

## African American Clergy and Churches: James W.C. Pennington (1820s-1850s)

James W.C. Pennington (1807-1870) made a breathtaking ascent out of slavery and illiteracy and into freedom and middle-class professionalism. His triumphs as well as the many trials he faced are quintessentially American, as is the central role that the Christian faith played throughout his adult life.

Pennington was born James Pembroke, son of enslaved parents in Maryland. Trained since the age of 11 to be a blacksmith, Pennington was very close with his older brother, who was also trained in a trade. In his 1849 autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, Pennington writes about the reason why he decided to escape at the age of 19. His master cruelly beat his father to control and humiliate him, and Pennington found his own situation as a slave to be untenable.

After a harrowing escape in which he had to evade determined bounty hunters, Pennington arrived at the home of the Wrights, a Quaker family that helped with the underground railroad. During the six months that Pennington lived with this family, he began learning to read and write under the guidance of William Wright. For the rest of his life, Pennington emphasized the importance of education for African Americans, and expressed his anger and frustration at being deprived of learning until his escape.

Pennington eventually made his way to New York City, where he worked his way up from a coachman to a teacher, and then became the first African American to attend classes at Yale University in the Divinity School. Only allowed to audit classes, and prevented from checking books out of the library, Pennington nonetheless prepared himself for ordination as a minister in 1838.

As a Congregationalist and Presbyterian minister in Long Island, Connecticut, and New York City, Pennington emphasized the need to educate and help find employment for the increasing numbers of free African Americans. He also spoke out against racism in the north, including in the white churches that often segregated white and black worshipers and shut out black clergymen. Pennington also helped many fugitive slaves and supported efforts to desegregate public transportation in New York City. Pennington did tours in the United Kingdom to speak out against slavery and to garner British support for American abolitionist efforts.

Pennington managed to legally secure his freedom in 1851 and continued to support his fellow African Americans as a minister and as a community leader until his death.

## Document 1: James W.C. Pennington's *The Fugitive Blacksmith*

Pennington, James W.C. *The Fugitive Blacksmith: Or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States.* Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971.

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**Source Note:** James W.C. Pennington (1807-1870) was a minister, abolitionist, author, renowned orator, and the first African American to attend Yale University. Born James Pembroke to enslaved parents in Maryland, Pennington was trained as a blacksmith at his master's bidding. At age 19, Pennington made a harrowing escape from slavery, living first with one and then another Quaker family until he made his way eventually to New York City. In addition to writing the first history of African Americans, *The Origin and History of the Colored People* (1841), he wrote a gripping account of his escape from slavery, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849). In this account, Pennington describes his upbringing as a slave in Maryland, and strongly emphasizes the immorality and brutality of what he calls the "chattel principle": the idea that human beings can be owned just like livestock or farm equipment. This autobiographical work is the main source of information available to historians about Pennington's early life.

### Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Who is their audience?
2. How long after the events described in this account was it written down? How does this timing relate to the reliability of the source?
3. In the preface, the author makes it clear that he feels compelled to share his experiences as an enslaved person and then as a fugitive "on account of the increasing disposition to overlook the fact, that the sin of slavery lies in the chattel principle, or relation" (page iv). What exactly does he mean by the "chattel principle"? Why do you think people tended to overlook this fact about the system of slavery at the time he wrote this?
4. What specific events induced the author to plan his escape from slavery (pages 5-9)?
5. What is the "great moral dilemma" that Pennington faces as he escapes from slavery? How does he resolve the issue, and what is his reasoning (pages 21-22)?
6. What is the "one sin that slavery committed against me, which I never can forgive" (page 56)? How does Pennington himself attempt to right this terrible wrong?
7. Why does Pennington abruptly shift from telling his personal story of enslavement, escape, and educational attainment, and focus on the general conditions of slave life in Maryland (Chapter VII, pages 65-73)? What purpose does this chapter serve in the larger narrative?
8. Given Pennington's potential audience for this book, why might he include a discussion of the degradation not just of slave families, but of the planter class families that owned slaves as well (pages 69-73)?

## Document 2: James W.C. Pennington Sermon

Pennington, James W.C. *Christian Zeal: A Sermon Preached before the Third Presbytery of New-York, in Thirteenth-St. Presbyterian Church, July 3, 1853.* New York: Printed by Zuille & Leonard, 1854.  
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\*See especially pages 13-15.

**Source note:** When James W.C. Pennington gave this sermon as moderator of the Third Presbytery of New York, he was the pastor of another New York City congregation, the Prince Street Presbyterian Church. Pennington had returned to New York in 1851 after a second tour in the British Isles, which he had extended in part for his own safety after passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 made it risky for him to live in the United States. With the help of his lawyer friend John Hooker and donations from Pennington's Scottish supporters, Pennington finally gained his freedom in 1851 by having Hooker purchase him from his former owner's estate (he was deceased) and then immediately manumit him. Almost 25 years after escaping from slavery, Pennington was now legally a free man. In this sermon, Pennington talks about the need to help the growing population of poor New Yorkers moving into the lower wards that had previously housed the middle and upper classes. He also addresses the question of slavery, pointing out that American Presbyterians were thought to own as many as 80,000 slaves all together. He does not condemn his own denomination outright, perhaps because he did not want to seem ungrateful after being honored with the position of moderator, and some abolitionists felt he was too lenient towards his fellow Presbyterians regarding their general acceptance of slavery and slaveholding church members.

### Reading Questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? Who was the intended audience?
2. Why might Pennington urge the Presbyterian churches of the slaveholding states to reveal information about the number of slaves held by Presbyterians (page 13)?
3. How might Pennington's listeners react to his claim that nowhere else in the world is slavery justified by referring to the Bible (page 14)? Why might Pennington choose to make this point?
4. Does the tone of this sermon match that of Pennington's autobiography, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, published three years earlier? How is it similar, and how does it differ?
5. How does Pennington's treatment of the slavery question fit into the historical context in which he was writing it?
6. What is Pennington's perspective on the Presbyterian Church's relationship to slavery, by the end of his sermon (page 14)? What action, if any, does he urge the Church to take?

## Document 3: W.E.B. Du Bois Secondary Source

Du Bois, W.E.B. “Of the Faith of the Fathers.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*.

**Source note:** William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) was a civil rights leader as well as a sociologist, historian, writer, and editor. Du Bois was born in Massachusetts to a Haitian-born Bahamian father and a mother who traced her lineage to an African freedman who fought in the Revolutionary War. Du Bois was the first African American student to graduate from his racially integrated public high school, and went on to get his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. (in history) from Harvard University. Du Bois wrote beautifully, effectively, and powerfully about the life of African Americans in America, and about the wide-ranging effects of racism that pervade the African American experience. Du Bois often wrote about African American religion, and in this 1903 essay, he explores the place of religion within African American life. Though critical of many aspects of African American Christianity, namely the passivity and blind trust that it engenders, Du Bois also recognized the immense social power and potential of the church.

### Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Who is the intended audience?
2. What are the three elements of the “religion of the slave,” according to Du Bois (page 2)?
3. What makes the church so central to African American life (page 3)?
4. Why is the church “peculiarly the expression of the inner ethical life of a people in a sense seldom true elsewhere” (page 4)?
5. In examining the contemporary African American with regards to religion, Du Bois observes that “conscious of his impotence, and pessimistic, he often becomes bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith” (page 6). What conditions does Du Bois point to as creating this sense of impotence and pessimism that influence black Christianity?
6. What are the characteristics of the two “divergent” types of African Americans—southern and northern—that Du Bois describes on pages 6 and 7?
7. Du Bois suggests that “deception is the natural defence of the weak against the strong” (page 7). How have African Americans utilized deception as a tool, and how has that use affected African American churches?
8. What might Du Bois think of James W.C. Pennington and his 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian church? What critiques of Pennington’s sermon (Document 2) would he be likely to offer?