



American to the Backbone: The Life of James W. C. Pennington, the Fugitive Slave Who Became One of the First Black Abolitionists

Christopher L. Webber

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The incredible story of a forgotten hero of nineteenth century New York City--a former slave, Yale scholar, minister, and international leader of the Antebellum abolitionist movement.

At the age of 19, scared and illiterate, James Pennington escaped from slavery in 1827 and soon became one of the leading voices against slavery prior to the Civil War. Just ten years after his escape, Pennington was ordained to the ministry of the Congregational Church after studying at Yale. Moving to Hartford, he became involved with the Amistad captives and founded the first African American mission society. He traveled to England as a delegate to a world Anti-Slavery Convention and served also as a delegate to an international peace convention. Later he traveled widely in Britain and on the continent to gain support for the American abolition movement. He was so respected by European audiences that the University of Heidelberg awarded him an honorary doctorate, making him the first person of African descent to receive such a degree.

As he fought for equal rights in America, Pennington's voice was not limited to the preacher's pulpit. He wrote the first-ever "History of the Colored People" as well as a careful study of the moral basis for civil disobedience, which would be echoed decades later by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. More than a century before Rosa Parks took her monumental bus ride, Pennington challenged segregated seating in New York City street cars. He was beaten and arrested, but eventually vindicated when the New York State Supreme Court ordered the cars to be integrated.

In a day when most American leaders believed that the solution to America's racial problems was for African Americans to be sent "back" to Africa, Pennington and others insisted that they too were Americans. "American to the backbone," was Pennington's way of putting it. Amazingly, it is the vision that he and a small group of free African Americans held up that prevailed.

After the Civil War, Pennington took part in the work of Reconstruction in Mississippi and served also in Portland, Maine, and Jacksonville, Florida. Pennington's writing reflects a delightful sense of humor, intellectual vivacity, and inspiring faith through it all. *American to the Backbone* brings to life this fascinating, forgotten pioneer, who helped lay the foundation for the contemporary civil rights revolution and inspire generations of future leaders.

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