



The Rev. Dr. James W.C. Pennington circa 1807 - 1870

By Gerald Renner

The list of property transfers for 1851 recorded in the Hartford city clerk's office looks routine at first. Austin Daniels conveyed a strip of land for \$10 to Lewis Powell. Henry Miller sold Tertills Wadsworth a couple of feather beds and other household items for \$200.

But between those entries, another more startling one leaps off the page -- John Hooker sold the Rev. Dr. James William Charles Pennington his freedom for \$1. The sale, recorded on June 3, 1851, on Page 356 in Volume 76 of the property records, can be found in the city clerk's office today.

Its dry, legalistic tone hardly hides the human drama behind it:

"Know all men by these presents, that I, John Hooker of Hartford ... in consideration of one dollar received to my full satisfaction of James Pembroke, formerly the slave of Frisbie Tilghman of Hagerstown [Md.] . . . more commonly known as the Rev. Dr. James W.C. Pennington ... do hereby manumit and set forever free from slavery, the said James Pembroke."

Hooker, Pennington's friend and confidant, wrote jokingly in his memoirs years later that he "held the deed for a day, in order to enjoy the unique sensation of owning a Doctor of Divinity."

He was referring to Pennington's unique distinction of having been presented an honorary doctorate by the University of Heidelberg in Germany in 1849 when he was still legally a slave -- the first black man ever so honored in Europe.

The pastor of the Fifth Congregational Church in Hartford, today known as Faith Congregational Church, Pennington was an author, teacher and lecturer who was acclaimed internationally as one of the leading abolitionists of his era.

As a former slave, Pennington exposed the evils of a system he knew firsthand and was a severe critic of the segregation and white racism he encountered in the North.

He stood alongside such black prophets of justice as the former slave Frederick Douglass in pre-Civil War America.

His memory is perpetuated at Faith Congregational Church, on Main Street, where his portrait hangs in a place of honor. At the 11 a.m. service today, a group of children and adults will dramatize events from Pennington's life, the interim pastor, the Rev. Barbara Headley said.

Among his accomplishments, Pennington turned the Fifth Congregational Church, then on Talcott Street, into a depot of the Underground Railroad to shunt runaway slaves to freedom and raised money for anti-slavery causes.

In the way he challenged segregation in public transportation, the clergyman provided a model for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. a century later, said Professor Herman E. Thomas of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

"He undertook one of the first attempts to desegregate the streetcars in New York City. That was in 1855. The Montgomery bus boycott led by the Rev. Martin Luther King came 100 years later, in 1955," said Thomas, author of the 1995 biography "James W.C. Pennington: African American Churchman and Abolitionist."

Pennington began his desegregation crusade when he was pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church of New York. Also known as the Shiloh Church, it was one of the largest and best-known black churches in the country and provided Pennington with an influential pulpit from which to preach.

During the first years of his pastorate in Hartford, between 1840 and 1847, Pennington was haunted by nightmares that his former owner might hunt him down. He told no one that he was a former slave except his friend Hooker -- a descendant of Hartford's founding father, Thomas Hooker -- in hopes the lawyer could arrange for his purchase.

He didn't even tell his wife, Harriet, because he did not want to alarm her. But his secret came out inadvertently in an 1845 abolitionist newspaper in England, where he had gone as a delegate to a world anti-slavery convention.

His quest for freedom took on particular urgency after slave-catching bounty-hunters were set loose in the North when Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. It gave them the right to seize fugitives and return them to their owners without benefit of a trial.

Pembroke had been Pennington's name when he had been a slave trained as a blacksmith in western Maryland. He escaped his abusive owner in 1827 when he was about 20. His decision to flee came after he watched his owner, a physician, lash his father with a cowhide whip out of sheer meanness.

"Although it was some time after this event before I took the decisive step, yet in my mind and spirit, I never was a Slave after it," Pennington wrote in his 1849 autobiography, "The Fugitive Blacksmith."

The autobiography -- republished in a 1969 book, "Great Slave Narratives" edited by

Arna Bontemps -- recounts Pennington's dramatic northward flight to freedom. Alone, with no guidance from anyone, unable to read or write, he knew only to follow the north star. But it was cloudy and he lost his direction, winding up on a road near Baltimore where suspicious white men collared him, beat him and took him to a tavern for interrogation.

Unable to convince them that he was a freed man, Pennington spun a tale of how a slave trader who was taking him to Georgia died of smallpox, along with some of the other slaves in his charge. No one wanted to claim him, he said. That cleared the tavern in a hurry. He saw his chance to escape later in the day when only a boy was left in the tavern to watch him. He dashed to nearby woods and eluded his pursuers by hiding in a barn and cornfields.

Several days later, Pennington crossed the border into Pennsylvania. A sympathetic white woman at a tollgate directed him to the farmhouse of an anti-slavery Quaker activist, William Wright.

He was trembling with fear and hunger when he knocked on Wright's door, Pennington recounted in his autobiography.

"Not daring to enter, I said I had been sent to him in search of employ. 'Well,' said he, 'come in and take thy breakfast and get warm, and we will talk about it.'"

Spending six months with the Wright family opened a wonderful new world for the former slave. He took the name Pennington at the inspiration of his new Quaker friends. He learned to read and write and was introduced to Christianity.

"From that day to this, whenever I discover the least disposition in my heart to disregard the wretched condition of any poor or distressed persons with whom I meet, I call to mind these words -- 'Come in and take thy breakfast and get warm,'" Pennington wrote.

His lust for education took him to Brooklyn, where he found work and attended night school. He learned so rapidly and so well he soon qualified as a teacher in a school for black children in New Town, Long Island. The articulate former slave also became a rising star among black abolitionists, who were soon electing him to a succession of leadership positions in the anti-slavery movement.

Pennington's desire to be a clergyman in his new-found Christian faith led him across Long Island Sound to New Haven, where he taught school, took up pastoral duties at the Temple Street African Congregational Church and sought admission to Yale Divinity School.

Yale allowed him to audit classes by listening to lectures standing outside classroom doors. Thomas said it was likely that white racism, as well as Pennington's lack of proper credentials, blocked his formal acceptance as a Yale student.

After auditing the entire course of study for ministers, however, he was ordained in 1838. Pennington founded and led a black Congregational church in New Town and, in 1840, accepted a call to the Hartford church, where he was to attain celebrity.

A book he wrote that was published in 1841, "A Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People," as well as his powerful sermons saying immoral laws need not be followed, propelled him to national attention.

"That was the first textbook history of African Americans, and one of the amazing things about the book is that it covers not only the African American experience in the United States, but throughout the world," Thomas said.

Pennington rebutted arguments that the Bible condoned slavery and that black people wore the "mark of Cain" or carried the "curse of Noah."

He also went beyond the Bible to indict white racism. He told of how people moved away from him when he sat in a white church on Main Street in Hartford to hear a sermon and cited other instances of northern prejudice against black people. Efforts to return African Americans to Africa were motivated by racism, he said.

Beginning in 1848, Pennington carried on the battle for emancipation as pastor of the Presbyterian church in New York. He was granted a two-year leave of absence between 1849 and 1851, which he spent mainly in England, raising money and support for abolitionists. He was there when Hooker obtained his freedom.

But as pastor of a Presbyterian church in New York, Pennington fell under pressures unknown in Connecticut.

Abolitionists accused him of turning soft against slavery by affiliating with the Presbyterian denomination, whose members included rich slave owners in the South. Others in his church urged him to moderate his anti-slavery rhetoric and actions. Some abolitionists accused him of failing to account adequately for the money he raised.

Pennington evidently began drinking heavily, Thomas and others note. He resigned his pastorate in 1855 under pressure from his church's leaders.

His star dimmed and he lost the confidence of other abolitionists. Little is known about his family life. His wife, Harriet, died in 1846. He married Amira Way, a Hartford teacher, in 1848. Thomas said it is not known whether there were children by either marriage.

Thomas said Pennington overcame his alcoholism by 1858 and returned as pastor to his first economically impoverished congregation in New Town, Long Island.

During the Civil War Pennington agitated for the Christian denominations of the North to train young black ministers for service in the South when hostilities ended. His call went unheeded. After the war, Pennington followed his own advice. He was commissioned in 1865 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church to serve a church in Natchez, Miss.

That pastorate lasted until 1868, when Pennington went north, to a small black Congregational church in Portland, Maine. In 1870 he left Maine for Jacksonville, Fla., to organize a black Presbyterian church.

He died in Jacksonville in October 1870. The date of his death has been listed as Oct. 20 and Oct 22.

The Rising Sun, a church periodical, said Pennington's death was "hastened by the excessive use of intoxicating liquors, which had impaired his usefulness in his latter days."

Thomas said Pennington's contributions remained obscure for a century, until the civil rights movement of the 1960s revived black history. Thomas himself was awarded a doctoral degree from the Hartford Seminary in 1978 for his dissertation on Pennington.

Pennington's role needs to be recognized, Thomas said. "In major ways his life illustrates the contributions African Americans were making for the ongoing struggle for freedom."

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