

“The whole land is full of blood,” 1851

Introduction

“The whole land is full of blood.”

These ominous words were uttered by James W. C. Pennington, a formerly enslaved person and noted abolitionist, in the wake of Thomas Sims’s infamous trial. Sims had escaped from slavery in Georgia before being captured in Massachusetts in April 1851 and taken to court under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. The judge decided in favor of Sims’s slaveholder, and the seventeen-year-old was marched through the streets of Boston by US marines before being returned to Georgia. The authoritarian nature and public spectacle of Sims’s case sent a resounding message to enslaved people who sought refuge in the North. It also inflamed antislavery sentiment, spurring many abolitionists to action.

Pennington could closely sympathize with the plight of Thomas Sims. In 1827 he escaped from slavery in Maryland. Pennington traveled first to Pennsylvania before settling in Brooklyn, New York, where he worked as a blacksmith while attending night classes. Since Yale would not enroll him as a regular student, he audited courses in Yale’s School of Divinity and obtained his ordination and license to preach in 1838. Pennington’s achievements as a scholar and an abolitionist were remarkable. He is noted for establishing an argument for the African origins of Western European civilization, and is also known for presiding as minister over Frederick Douglass’s marriage to Anna Murray. In this letter, Pennington offers us a glimpse into the frustrating struggle for abolition at a time when fugitive slave laws provoked pivotal court rulings. In his words, “These cases are enough to break one’s heart. It is difficult to see how the enormous evil and crime of Slavery can be carried to a greater extent.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. In what way does Pennington’s account of Thomas Sims’s trial help us to understand why many enslaved people continued fleeing until they crossed the border into Canada?
2. How does Pennington’s accomplishments destroy the arguments that enslaved people were intellectually inferior and needed the care and protection provided by their white slaveholders?
3. “The whole land is full of blood” references one of the Ten Plagues in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament. Why do you think J. W. C. Pennington chose to include that sentence?

"The whole land is full of blood," 1851

Image

9 Grinfield street
Edget Hill
Liverpool Ap 29. 1851

Esteemed friend. I have lately
had a letter our excellent
friend Mrs Henry Richardson,
in which she informs me
of your wish to have a few
of my autographs. I
take it very kind of you
to think of one so humble
in life. My constant
trouble of mind is the
evil war pressing
on my nation and people.
What the end is to no eye
human can foresee &
we are naturally
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The mail which arrived
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James W. C. Pennington to unknown, April 29, 1851. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09088 p1)

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James W. C. Pennington to unknown, April 29, 1851. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09088 p2)

"The whole land is full of blood," 1851

The poor is going
up from every
part of the country
into the ears of the
Lord of Sabaoth
Will he not soon
hear and answer;
"Lord give us
help from trouble"
Yours truly
J. W. Pennington

James W. C. Pennington to unknown, April 29, 1851. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09088 p3)

Transcript

9 Grinfield Street

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Esteemed Friend, I have lately had a letter our excellent friend Mrs Henry Richardson, in which she informs me of your wish to have a few of my autographs—I take it very kind of you to think of one so humble in life. My constant trouble of mind is the evils now pressing on my nation and people. What the end is to no eye human can foresee & we are naturally inclined when suffering bad to fear worse. The mail which arrived yesterday the Baltic gives [2] an account of the termination of the last Boston case. Thomas Sims has been given over to his Claimant and has been taken back into Slavery. These cases are enough to break one’s heart. It is difficult to see how the enormous evil and crime of Slavery can be carried to a greater extent.

The whole land is full of blood. The cry of [3] the poor is going up from every part of the country into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth Will he not soon hear and answer; “Lord give us help from trouble”

Yours Truly

J.W.C. Pennington