



A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation

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Slave narratives, some of the most powerful records of our past, are extremely rare, with only fifty-five post-Civil War narratives surviving. A mere handful are first-person accounts by slaves who ran away and freed themselves. Now two newly uncovered narratives, and the biographies of the men who wrote them, join that exclusive group with the publication of *A Slave No More*, a major new addition to the canon of American history. Handed down through family and friends, these narratives tell gripping stories of escape: Through a combination of intelligence, daring, and sheer luck, the men reached the protection of the occupying Union troops. David W. Blight magnifies the drama and significance by prefacing the narratives with each man's life history. Using a wealth of genealogical information, Blight has reconstructed their childhoods as sons of white slaveholders, their service as cooks and camp hands during the Civil War, and their climb to black working-class stability in the north, where they reunited their families. In the stories of Turnage and Washington, we find history at its most intimate, portals that offer a rich new answer to the question of how four million people moved from slavery to freedom. In *A Slave No More*, the untold stories of two ordinary men take their place at the heart of the American experience.

A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation Details

Date : Published November 5th 2007 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN : 9780151012329

Author : David W. Blight

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Military History, Civil War, Biography, Cultural, African American, North American Hi..., American History

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Burney Huff says

I really enjoyed this book! The author begins by telling a story that incorporates parts of the autobiographies of the two escaped slaves. In my opinion, this story provides the reader with a good picture of what life was like for slaves and non-slaves during this time. Following the author's story, both autobiographies of the escaped slaves are presented. The autobiographies are presented verbatim, exactly as written by the two men. Very good!

Jill Parsons st john says

I really disliked how Blight did not let the narratives speak for themselves. They were very understandable and well written. Basically he re-wrote their narratives. If he would have put the narratives first, then added the additional information about their lives and history I think it would have worked better. The history and information in the book is amazing, but Blight's organization and editing was too heavy handed.

Nathan Albright says

If the editor of this book would have been less skillful at framing the slave narratives included here, this could have been a much less enjoyable work, but fortunately for any reader of this book, this is a compelling narrative placed superbly in context. As someone who is very familiar with books about slavery [1], this book caught my interest for fairly obvious reasons. I have to say that having read this book I am impressed both with the narratives themselves as well as with the way that the editor provides a context for those narratives in light of the historical situation both of the narratives are set. While each of these narratives would have made a short read on their own, combined they provide each other with a context in demonstrating some of the common traits and similarities that were experienced by both of the men and their families. The editor also excels in discussing the life of the authors before and after slavery were documentary evidence allows such an understanding, which makes the gripping and dramatic tales of self-emancipation discussed here even more compelling to the reader.

The slightly more than 250 pages of this book are divided into two parts. The first 160 pages or so of the book consists of written material by Professor Blight on the lives and narratives of two slaves who self-emancipated during the Civil War. The author discusses their similarities--both had white fathers, learned a taste for freedom as urban slaves, and ran away to Union lines and were accepted along with the intelligence they brought, both traveled for some time at least with the Union troops they met, and both wrote about their experiences and sought to demonstrate their citizenship through hard work and a drive to rise in the world.

The second part of the book consists of two slave narratives and some additional material to the second one. The first narrative is from John Washington, who escaped from Fredericksburg in early 1862 with the approach of Union soldiers and later became a sign painter. The second narrative is from Wallace Turnage, a chronic runaway who finally succeeded in finding Union lines on his fifth (!) escape attempt while in

Mobile in late August of 1864. This second narrative also includes a eulogy for his deceased son in 1865 in the aftermath of national mourning over Lincoln's death.

This book excels for at least a few reasons. For one, these two narratives are very rare examples of runaway slave writings from the period of the Civil War. Likewise, the eulogy to Turnage's dead son is a rare example of a black narrative of the mid-19th century of such a circumstance. The narratives themselves, although filled with a large degree of spelling and grammatical errors, are compelling stories told with a great deal of rawness and authenticity. These were not heavily doctored and ghostwritten accounts designed to appeal to a mass audience, but rather handwritten documents written for the family of the authors and unpublished until this book. In addition to this, the editor's own writing is filled with nuance and balance.

He comments on the duel of wills both of the narratives display between masters and slaves, on the corrupting/liberating habits of urban life for slaves, and on the fact that self-emancipation required both the initiative of the escapee as well as the opportunity to be able to reach Union lines. In both of these cases, both qualities were met and the result was a successful bid to freedom that increased the personal dignity both men felt and also felt it worthwhile to put down in writing to the best of their abilities, for the benefit of posterity.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

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<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2013...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2010...>

Jenny says

I've always been a fan of those sort of rags-to-riches stories, but with slave narratives it takes these stories to a new level of awesome. How you go from chattel to society-man or -woman within one generation is astounding, perhaps impossible for most of those former slaves who have gone before us.

In their narratives, both Wallace Turnage and John Washington use geography in near-precise terms. Through this geography, David Blight was able to place these slaves' escapes within the larger landscape of the Civil War and other major national events. It was this juxtaposition that helped *me* see Turnage, Washington, and key political/wartime figures as real people in a real place in time. For instance, I learned here that Lincoln was **not** a champion of abolition but a troubling pragmatist willing to do *anything* (including the repatriation of slaves) to preserve the Union.

I give this book 5 stars not because of the narratives' "quality", but because of Blight's analysis of this time period in American history. This book and its accompanying narratives is a rare gem within the African American Diaspora and should be required reading for high school/college American history courses.

Amy says

Totally recommend this book! I would have put the original narratives first and then the historical commentary, but these accounts are incredibly enlightening. The historic background fills in the gaps and provides the context for the story.

R.K. Byers says

Turnage's story of escape, alternating between slaves that helped and fed him and slaves that betrayed him was AMAZING.

Jennifer says

I thought the history and build-up added needed context to the narratives. There was so build-up that I was a little disappointed in the actual journals. I think the historical context gave good perspective to the conditions. I think everybody should read a book about cultures that have historically been disadvantaged.

Heidi Weaver says

Nicely done.

Cathy says

As the civil war was being waged, two slaves, John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage, seized the moment and escaped across Confederate lines and into the union army. Both men left narratives or autobiographies that were passed down through friends and family and only recently came to attention of historians. Blight, a foremost authority on emancipation and professor at Yale University, published them with no changes to grammar or spelling, adding a lengthy analysis that reveals how the narratives came to light, puts them in historical context, and fills in biographical gaps with genealogical information. An incredible amount of work went into filling in the gaps of their lives.

Nona Thomas says

I have read many of the WPA slave narratives in the past. This book however gives a complete profile of two men both slaves with different experiences who want to be free. Excellent book

Jason Koivu says

Though lacking the depth and description one might hope to garner from a firsthand account of slavery and escape, *A Slave No More...* still captures the essence and importance of these men's tales.

Blight introduces at exhaustive length the two slave's narratives, expounding with such great insight that it makes the roughly written narratives from the mouths of the uneducated slaves almost redundant when you actually get around to reading them. However, his explanations go a long way to enliven and enlighten the text, helping the modern day reader gather more understanding of the times and circumstances.

Very much worth the reading. Highly recommended as a companion to studies of Frederick Douglas.

Emily says

In a slave no more, David W. Blight tells the stories of two men who escaped from slavery during the American Civil War. He takes us through their lives before, during, and after their escapes. In the first few chapters, he mingles their stories and explains a lot about the history of the time as he does so. It is not until the final chapters that the reader is introduced to the men's own accounts of their escapes.

While the first few chapters were filled with a lot of historical details, it was hard to connect with the men because the narrative kept jumping around. However, once the personal narratives are reached, it becomes a lot easier to relate to the men and understand them. I wish I had read their versions of their lives and story before reading all the information that Mr. Blight provided.

Eric says

Two important American stories.

Sam toer says

Fascinating gripping narratives that speak to the legacy of slavery and the meaning of the Civil War and Reconstruction

Maya says

I heard an interview of David Blight on Fresh Air and knew right away that I had to read this book. These two narratives are amazing. Each man was a slave who escaped to freedom during the civil war and then later wrote the story of his escape. And each story was protected, but hidden, for almost a hundred years so that they are now available to us completely unaltered from their original writing (which wouldn't be the case if they'd been published at the time of their writing).

It goes without saying that slavery was and is a horrible, evil institution with lasting ramifications that is (and should be) a permanent stain on our country. But I imagine that most people who aren't Black probably haven't really thought about what slavery was.

Reading this book, which begins with Blight's excellent description of the overall times and history and which weaves in parts of Wallace Turnage's and John Washington's narratives and ends with the narratives themselves, really made me stop and think about slavery. Just one example: I think all of us know that slave owners raped their slaves and that children resulted from these rapes. And these children were themselves slaves. But how many of us have stopped to really think about what this means?

Fathers enslaved their own children. Their own children! Sold them, separated them from their mothers, beat them, killed them. Their own children.

I don't know if slavery made slave owners inhuman or if the inhuman chose to own slaves. Whichever, one remarkable thing is proven true by these two narratives: not even slavery could rob these men of their incredible dignity, their strength, or their determination to be free, no matter what it took. And what is true of these two men is undoubtedly true for the many millions of slaves who were prevented from writing their stories for us.
