

“Hung Be the Heavens in Scarlet” John Brown

A Declaration of Liberty

John Brown’s “A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America” was intended to be distributed among the white population of the South, just as David Walker’s *Appeal* was written. Hoping to begin his attack on slavery with the symbolic date of the 4th of July, the tracts were printed with a blank for the day, so that it could be inserted as the army moved. In a letter to Theodore Parker in March, 1858, excerpted here, Brown explained it should be read by “prisoners” before being set at liberty, and that “magnanimous action” rather than “slaughter of the vile reptiles” would be more effective in ending slavery.

“A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America” published by John Brown for mass distribution,”-----4th, 1859,” in Richard Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, 637-43. Transcribed verbatim by Jean Libby

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary “for an oppressed people to Rise, and assert their Natural Rights, as Human Beings, as Native an Mutual Citizens of a free Republic, and break that odious yoke of oppression, which is so unjustly laid upon them by their fellow countrymen, “and to assume among the powers of Earth the same equal privileges to which the Laws of Nature, and nature’s God entitle, them; A moderate respect for the opinions of Mankind, requires that they should declare the causes which incite them to this Just and worthy action.

“We hold these truths to be Self Evident; That all men are created Equal; That they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights. That among these are Life, Liberty; & pursuit of happiness, “That nature hath freely given to all Men, a full supply of Air, Water, and Land; for their sustinance, & mutual happiness. That No Man has any right to deprive his fellow Man, of these Inherent rights in punishment of crime. “That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their Just powers from the con-

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sent of the governed. That when any form of government, becomes destructive to these ends, It is the right of the People, to alter Amend, or Remoddel it, Laying its foundation on such Principles, & organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to affect the safety, & happiness” of the Human Race. To secure equal rights, privileges, & Justice to all; Irrespective of Sex; or Nation; To secure Fraternal kindness to all Friends of Equal Moral privileges, to all who honestly abandon their Despotic oppressive rule. We hold this truth to be self-evident: That it is the highest Privilege, & Plain duty of Man; to strive in every reasonable way, to promote the Happiness, Mental, Moral & Physical elevation of his fellow Man. And that People, or Clanish oppressors; who wickedly violate this sacred principle; oppressing their fellow Men, will bring upon themselves that certain and fearful retribution, which is the Natural, & Necessary penalty of evil Doing. “Prudence, indeed will dictate, that Governments long established, should not be changed for light & transient causes; But when a long train of abuses, & usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object; evince a design to perpetuate an absolute Despotism; and most cruel bondage; It is their Right, it is their Duty, to resist & change such Government, & provide safeguards for their future Liberty.” Such has been the patient sufferance of the slaves of the United States, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to Crush this foul system of oppression.

“The history of Slavery in the United State is a history of injustice and cruelties inflicted upon the Slave in every conceivable way, and in barbarity not surpassed by the most savage Tribes. It is the embodiment of all that is Evil, and ruinous to a Nation; and subversive of all Good. “In proof of which; facts innumerable have been submitted to the People, and have received the verdict and condemnation of a candid and Impartial World.” Our Servants; Members of Congress; and other servants of the People, who receive exorbitant wages, from the People; in return for their unjust Rule, “have refused to pass laws for the accommodation of large districts of People, unless that People, would relinquish the right of representation in the Legislation, a right-ineestimable of them, and formidable to tyrants only. Our president and other Leeches have called together legislative, or treasonable Bodies, at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of our public records; for the sole purpose of fatiguing us into compliance with their measure. They have desolved Representative houses, for opposing with manly firmness, their invasions of the rights of the people.

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“They have refused to grant Petitions presented by numerous and respectable Citizens, asking redress of grievances imposed upon us, demanding our Liberty and natural rights. With contempt they spurn our humble petitions; and have failed to pass laws for our relief. “They have prevented in all possible ways, the administration of Justice to the Slave. They have made Judges like Taney dependent on their will alone, for the tenure of their office, and the amount and payment of their salaries. They have erected a Multitude of new offices, and Sent on Swarms of Blood Suckers, and Moths, to harass the People, and eat our their Substance. They have affected to render the Military, independent of, and superior to the power and wishes of the people (the Civil power.) Claiming that knowledge is power, they have, (for their own safety,) kept us in totoal darkness, and Ignorance, inflicting base cruelties, for any attempt on our part to obtain knowledge. They have protected base Men, Pirates (engaged in a most Inhuman traffic; The Foreign; and Domestic Slave Trade.) “by mock trials, from punishment, for unprovoked murders which they have committed upon us, and free Citizens of the States. They have prevented by law, our having any Traffic or deal with our fellow Men; Regardless of our wishes, they declare themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever. They have abdicated government among us, by declaring us out of their protection, and waging a worse than cruel war upon us continually.

“The facts and full description of the enormous sin of Slavery, may be found in the General History of American Slavery, which is a history of repeated injuries, of base hypocrisy; A cursed treasonable, usurpation; The most abominable provoking atrocities; which are but a mockery of all that is Just, or worthy of any people. “Such cruelty, tyranny, and perfidy, has hardly a parallel, in the history of the most barbarous ages.

“Our Servants, or Law makers; are totally unworthy the name of Half Civilized Men. All their National acts, (which apply to slavery,) are false, to the words Spirit, and intention, of the Constitution of the United States, and the Declaration of Independence.

“They say by word & Act, That their own Children, or any faithful Citizen, may be legall robed of every Natural and Sacred Right, and that we had no rights whatever. They are a blot upon the character, the honor, of any Nation, which claims to have the least shadow or spark of Civilization above the lowest, most inferior Canibal Races. This is a slight through brief recital, of some of the enormous atrocities, of these Idle, haughty, tyrannical, Arrogant Land Monopo-

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lists; slave holders are lords and masters, From which, Good Lord Deliver us. These are some of the facts, which we now, (after the lapse of 83 years, since the writing and signing of that Sacred Instrument, Honored and Adored by our Fathers, which declares that it is Self Evident that all Men are created Equal, Endowed by their Creator with certain inherent rights &c.) submit to the Decision of all Candid; true Republican, Friends of Universal Freedom, and National Equality of Rights. All We Demand, is our Liberty, and the Natural rights and immunities of faithful Citizens of the United States. We will Obtain these rights or Die in the Struggle to obtain them. We make war upon oppression, we have no controversy with any Religious Sect, our intention is not to molest any Good Man, whatever may be his religious belief. "The welfare of the People; Is the first Great Law." We hold these to be self evident truths, That any Tribe, Rulers, or People who Rob and cruelly oppress their faithful Laboring Citizens, have within themselves the Germ, of their own certain and fearful overthrow; It is one of Nature's Immutable Laws; that According to the measure that ye mete; so shall it be measured to you again." Herein is the secret of Security & true happiness, for Individuals, and the only firm Basis, upon which Governments, may be permanently Established; where the Citizens, are Devoted to the greatest good of their fellow Men, The more humble, benighted & oppressed they are, So much more sympathy, & earnest effort for their relief, is demanded, striving earnestly to promote the Safety and prosperity of their Nation; & the Human Race.

"It is a fixed Law of Nature, That any People or Nation whose steady purpose; & Constant Practice, is in accordance with these principles; Must go forward Progressing; So long as Man continues to Exist. For in Nature the Principle of Reciprocity is Great.

"The Legitimate object of all Punishment, is to present Crime." When any Punishment is inflicted more than is necessary to present Crime, it then ceases to be a Punishment; It has then become a Barbarous Crime. A Sore Evil. "The Natural Object of all Government is to Protect the right, Defend the Innocent. When any set of Usurpers, Tribe, or community fail to protect the right, but furnish protection & encouragement to the Villian, by bestowing a Bounty, or Premium, upon the vile Thief, Rober, Libertine, Pirate; & Woman killing Slave Holder; as a reward for their deeds of rascality and Barbarism; And inflict grievous cruelties upon the inocent, Shooting and Butchering the most faithful. Citizens, who have striven Manfully, for the relief of the down troden & oppressed of their country, Who fought bravely in support of the Great Principles set forth in Our Declaration of Independence, from the oppressive rule of England. Encouraging in

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various ways, by bribery and fraud, the most Fiendish acts of Barbarism, (like those Perpetuated within the limits of the United States, at Blounts Fort; in Florida and other Territories.) under the Jurisdiction and guidance of Slave holding Authority, & in strict accordance with Slave holding Rules. They have transcended their own limits, they have fairly outwitted themselves; Their Slave Code is a Shame to any Nation, Their Laws are no Laws, they themselves are no more than a Band of Base Piratical Rulers. They are a curse to themselves, a most lamentable Blot upon Society.

“In every stage of these oppressions, we have petitioned for redress, in the most humble terms, Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury A Class of oppressors, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyranical Despotism, is unfit to rule any People. Nor have we been wanting in attention, to our oppressors; We have warned them from time to time, of attempts (made by their headlong Blindness,) to perpetuate, extend, strengthen, and revive the dieing elements of this cursed Institution. We have reminded them of our unhappy condition, and other their Cruelties. We have appealed to their native Justice and magnanimity, we have conjured them by the ties of our common nature, our Brotherhood, & common Parentage, to disavow these usurpations, which have destroyed our Kindred friendship, and endangered their safety. “They have been Deaf to the voice of Justice & Consanguinity. We must therefore acquiece in the necessity, which denounces their tyranny & unjust rule over us. Declaring that we will serve them no longer as slaves, knowing that the “Laborer is worthy of his hire.” We therefore, the Representatives of the circumscribed citizens of the United States, of America in General Congress assembled, appealing to the supreme Judge of the World, for the rectitude of our intentions, Do in the name & by authority of the oppressed Citizens of the Slave States, Solemnly publish and Declare; that the Slaves are, & right out to be as free & independent as the unchangeable Law of God, requires that All Men Shall be. That they are absolved from all allegiance to those Tyrants, who still persist in forcibly subjecting them to perpetual “Bondage, and that all friendly connection between them & such Tyrants, is, & ought to be totally desolved. And that as free, & independent citizens of these states, they have a perfect right, a sufficient & just cause, to defend themselves against the tyranny of their oppressors. To solicit aid from & ask the protection of all true friends of humanity & reform, of what ever nation, & wherever found; A right to contract Alliances, & do all other acts & things which free independent Citizens may of right do.

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And for the support of Declaration; with a firm reliance on the protection of Devine Providence; We mutually Pledge to each other, Our Lives, and Our Sacred Honor. Indeed, I tremble for my Country, when I reflect; that God is Just; And that his Justice; will not sleep forever." &c., &c. Nature is mourning for its murdered, and Afflicted Children. **Hung be the Heavens in Scarlet.**

The idea for the "Declaration of Liberty" tract was expressed by John Brown to Rev. Theodore Parker, Congregational minister of Boston, in 1858, shortly before the Convention in Chatham. Brown had intended that the war of slavery would move to Virginia on July 4th of that year. The letter is remarkable for its expression of hatred to slaveholders, and the viewpoint that they expected to be severely punished, if not killed, in retribution for the sin of slavery they had committed.

Boston, Mass., March 7, 1858

MY DEAR SIR,

—Since you know that I have an almost countless brood of poor hungry chickens to "scratch for," you will not reproach me for scratching even on the Sabbath. At any rate I trust God will not. I want you to undertake to provide a substitute for an address you saw last season, directed to the officers and soldiers of the United States army. The ideas contained in that address I, of course, like, for I furnished the skeleton. I never had the ability to clothe those ideas in language at all to satisfy myself. . . In the first place, it must be short, or it will not be generally read. It must be in the simplest or plainest language; without the least affectation of the scholar about it, and yet be worded with great clearness and power. . . .

I also want a similar short address, appropriate to the peculiar circumstances, intended for all persons, old and young, male and female, slaveholding and non-slave-holding, to be sent out broadcast over the entire nation. So by every male and female prisoner upon being set at liberty, and to be read by them during their confinement. I know that men will listen, and reflect too, under such circumstances. Persons will hear your anti-slavery lectures, when they have become virtually slaves themselves. The impressions made on prisoners by kindness and plain dealing, instead of barbarous and cruel treatment, such as they might give, and instead of being slaughtered like vile reptiles as they might very naturally expect, are not only powerful,

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but lasting. Females are susceptible of being carried away entirely by the kindness of an intrepid and magnanimous soldier, even when his bare name was a terror but the day previous. Now, dear sir, I have told you about as well as I know how to, what I am anxious at once to secure. Will you write the tracts, or get them written, so that I may commence ‘colporteur?’

Very respectfully your friend, JOHN BROWN. ¹

Theodore Parker was one of the “Secret Six” supporters in New England who raised funds for Brown’s activities. Rev. Parker was in Europe in 1859, where he died in May 1860. He wrote a passionate letter of support for Brown at the time of his trial and sentence of death, recently reprinted. ²

Document History. “A Declaration of Liberty By the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States” was captured with Brown in the enginehouse on October 18, 1859. Scores of printed copies of “A Declaration of Liberty” were captured with Brown and his men at the raid. They were thoroughly destroyed by the authorities and populace—one described folding them and inserting into the barrels of rifles and firing them into pieces in the countryside.

The transcription made in November 1859 was not published by the Senate Committee investigating the events headed by Senators George Mason and Jefferson Davis. In 1893 it was published in the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*. Its description (page 279): “The paper (foolscap) upon which it is written is pasted under sheet on white cloth attached to and rolled up on a round stick and tied with a string attached to one end.” This was the source for Richard Hinton in the *Appendix of John Brown and His Men; with some account of the roads they traveled to reach Harper’s Ferry* (1894).

Historian John M. Lawlor, an archives scholar at the Library of Congress, searched for the documents and artefacts sent to the Secretary of War John B. Floyd by U. S. Marines Captain Robert E. Lee soon after John Brown’s capture. “The Documents Chase” by Professor Lawlor was published by Allies for Freedom in 2006. It is published online:

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http://www.alliesforfreedom.org/files/John_Brown_Records_at_the_National_Archives_and_Recordsprint.pdf

The documents published as “The John Brown Papers” in the Calendar of Virginia State Papers in 1893 mysteriously disappeared. The extant original “Declaration of Liberty” is in the John Brown Scrapbook in the Dreer Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is handwritten in calligraphy, in large letters, on heavy paper cut and pasted onto pages of a scrapbook in size 11 x 14 inches. There are a few blots and inserted words to support handwriting conclusion. The HSP cannot examine the original paper because of the cutting and pasting into Ferdinand Dreer’s scrapbook. However, the wording they publish is almost verbatim³.

A photocopy was acquired by the late Eric Ledell Smith, a member of the board of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in 2003. He noted that the calligraphy hand was certainly that of a woman. Mr. Smith’s complete list of the documents in the Dreer Collection was published in *John Brown’s Family in California; A journey by funeral train, covered wagon, through archives to the Valley of Heart’s Delight, including the years 1833-1936, and honoring descendants of the Women Abolitionists of Santa Clara County, now known as Silicon Valley* (Allies for Freedom publishers, 2006) http://www.alliesforfreedom.org/files/Finding_the_Carpetbag.pdf

John Brown was intensely interested in reproduction of photographs and documents for use in his liberation strategy. A red leather letterbook was confiscated on October 18, 1859 by Captain Clifton Taylure of the Baltimore Guard, and present to the officer of the U. S. Marines in charge, Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart. It contained a reversed-image copy of “Sambo Mistakes” by John Brown which was published in *The Ram’s Horn* in 1848.⁴ Captain Taylure was a correspondent for *The Baltimore Clipper*, which published many documents taken at the time.

Richard Hinton was an abolitionist journalist who joined John Brown in Kansas. He intended to be on the raid at Harpers Ferry—planned for October 24—arriving in Hagerstown on the 14th of October. Referring to himself as “the Kansas recruit”, Hinton was sent to Chambersburg by Brown at the precipitous change occurring on October 15.⁵ Learning of the raid’s failure on October 17-18, he went to Harrisburg and then to

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Ohio to attempt to help those who escaped and were not recaptured. His 1894 history reprinted many captured documents known as “The John Brown Papers” which were published in 1893.⁶

Jean Libby, Allies for Freedom. July 4, 2019

Notes and Sources

¹ John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, Boston* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 164-5.

² *John Brown's expedition reviewed in a letter from Rev. Theodore Parker, at Rome, to Francis Jackson, Boston*. Published in Boston by The Fraternity, 1860. Reprinted January 2018 by Lost Cause Press.

³ The major error in transcription is this line: “It is one of Nature’s Immutable Laws, that ‘According to the measures ye mete, so shall it be measured to you again.” The Virginia transcriber wrote the word as meet.

⁴ The Letter Book containing a copy of the original handwritten “Sambo Mistakes” was brought from the North Elba farmhouse to Maryland during the summer of 1859 as they prepared for the raid on the Harpers Ferry arsenal across the Potomac River in Virginia. It was captured in his abandoned “carpetbag” by a company headed by Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart following Brown’s capture on October 18th. Stuart allowed a Baltimore journalist, Clifton W. Tayluere, to keep it and the rest of the written materials (marines and militia were more interested in confiscating the weapons) and to distribute them. The Letter Book is bound in deep red leather, and contains only the copy “for the Rams Horn”, the original having been removed. It is an early form of carbon paper, the pages remaining for the writer, an ingenious “Patent Process” made in Pennsylvania. John Brown’s essay is preserved in reverse writing on the back of the paper, the front of the copy in faint and faded blue. To transcribe the words, Scott Sherlock used the hand mirror of Mary Herbert, the Assistant Curator of Manuscripts at the Maryland Historical Society Library in Baltimore to read the reversed image in May, 2000.

⁵ Richard Hinton, *John Brown and His Men; With Some Account of the Roads They Traveled to Reach Harper’s Ferry*. 1894:251-252.

⁶ Flournoy, Henry W., ed. *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts Preserved in the Capitol at Richmond*, 11 volumes. Richmond: Imprint varies, 1875-1893. Volume 11, pp. 73-101, 269-349.