of battle and of our reunion.”15

Then, after a year of military, diplomatic, and political threats and maneuvers, extending beyond San Domingo to the rivalries of the...
European and North American worlds, after several attempts by Napoleon to use the local French settlers to help undermine the revolution—after all that and more, the time for threats and maneuvers was up. Now, the overwhelming thirst for revenge against French treachery and brutality which had been building up within some of the Haitian revolutionaries finally won the day. Before March 1805 was over Dessalines “the liberator” became Dessalines “the avenger.” His order for the death of all French settlers who had refused the hand of brotherhood was mercilessly carried out by Haitian soldiers and civilians. The terrible burdens of a land already engorged with blood were multiplied, and the cries of thousands of white men, women, and children became a bitter counterpoint to the agonizing, echoing calls of the tens of thousands of the island’s people who for years had fallen under the fire, guns, and swords of the armies of the motherland.18

There was no way to contain these cries of anguish, rage, and victory, and when news of the latest developments in Haiti reached America, new tremors of excitement ran deep within the black community there. For years afterward, memories of this time when neighboring Africans seized their own freedom, created a nation, and repelled elements of Europe’s greatest military force would live and grow in black tradition. As for American whites, they were understandably stunned and fearful. Although they held an overwhelming numerical advantage in the nation, there were many localities in Virginia and South Carolina, for instance, where slaveholders and their white neighbors were far outnumbered. And in spite of their denials, whites had every reason to believe that the Africans around them also loved liberty and craved independence. So the developments in Haiti stimulated a renewed campaign in America to erect every possible legal barrier against that revolutionary incubus.19

But some men were not content with laws and regulations. In 1804, shortly after Dessalines’s cry of “Death to the whites” resounded throughout Europe and its colonies, William Claiborne, the new governor of the Louisiana Territory, reported on the special precautions he had taken: “All vessels with slaves on board are stopped at Plaquemine, and are not permitted to pass without my consent. This is done to prevent the bringing of Slaves that have been concerned in the insurrections of St. Domingo; but while any importations are admitted, many bad characters will be introduced.” It was, of course, too late: the “bad characters” had been coming by ship for decades and so were already there, waiting for the day. Indeed, such characters were everywhere. In the year of Governor Claiborne’s searches, a black insurrectionist in Virginia declared in the course of his trial: “I have nothing more to offer than what George Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and
put to trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain
the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause.”
This was indeed bad: black men were comparing themselves to the
heroes of the white “revolution,” claiming a legitimacy which was dan-
gerous in slaves.18

Meanwhile, after several years of intermittent debates in Congress, the
white heirs of the American revolutionary tradition were finally developing
a new version of their own response to black slavery—one which avoided
the central issues and affirmed the deepest contradictions. In the late win-
ter of 1806–07, when they finally kept a promise of their Revolution and
legislated an official end to American participation in the African slave
trade, the bill was intentionally so weak that its provisions proved easy to
circumvent. More ironic yet, the law proposed that any Africans found
on interdicted slaving ships, instead of being hastened toward freedom,
should be sold into bondage in the South. The law was to go into effect
in January 1808. Not long before that, two boatloads of Africans brought
to Charleston for sale had offered their own response to the slave trade:
while awaiting sale in the slave pens, a number of them starved them-
selves to death.19

In the North, the options for struggle were usually not so harshly
limited, especially for those free blacks who had been in the country for
some time, learned its language, and studied its contradictions. Though
their resistance was generally less stark and less costly than that in
Charleston’s slave pens, their continuing use of white American politi-
cal and religious assumptions contributed an important element to the
developing protest traditions of black struggle. In 1806, a member of
Boston’s African Society spoke to that organization on the topic, “The
Sons of Africa: An Essay on Freedom.” In the course of his lecture he
put forward words which held significant portent, saying, “Men have
exercised authority over our nation as if we were their property, by
depriving us of our freedom as though they had a command from heaven
to do. But, we ask, if freedom is the right of one nation; why not the
right of all nations of the earth?”20

Quietly, forcefully, certain questions were being raised by the blacks
in America. Didn’t black people have the same right and responsibility
to fight for their liberty as white America had to fight for its indepen-
dence? And were Africans in America not a nation? In the decades
ahead these basic, radical questions would mei®. The river, thrusting black
struggle onward with their force.

The seemingly confident surface of America’s Natural Rights philos-
ophy was not the only white theory and practice under constant attack
from the underground black struggle. The religion of white America,
which in most situations was meant to assure the tranquil submission of its captives, was insistent upon, continually wrested from the white mediators by black hands and minds, and transformed into an instrument of struggle. The Scriptures, the theology, the doctrine, the very places of worship were repeatedly transmuted in the alchemy of the black movement. This was seen in Gabriel’s use of the preaching meetings, and explains the laws against independent black gatherings for worship, and the anger of Richard Byrd of Virginia in 1810, who “felt that slave preachers used their religious meetings as veils for revolutionary schemes.” He was right—not only about one General Peter, a religious revolutionary operating from Virginia’s Isle of Wight, but about others as well, such as those who in that same year sent messages of rebellion from nearby North Carolina, saying, “Freedom we want and will have, for we have served this cruel land enough.” Such men, like their ancestors on the slave ships, would hammer any object, any doctrine, into a weapon for the struggle toward freedom. Indeed, to love freedom so fully in the midst of slavery was religion, was radical.  

Nor were such radicals difficult to find, even after slave ships had been searched to weed them out, and laws passed to guarantee their death. They appeared in the Pointe Coupée section of Louisiana in January 1811, even though some twenty-five men and women had been executed less than two decades earlier in the same area for the same kind of thrust toward freedom. This time several hundred black men organized, secured some guns, flags, and drums, and on the night of January 8 began “marching from plantation to plantation, slaves everywhere joining them.” It was a familiar scene, though in their march the group managed to kill only one white person (or so the records say). Nevertheless, their marching presence was so threatening that wagons and cartloads of white refugees were seen pouring into New Orleans seeking safety. However, before long a group of well-armed planters, assisted by militiamen of the territory and almost three hundred troops of the U.S. Army, met the poorly armed black forces, broke the uprising, and killed scores of other black persons in the days that followed. Thus the forces of the American government moved again to guarantee black bondage, presenting a harsh challenge to the radical black movement toward freedom.  

By then it had become strikingly apparent that the military power of the democratic American state would be used insistently to tighten the chains of slavery. Nevertheless, the movements of the river went forward, often buoyed by the desperate hope that some countervailing, supporting forces might be brought to bear on their behalf against the overwhelming weight of white America’s national power. That hope was sometimes based in magic powers brought from the homeland, sometimes in the
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mysterious arrival of African forces from Santo Domingo or elsewhere. Often, hope was focused on America's white national enemies, chief among whom was still Great Britain.

Thus during the War of 1812 thousands of fugitives broke loose from slavery, and in some places tried to organize insurrections, expecting help from the English. In 1813, along the South Carolina coast there was much excited talk of a British invasion, and an insurrection was planned to coincide with it. In the course of the almost nightly planning meetings, black people on one of the Sea Islands apparently developed a song expressing their commitment to the struggle, a song lacking any of the ambiguity that usually attached to black songs of struggle and faith. At the beginning and close of each meeting, they are said to have sung:

Hail! all hail! ye Afric clan
Hail! ye oppressed, ye Afric land,
Who toil and sweat in Slavery bound;
And when your health & strength are gone
Are left to hunger & to mourn.
Let Independence be your aim,
Ever mindful what 'tis worth.
Pledge your bodies for the prize
Pile them even to the skies!

Firm, united let us be,
Resolved on death or liberty
As a band of Patriots joined
Peace and Plenty we shall find.

After stanzas of similar sentiments, the song ended with these lines:

Arise! Arise! Shake off your chains
Your cause is just so heaven ordains
To you shall Freedom be proclaimed
Raise your arms & bare your breasts,
Almighty God will do the rest.
Blow the clarion! a warlike blast!
Call every Negro from his task!
Wrest the scourge from Buckra's hand,
And drive each tyrant from the land.23

Current knowledge of the origins of this song is third-hand. If it was indeed created by the children of Africa out of the river of their struggle, it testified to a deep wrestling with the white American world. It called for independence for black people. It saw the liberating possibilities of the religion of Jesus and the Israelites. It demanded that all who loved tyranny be driven from the land—a demand which could be made only
by those who now believed that they had some firm right to the land themselves. At every level, this was a radical statement for black bondpeople, and the call to arms was only the most obvious level of its radical thrust.

Africans in America were a long way from home, separated in some cases by several generations, and yet, if such things as presence, work, and blood counted, there were few places in the young nation which black people could not rightfully call home. But the claims of black work and blood, and the undeniable, troubling reality of black presence, were insistently denied by whites; and among black people themselves, America was often considered only a second home. Therefore Africa’s children had only begun to make those just claims which flow out of a people’s right to the territory they have helped develop and create. In its talk of driving tyrants from the land, the Sea Island battle hymn implied a contrast between prison ships and prison states, recognizing that while the ocean-going ships might be taken over only to be abandoned on Africa’s coasts, this new land might have to be taken over to be transformed into a new home.

Of course, at profound and difficult levels, the claim to the American land as a home was complicated by the relationship of black struggle to the dark natives of North America, and to the fight they were waging in various parts of the continent. In fact, throughout the American sojourn Africans found themselves in a special and often cruelly difficult relationship to those beleaguered people who had invested their spirits in this land for thousands of years. That relationship between Africans and Native Americans affected the black struggle, from the earliest days of flight right down to the Seminole wars.

For the black people of the Southern states, Florida was a focal point for this intertwined struggle. For three hundred years—from the initial Spanish settlements through the brief period of British domination, to the time when the United States forced its rights to the area—the territory had been a crucial sanctuary for black outlyers and other runaways, who made it a base for their attacks in various Southern states and a beacon of freedom for other captives. In doing this, they were often assisted by the Native Americans who shared the area with them. Then, during the War of 1812, hundreds of militant Creek Indians fled to Florida following their defeat by the white Americans in the Creek War of 1813-14, while thousands of additional black fugitives made their way into the area as well. During the war the British sought to recruit these disaffected groups, both of whom responded; by the end of 1814 at least four hundred black fugitives had enlisted, and were armed and uniformed as part of the British forces. In exchange for this service, the black men were
promised their hard-earned freedom, as well as land in either Florida or the British West Indies. At the war's end, when the British finally withdrew and Spain resumed nominal control, both blacks and Indians were once more on their own in the grueling struggle for freedom against the American forces. Although some black people departed on the British transports, most remained to carry on the fight. They were aided in this when, just before they pulled out in the spring of 1815, British officers turned over to a group of the black soldiers and their families, plus a few of their Indian allies, one of their newest and best forts on the southwest coast of Florida. The fort at Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River was renamed "the Negro Fort" and occupied by more than three hundred men, women, and children, mostly black, commanded by a fugitive slave named Garson and a Choctaw chief. In addition, approximately a thousand men, women, and children lived in settlements along the river under the fort's protection. Immediately the group began both to symbolize and to demonstrate possibilities of such a sanctuary in the heart of the South, by using the fort as a base for marauding expeditions against slaveholders and as a haven for other fugitives. Men, women, and children came there from Georgia, the Mississippi Territory, and as far away as Tennessee. Thus not only were black people defying white law and order and creating new visions of their own possibilities, but valuable white property was roaming free, and even more of it was being daily endangered—all with the co-operation of those perennial "bad characters," the Indians.

Obviously, this situation presented fundamental dangers to the keepers of the society. On June 26, 1816, the Savannah Journal said of the black fort: "It was not to have been expected, that an establishment so pernicious to the Southern States, holding out to a part of their population temptations to insubordination, would have been suffered to exist after the close of the war. . . . How long shall this evil requiring immediate remedy be permitted to exist?" Within a month the question had been answered, not simply by "the Southern States," but once again by the military forces of the federal government. Gen. Andrew Jackson—who whose fame had recently been made, with a certain black assistance, in the battle of New Orleans—was the commander of the Southwestern Military District of the United States. In July 1816 he sent a unit of federal troops, backed by naval gunboats, to destroy the fort "and restore the stolen negroes and property to their rightful owners."

After an initial encounter in which the waiting blacks and Indians captured a small vessel on reconnaissance and killed several crew members, the United States forces sent a delegation to call for the fort's sur-
render. Garson and his Choctaw comrade refused the demand, and the
dlegation reported that the black fugitive leader had "heaped much
abuse on the Americans." Indeed, it was said that Garson declared he
would "sink any American vessels that should attempt to pass" the fort.
Learning of this defiant spirit, one of the American officers commented:
"We were pleased with their spirited opposition . . . though they were
Indians, negroes, and our enemies. Many circumstances convinced us
that most of them were determined never to be taken alive."25

Most of them were not. Early in the morning of July 27, 1816, after
days of negotiations, skirmishes, and waiting, the American gun-
boats moved into position near the fort. The inexperienced gunners of
the fortress fired first and missed. The first shot fired in return found its
way into a powder magazine which had been left open. The terrifying
explosion which followed was so powerful that it was reportedly heard
and felt in Pensacola, some sixty miles away. Fewer than fifty of the fort's
inhabitants survived the disaster, many of them so burned and mutilated
that there was little hope for their survival.26

In a sense, the battle at the Negro Fort was a prelude to the First
Seminole War, and announced the crucial role of black people in it. But
for the long run the blinding explosion signaled something even more
important: the fact that black men and women who broke away toward
freedom had always to estimate the range of the cannon of the American
government. In essence, then, the chilling sounds of the guns at Apa-
lachicola were meant to deny the captive children of Africa—and the
native peoples of America—any sanctuary from white domination, ex-
ploration, and destruction, any right to claim the land as their own. Apa-
lachicola meant that all such claims were guaranteed to drive endless
streams of blood into the river of struggle; and the harrowing cries of
the dying were harsh reminders of the realities which surrounded every
black fortress in the midst of a hostile white society.

Faced with these bitter truths, some Africans were again exploring
return to the homeland as a path toward that new life which seemed so
dark to find on the bloody American ground. Indeed, under the leadership
of stalwart men like Paul Cuffee, some Afro-Americans had already
returned home: surely there was something tempting in letters they sent
to friends here. One said: "Be not fearful to come to Africa, which is
your country by right. . . . Though you are free, that is not your coun-
try. Africa, not America, is your country and your home." The letter was
obviously addressed to the black "free" minority. Did it have any meaning
for those who had to defend their "illegal" freedom in the forts of
Florida, the swamps of North Carolina, the bayous of Louisiana?26

Some answers came slowly. But Denmark Vesey, one of the "free" mi-
nority in Charleston, South Carolina, had clearly answered the question of African repatriation for himself. In 1800 Vesey, then in his thirties, had bought his freedom from the ship’s captain who held legal possession of him, and with whom he had already spent many years on voyages. In the course of those trips Vesey had traveled through the Caribbean, where in his adolescence he spent three months in San Domingo. He had apparently spent some time in Africa also. Since the beginning of the century, Vesey had lived in the ambiguous world of a free black in Charleston, working as a skilled and much-respected carpenter, while serving as a leader in the powerful African church there. His tall, spare figure was well known on the streets of the city and in the country districts surrounding it. By 1817 he had amassed savings of several thousand dollars, probably making him one of the wealthiest black men in the city. On at least one occasion he had been offered a chance to return to Africa as a free man. For it was a time when white, usually Southern-dominated organizations like the American Colonization Society were developing programs and raising funds to encourage the voluntary emigration of free blacks—those thorns in the side of slavery—from the United States to West Africa and other locations. But Vesey clearly shared the sentiments of the free black persons in Philadelphia who responded directly to the Colonization Society in 1817 by declaring: “We will never separate ourselves voluntarily from the slave population of this country; they are our brethren by the ties of consanguinity, of suffering and of wrong; and we feel that there is more virtue in suffering privations with them, than fancied advantages for a season.”

By that time Denmark Vesey was intimately familiar with many aspects of “the ties of consanguinity, of suffering and of wrong.” At least one of his wives and some of his children were in slavery. He had seen the oppression and injustice meted out by the white community all around him, and he stood firm as a symbol of defiant resistance in the black community. However, it was not mere sentiment or ties of blood and oppression which kept him in Charleston when he could have begun a new life elsewhere. By 1817 Vesey had evidently decided that the only new life he desired was a struggle for the freedom of his people. One of his companions said that Vesey often rebuked any of his friends who offered the customary black gesture of bowing to a white person on the street. Vesey claimed that “all men were born equal, and that he was surprised that anyone would degrade himself by such conduct; that he would never cringe to whites, nor ought any who had the feelings of a man.” Such feelings were not uncommon in the black community, and were often expressed within its confines. It was not common, however, to
act on them publicly or urge others to do the same. Denmark Vesey did both, and plunged forthrightly into the stream of black radicalism.

He acted because he believed that, both in Charleston and outside of it, history was evolving in ways which could be bent for the purposes of black freedom. Within the port city those historical developments were focused in the church, the heartland of institutional black concern. By the end of the War of 1812 the black Methodists in Charleston—the single largest black denomination—outnumbered the white membership ten to one. They had developed a quarterly conference of their own, and had custody of their own collections and control over the church trials of their own members. This independence was intolerable for the supervising white Methodists (and probably their non-Methodist friends as well). In 1815 they had acted against this black freedom, taking away privileges that they claimed were theirs to give, asserting that the African people had abused their freedom.

This was the decisive signal for a secession movement which had been stirring within the African churches. In 1816 Father Morris Brown and other black Charleston church leaders had gone to Philadelphia to confer with Richard Allen and other founders of the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church. Later in that year Brown and another elder were ordained for pastorates in Charleston. By 1817 an independent African Association was organized in the city. Then in 1818, on the occasion of a dispute over a burial ground, more than three-fourths of the six thousand black Methodists of Charleston withdrew from the white-dominated churches. Morris Brown was appointed bishop, and the independent African Church of Charleston was established.32

The Charleston movement for religious independence was a crucial form of mass black struggle which would be revived in and through the black churches more than a century later. Following the Philadelphia example, it challenged white domination, white control, white definitions of religious life and church polity. It participated in the growing movement among African people in America to establish relatively autonomous religious institutions where black life could be shaped and affirmed under black control. In the context of American slavery, the secession was a budding radicalism, and if the religious authorities of Charleston did not recognize it, the white secular authorities certainly did. (In many cases, of course, they were the same.) That was why the city consistently harassed and broke up the meetings of the newly established independent black congregations. That was why there were periodic arrests—sometimes of the leaders alone, and sometimes of large numbers of members—and why some were kept in jail, some banished, and others publicly
whipped and otherwise punished. Finally, in 1821, the city of Charleston closed the Hamstead church, which had provided key leadership in the movement.²²

The spirit of resistance and struggle had been lodged deeply in the black community’s religious life, and the white authorities were not the only ones who recognized its larger potential. Denmark Vesey and certain special companions of his had known it long before; indeed they had helped to nurture it. But the closing of the church was the stimulus for organizing black discontent and resistance into something more effective than anger. Vesey had been a member of the Hamstead church, as had his friends Rolla Bennett, “Gullah Jack” Pritchard, Monday Gell, and Ned and Peter Poyas. They began meeting with some of the discontented members of the black community, often in Vesey’s own house, sometimes in the areas for religious gatherings on plantations, at other times in the brush arbors outside the rural cabins. Vesey and his comrades believed that the suppression of the church had provided the issue around which they could rally the Charleston-area black community in a full-scale rebellion against white power. Within Charleston itself history had moved, and Vesey interpreted its movement to the black community. As one participant remembered it, the black leader said again and again that “we were deprived of our rights and privileges by the white people and that our Church was shut up so that we could not use it, and that it was high time for us to seek for our rights, and that we were fully able to conquer the whites if we were only unanimous and courageous, as the Santo Domingo people were.”³³

The Santo Domingo revolution was the second movement in history to which Vesey turned the minds of the people. He had been to the island as a boy. There is evidence as well that one of Vesey’s comrades, the brilliant Monday Gell, had corresponded with the president of the troubled black republic. So as an insurrection was organized, Africa’s children in and around Charleston were told that “Santo Domingo and Africa will assist us to get our liberty, if we will only make the motion first.” That recurring pan-African element of black struggle, which had originated in the slave castles and on the ships, was now revived again in a fierce hope of help from elsewhere in the African diaspora. Of course, in Gullah Jack the Charleston conspirators already had Africa and its spirits with them in a peculiar way: he was a conjurer from among the Gullah people who lived on the coasts of the homeland, and his comrades in the conspiracy believed that he would call upon the fathers in their behalf, and would develop potions and powders to protect them.³⁵

But neither Haiti nor Africa was the center of their hope. Rather it was another movement in history, another diaspora, which was used more
effectively in rallying the insurrectionary forces. At almost every meeting, it was said, Vesey or one of his comrades "read to us from the Bible, how the children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage." That theme was struck insistently: the deliverance from Egypt, the movement of God among his captive people. (No wonder, then, that in some black traditions it is said that Vesey or his fellows were the inspiration for the ageless black song of faith and struggle, "Go Down, Moses." Was it not there in the fields, late in the Carolina nighttime, that a voice first lifted the slow and halting melody?)

But Vesey went further. He did not merely speak of the mysterious action of God in plagues upon an Egyptian people, for that might have been misunderstood as a call to wait passively for divine intervention. Indeed, he constantly read to the people: "Behold the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. For I shall gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken. . . And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword." That message was unambiguous. And assurance for the faint of heart was there, too: "Then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle." Even one of the noncanonical books of the Old Testament Apocrypha, Tobit, was brought to bear, to strengthen, to urge the children of Africa into battle for justice, for freedom.

They needed every available encouragement, for even though blacks outnumbered whites in the city of Charleston, and held nearly a ten-to-one advantage in the surrounding areas, they lacked arms. The plans, similar to those of Gabriel, were to sweep into the city from seven different points, capture arms from the arsenal, set fire to the whole area, kill all whites who came into their path, and if necessary make good an escape to the Caribbean or Africa.

As with many of the attempted insurrections in this phase of black struggle—as is the case, indeed, with insurrections everywhere—there was considerable vagueness concerning ultimate objectives. Part of that ambiguity lay in the dilemma of their basic situation: assuming immediate victory, how would thousands of black people make their way in safety to Haiti or Africa, as the armed forces of the white American national government bore down upon them? Could there really be any mass abandonment of the Southern prison-state at this stage of history? And if it could not be abandoned, how could it be held and sustained as a free territory in the midst of a white-dominated country?

The existing records do not provide any real sense of how Vesey and his comrades answered such questions. However, there is a possibility
that the resolute leader believed history to be moving so decisively in favor of black freedom that such desperate flight or beleaguered military action might not be necessary after their victory in Charleston. He had read accounts of the recent bitter debates in Congress over the Missouri Compromise, and there is some evidence that Vesey had either himself come to believe, or at least had convinced others, that the federal government was abandoning its protection of slavery. If that were true, it might not be necessary to face any forces other than those of South Carolina.  

Whatever their ultimate objective, Vesey and his companions apparently did an outstanding job of organizing. This was evident from the first comrades in arms whom the black leader had chosen. One white official wrote:

In the selection of his leaders Vesey showed great penetration and sound judgement. Rolla was plausible and possessed uncommon self-determination; bold and ardent, he was not to be deterred from his purpose by danger. Ned’s appearance indicated that he was a man of firm nerves, and desperate courage. Peter was intrepid and resolute, true to his engagements, and cautious in observing secrecy where it was necessary; he was not to be daunted nor impeded by difficulties. . . . Gullah Jack was regarded as a sorcerer, and as such feared by the natives of Africa, who believe in witchcraft. He was not only considered invulnerable, but that he could make others so by his charms. . . . His influence among the Africans was inconceivable. Monday was firm, resolute, discreet, and intelligent.  

Such were Vesey’s lieutenants. Together they prepared for a deadline in the second week of July 1822. Blacksmiths were making bayonets and spikes. Others were to obtain daggers, swords, fuses, and powder. Disguises, wigs, and false mustaches were to be contrived. The draymen, carters, and butchers were to supply the horses. Plantation people were recruited from the surrounding areas, some from as far away as eighty miles outside of the city. They were to bring whatever weapons they could obtain. However, most of the active participants were from the urban black artisan population, both enslaved and free. Within the limitations of the time, Denmark Vesey and his comrades had built an all-class black movement.  

Of course, a rebellion which meant to capture an important city needed quantity as well as quality and breadth, and the leaders seemed to have made hundreds of contacts over the months of patient organizing. But that success carried within it the elements of defeat: for as knowledge of at least the general plans spread among an ever-widening circle of black people, so did the likelihood of betrayal become more imminent danger. At the end of May 1822, the possibility became a reality when a slave who had been contacted as a likely recruit reported the contact to
African captives, caught in the net of the Europeans' slave trade, on their way from the interior to the ships.

Africans on the slave ships rebel and are thrown overboard by crew members.

An enslaved African convicted of participation in a wave of arson and robberies in New York City in 1741 is burned at the stake.
Andrew Bryan, founder of one of the first independent black churches in the United States, in Savannah, Georgia.

Richard Allen, a key founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The building that housed the first Baptist Church of Savannah.
Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the successful revolution carried out by the enslaved Africans of San Domingo.

A scene from the San Domingo revolution, which led to the establishment of the Republic of Haiti in 1804.

W. L. Katz
Negro Abraham, an interpreter and comrade of the Seminole Indians in their fight for self-determination against U.S. military forces.

Captive Africans brought ashore in Florida for their introduction into the slave system of the United States in the early nineteenth century.
Massacre of whites by blacks and Indians in Florida, in December 1835.

Slaves working with cotton, the basis of the South's economy.
RAFFLE

Mr. Joseph Jennings respectfully informs his friends and the public that, at the request of many acquaintances, he has been induced to部分s from Mr. Osborne, of Missouri, the celebrated

DARK BAY HORSE, "STAR."

Aged five years, square trotter and warranted sound, with a new light bradding Bayy and Horse椿s, the dark, stout

MULATTO GIRL, "SARAH."

Aged about twenty years, general house servant, valued at one hundred dollars, and guarantees it.

Will be Raffled for

At O. B. M. February first at the selection made by the subscribers. The above is a true list
and those persons who may wish to engage in the raffle practice a ticket with me. Be sure the tickets sold with their deposit in the office.

The whole is valued at ten hundred, nine hundred dollars, fifteen hundred.

CHANCES AT ONE DOLLAR EACH.

The Raffle will be conducted by a committee selected by the interested subscribers present. The tickets will be allowed to complete the raffle. THE ABOVE DESCRIPT CAN BE SEEN AT MY STORE, No. 18 Pleasant St, second floor from Cape, at room W. Block, A. M., and P. M.

Highest three to take the first prizes: the lower three, three shares of prize, and the fortunate winners will pay twenty dollars each, for the tickets remaining, if the same won't.

N. B. No changes required unless paid for postage to the subscriber at.

JOSEPH JENNINGS

Black men and women advertised
in the same category as material possessions.
Samuel Cornish, editor of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States.

John Russworm, the first black college graduate in the United States, later co-editor of *Freedom's Journal*. 
For many, running away to freedom was the only appropriate response to slavery. Polemical art like this emphasized the great danger involved.
his master. From that point on, the carefully constructed plan began to break down as the white authorities initiated a series of probing arrests, questionings, and releases, followed by new arrests. Though their initial information was fragmentary and did not immediately include Vesey's role, they were clearly on the trail.

Near the beginning of June, before the whites had worked their way through to the heart of the insurrectionary plans, Vesey attempted to recoup the situation by moving up the time of the attack to June 16. But by then not only was it impossible to recoup his network of recruits in time, but the authorities were sufficiently alert to stymie the move before it could take on any real life. By June 22, Vesey and the rest of his comrades had been rounded up for a long, involved trial that was held under a law enacted "for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and other slaves in this state." Even during the trial it was not easy to order and govern the African people of the Charleston area. They knew what the planned insurrection might have meant to them, and attempted to get close enough to the courtroom to receive news of its action. But black people were not allowed within several hundred yards of the building; indeed, federal troops "guarded the prison and court day and night to prevent blacks from freeing prisoners and continuing the conspiracy."

Within the courthouse, most of the leaders of the insurrection remained faithful to their commitments and refused to identify their comrades. Then, before the trial was over, the deepest meaning of black radical struggle was set in relief by the words of the oppressors. When Denmark Vesey was being sentenced, the presiding magistrate said to him: "It is difficult to imagine what insurrection could have prompted you to attempt an enterprise so wild and visionary. You were a free man; were comparatively wealthy; and enjoyed every comfort, compatible with your situation. You had therefore, much to risk and little to gain. From your age and experience you ought to have known, that success was impracticable."

If one forgot the slavery of Vesey's own children and wives for the moment, then it was possible to say that he was especially fortunate—an unusual and even well-to-do Negro, since assets of eight thousand dollars would have been impressive for any Charleston white man at the time. But Denmark Vesey had chosen to identify himself as an integral part of the black river, of Tomba's river, of Gabriel's river, of Tomba's river, of the river that was created by the countless thousands before him. Neither his freedman's status, his wealth, his age, nor his relative security could cut him off from the oppression and injustice his people suffered. He had rejected the precarious security of his "class" to join the struggle to
overcome the entire system of white supremacy and slavery, and to smash all the false distinctions it had created, even among the children of Africa. At the age of fifty-five, Denmark Vesey had chosen to die.

The white rulers could not, or would not, understand such things. The magistrate concluded: "Your professed design was to trample on all laws, human and divine; to riot in blood, outrage, rapine, and conflagration, and to introduce anarchy and confusion in their most horrid forms. Your life has become, therefore, a just and necessary sacrifice, at the shrine of indignant justice." According to the record, Denmark Vesey and his men "mutually supported each other, and died obedient to the stern and emphatic injunction of their comrade, Peter Poyas: 'Do not open your lips! Die silent, as you shall see me do.' "44 In Peter's trunk a letter was found with these words: "Fear not, the Lord God that delivered Daniel is able to deliver us." Perhaps he believed it.45

Didn't my Lord
Deliver Daniel.
Then why not ev'ry man?

Nor was Peter the only one. There is evidence that on July 2, 1822, the day of their execution, another attempt at insurrection was made by the persistent, committed black people who had joined the struggle in Charleston. State militia held back the demonstration, but "so determined, however, were they to strike a blow for liberty that it was found necessary for the federal government to send soldiers to maintain order.

The basic testimony of the slave ships remained: almost any serious black movement toward liberty confronted white law, white firearms, and the quest for white order.46

While major plots like Vesey’s presented the most obvious challenges, they were constantly sustained by thousands of nameless black people like those in Charleston who attended the execution of their leaders, who were arrested and beaten for wearing black to mourn the death of Vesey and Poyas, of Gullah Jack and Ned, and more than thirty others. At the same time the poisoning, the arson, the flight from slavery still fed the subterranean streams.47

Throughout this period the fugitive outliers who stayed in the South continued to be a persistent judgment and challenge. In the spring following Vesey’s death, the profound effect that a company of outliers might have on the workings of slavery was seen in the southern portion of Virginia’s Norfolk County. In May 1823 it was reported that the white residents of the area "have for some time been kept in a state of mind peculiarly harassing and painful, from the too apparent fact that their lives are at the mercy of a band of lurking assassins, against whose fell
designs neither the power of the law, nor vigilance, or personal strength and intrepidity, can avail. \(^{94a}\)

This group of what Governor Claiborne of Louisiana would have called "bad characters" were in fact former slaves of the area. "These desperadoes are runaway negroes (commonly called outlyers) ... Their first object is to obtain a gun and ammunition, as well as to procure game for subsistence as to defend themselves from attack, or accomplish objects of vengeance." In the course of their struggle to remain free, and as part of their warfare on slavowners and patrollers, the self-determining black band had killed several white men. One slaveholder in the area received a note from the group, "suggesting it would be healthier for him to remain indoors at night." He took the suggestion. \(^{95}\)

Finally the state militia was dispatched. In June they captured the reputed leader, Bob Ferebee, a black who had lived independently as a free man and fugitive for six years. In July 1823—just one year after the execution of Denmark Vesey and his comrades—Bob Ferebee met the logical results of white justice, became another strange fruit, witnessing in the wind of Virginia. \(^{96}\)

As usual, the executions were not deterrents. Ferebee and his band had already offered their contribution to the struggle, and their existence had made a point to both blacks and whites. They were "bad niggers"—"desperadoes" elevated to an organizational level. They had inspired deep, open fear in the white community, and for a time had been the hunters rather than the hunted. Their leader had remained free for six years; others had most likely been outlyers for even longer, for the Dismal Swamp offered protection for many children of Africa for long periods of time. (Some persons were said to have been born and died in such refuges.) This band and others like it provided an essential and unambiguous challenge to the system of slavery and its law and order.

A manifestation of black radicalism which rises out of swamps does not fit into easy categories, but black struggle is not easy to wage. Unquestionably these self-determining African men and women were part of the irrepressible struggle which was destined to meet its counterparts in the streets of the Northern cities a century later. But even in Virginia in 1823, their ultimate destiny might have been suggested through a glimpse at the life of one of the state's enslaved black men, Nat Turner. For it was during this period that Turner ran away for thirty days. Other fugitives from Southampton had gone to the Dismal Swamp. Did he go, too, perhaps following the footsteps of his fugitive father? Was the inspiration of such men as Ferebee's outlyers part of the sound which eventually burst like a trumpet in his soul? \(^{97}\)

The time may yet come for such questions to be answered. All that is
Certain now is that the early nineteenth-century black community in slavery—the community that knew names like Gabriel, Vesey, and Forebes—lived close to the active, radical depths of the river of black struggle. Occasionally they were swept in by its force; most often, they operated at less costly levels, but knew of the radical movements. Engaged in day-to-day survival to maintain integrity, identity, and life, the vast majority who formed the mainstream were constantly in touch with the runaways, outlyers, and arsonists, and with those men and women who sneaked back into their cabins before dawn after attending secret planning meetings. In addition, the fugitive, exciting word from white political sources, telling of arguments and debates over the operation of the institution of slavery, continued to seep into the life of the Southern black community, hinting, suggesting, revealing the basic tensions which lurked deep in the larger white society. Always, too, there was word from farther away (and nearer), from San Domingo and other parts of the African diaspora in the Caribbean—word of struggle and victory, even of emancipation. Then, beyond and above all these, was the word from the Lord, word from the Word, word of delivering Daniel, word that “Jesus do most anything/Oh, no man can hinder me.” There were words not only to hear, but to eat and drink, words to ponder, words to surrender to.

The river of black struggle held all these speaking, acting, and enlivening words, all these bold, challenging heroic lives, and it was always moving, rising in the midst of the slave community. Therefore this was not a community caught in the flatness of despair. It was not a community without hope. It lived with brutality, but did not become brutish. Often it was treated inhumanely, but it clung to its humanity. There was too much in the river which suggested other possibilities, announced new comings, and hurled restless movements against the dam of white oppression. Always, under the surface of slavery, the river of black struggle flowed with, and was created by, a black community that moved actively in search of freedom, integrity, and home—a community that could not be dehumanized.