

THE YOUNG OXFORD HISTORY OF  
**AFRICAN  
AMERICANS**  
VOLUME 4



# Let My People Go

**AFRICAN AMERICANS  
1804-1860**

**DEBORAH GRAY WHITE**



# **Let My People Go**

**AFRICAN AMERICANS  
1804-1860**





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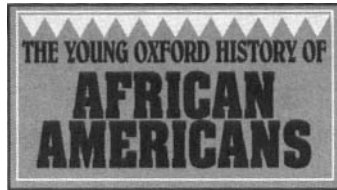
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Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis  
General Editors

# Let My People Go



**AFRICAN AMERICANS**  
**1804-1860**

**DEBORAH GRAY WHITE**

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# *In memory of Cathy Belinda Taylor*

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by Charles White, 11'9" x 17'3". Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia.



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ROBIN D. G. KELLEY  
EARL LEWIS

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he folk tales that slaves passed down to their children and grandchildren are more than quaint stories about weaker animals using their cunning to overcome the powerful, or moral tales that teach the difference between good and evil. These age-old stories often contain rich insights into history. The slaves of the Georgia Sea Islands, for instance, used to tell a funny tale about a master who forced his mule to work on Sunday. This practice went on for several weeks until one day the tired and disgusted mule turned to his master and began protesting in clear, eloquent English. “Great Gawd,” said the master, who by now was scared out of his wits, “I never seen a mule talk before!” A dog who was sitting under a shade tree nearby replied, “Me neither.” Of course, these talking animals frightened the master, who willingly yielded to the mule’s demand for Sundays off.

The most obvious moral of the story is that slaves, too, must follow the Biblical injunction against working on the Sabbath. A less obvious but equally important purpose of the story is to show what happens when the master learns that his “mules”—meaning his slaves—not only talk but protest the conditions of their enslavement. Of course, from our vantage point almost a century and a half later, the fact that slaves had voices and used them should not surprise us. But it often surprised their owners since many convinced themselves that enslaved Africans could be “broken” like horses and that deep down they were docile people put on this earth to serve the “white race.” At least that is what many masters claimed to believe. The truth is, they were also scared of their imprisoned black laborers, which is why they used whips and chains to keep

*The scars on the back  
of this former slave  
serve as a reminder  
of the cruel legacy of  
slavery.*



## ***Let My People Go / African Americans 1804–1860***

them in line, developed elaborate systems to police the plantations, and passed a flurry of laws intended to keep both the slave and free black populations under control. The free black community was considered especially dangerous to the slave masters. Although legal and informal discrimination sharply restricted their voices and activity, free African-Americans had much more space to maneuver, to build community institutions, and to speak out against the evils of slavery than their sisters and brothers in bondage.

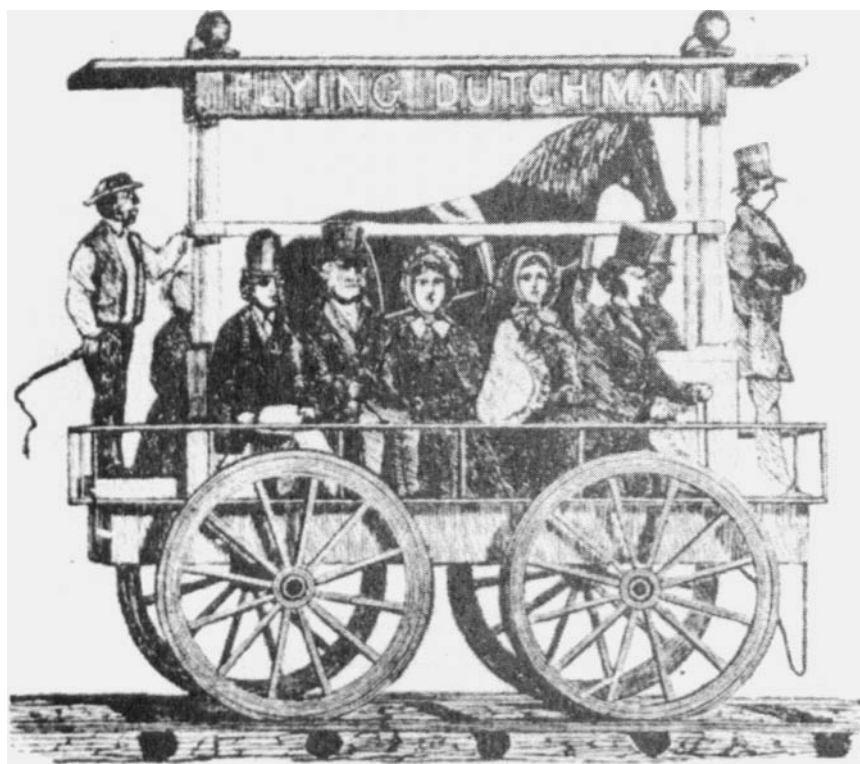
The era from 1800 to the Civil War, also known as the antebellum period, in some ways parallels the folk tale from the Georgia Sea Islands. It was a period when black voices against slavery became even more intense. Free and enslaved African-Americans, including notable figures like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, attempted to launch slave rebellions against the system. David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Maria Stewart, Henry Highland Garnet, and a host of others, wrote militant books, pamphlets, and speeches calling for the abolition of slavery and condemning the United States for its hypocritical claim to being a “land of the free.” Indeed, the rising voices of black, as well as white, abolitionists is partly responsible for the eradication of slavery in the Northern states during the early 19th century.

Black voices and actions certainly surprised the masters, but unlike the planter in our tale, real-life plantation owners were unwilling to yield. As the industrial revolution got underway in the Northeastern states and England, the market for cotton was more profitable than ever. And after inventor Eli Whitney created a machine that could easily remove the seeds from cotton bolls—a slow and tedious chore slaves had to do by hand—plantation owners were able to grow even more cotton with less hands. So they were not about to give up the slave system so easily. Even after the United States abolished the slave trade in 1808, plantation owners in the less fertile “upper South” added a new twist to the business of human bondage by breeding their slaves like cattle and selling them to the growing cotton plantations of the South and Southwest.

This book documents the growing tension between the African-American struggle to be free—and remain free—in the United States, and the slaveholders’ efforts to keep the system alive and profitable. *Let My People Go* not only details what slavery was like for men, women, and



*This early form of mass transit, powered by a horse and a slave with a whip, could carry up to 12 passengers.*



children imprisoned in white homes and plantations, but how they created communities under bondage, how they fought back, and how they contributed to the system's decline. The book also documents the making of "free" black communities in a land where the vast majority of their sisters and brothers were slaves. As historian Deborah Gray White demonstrates, the central goal of free blacks in antebellum America, beyond their very survival as a people, was to fight for the complete abolition of slavery. And fight they did, often in concert with fellow slaves, sometimes in alliance with progressive white abolitionists, sometimes all alone. Without the efforts of slaves and free blacks, the history of slavery's demise would look very different.

This book is part of an 11-volume series that narrates African-American history from the 15th through the 20th centuries. Since the 1960s, a rapid explosion in research on black Americans has significantly modified previous understanding of that experience. Studies of slavery, African-American culture, social protest, families, and religion, for



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example, silenced those who had previously labeled black Americans insignificant historical actors. This new research followed a general upsurge of interest in the social and cultural experiences of the supposedly powerless men and women who did not control the visible reins of power. The result has been a careful and illuminating portrait of how ordinary people make history and serve as the architects of their own destinies.

This series explores many aspects of the lives of African Americans. It describes how blacks shaped and changed the history of this nation. It also places the lives of African Americans in the context of the Americas as a whole. We start the story more than a century before the day in 1619 when 19 “negars” stepped off a Spanish ship in Jamestown, Virginia, and end with the relationship between West Indian immigrants and African Americans in large urban centers like New York in the late 20th century.

At the same time, the series addresses a number of interrelated questions: What was life like for the first Africans to land in the Americas, and what were the implications for future African Americans? Were all Africans and African Americans enslaved? How did race shape slavery and how did slavery influence racism? The series also considers questions about male-female relationships, the forging of African-American communities, religious beliefs and practices, the experiences of the young, and the changing nature of social protest. The key events in American history are here, too, but viewed from the perspective of African Americans. The result is a fascinating and compelling story of nearly five centuries of African-American history.





# **THE YOUNG OXFORD HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

*Volume 1*

**THE FIRST PASSAGE  
BLACKS IN THE AMERICAS 1502-1617**

*Volume 2*

**STRANGE NEW LAND  
AFRICAN AMERICANS 1617-1776**

*Volume 3*

**REVOLUTIONARY CITIZENS  
AFRICAN AMERICANS 1776-1804**

*Volume 4*

**LET MY PEOPLE GO  
AFRICAN AMERICANS 1804-1860**

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**BREAK THOSE CHAINS AT LAST  
AFRICAN AMERICANS 1860-1880**

*Volume 6*

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AFRICAN AMERICANS 1880-1900**

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*Volume 9*

**WE CHANGED THE WORLD  
AFRICAN AMERICANS 1945-1970**

*Volume 10*

**INTO THE FIRE  
AFRICAN AMERICANS SINCE 1970**

*Volume 11*

**BIOGRAPHICAL SUPPLEMENT  
AND INDEX**







## CHAPTER 1

# THE RISE OF COTTON



**O**n August 30 in the year 1800, a chilling fear spread among the white people of Henrico County, Virginia. Within a few days the fear had gripped the minds of most white Virginians. Within weeks, slaveholders as far west and south as what was then the Mississippi Territory were cautioning each other to beware of suspicious behavior on the part of blacks. On their tongues was the name Gabriel Prosser; in their minds were thoughts of what might have happened if Prosser had succeeded in leading Virginia slaves in revolt against slavery.

Prosser, his wife Nanny, and his two brothers, Martin and Solomon, were a slaveholder's nightmare. Born into slavery, they declared themselves fit for freedom. They decided not only that they would be free but that all slaves should be free. Together they plotted to lead the slaves of the Richmond area in revolt against the city. Their plan was to capture the arsenal and, once supplied with weapons, to take over Richmond and then other cities in the state. Virginia, it was planned, would become a free state, a black state, a homeland for those unfit for slavery.

But Prosser never got a chance to put his plan into action. On the night of the scheduled attack on Richmond, a terrible storm washed out the bridges and roads to the city. Prosser had to postpone his rebellion, and the delay gave someone time to betray him and expose the plan. All who conspired in the revolt were captured and put to death. Gabriel was among the last to be captured, tried, and hanged.

*Working in the fields  
from sunup to sun-  
down, these slaves were  
forced to endure a  
world of constant toil.*



*Ten Dollars Reward.*



**R** A N A W A Y  
on the twelfth  
day of April last,

**G A B R I E L,**

a slave the property of  
Mrs Mary Bolling, of  
Petersburg; obtained leave of absence for  
15 days to go to Mr. Benjamin Marable's  
in Gloucester County—and the said slave  
not having returned yet, and there being  
good reason to believe that he is still  
lurking in that neighbourhood—the a-  
bove sum will be paid for having him con-  
fined in jail so that his owner gets him a-  
gain, or a reward of Twenty Dollars, ex-  
clusive of what the law allows if brought  
home. Gabriel is a black man, about 30  
years old, long visage, about 6 feet high,  
fond of drink, and by trade a weaver.  
He was purchased from the estate of the  
late Colonel Peyton, and is well known  
in that part of the country. All persons  
are forewarned from harbouring, employ-  
ing or carrying the said fellow out of the  
State.

*Richeson Booker.*

Petersburg, October 30, 1800. cotf

*The Richmond Exam-  
iner posted this notice  
for a runaway slave  
named Gabriel on  
November 4, 1800.*