

**From Slave to Abolitionist: James W. C. Pennington
of Washington County, Maryland**

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Sunday, October 28, 1827, was Jim Pembroke's last day in Washington County, Maryland. A slave for all of his 21 years, Pembroke had decided the previous day to escape. Yet, as he sat alone that Sunday morning, awaiting the right moment to leave, he hesitated, and considered the difficulties of his decision. First and foremost, he was worried about his family. He would be leaving behind on the plantation not only his mother and his father, but also ten siblings, plus a beloved older brother nearby. What would become of them? Pembroke was well aware that it was a custom for families of runaways to be sold to the Deep South, before they had a chance to follow their kinsman. What, on the other hand, would happen to him if he failed? The consequences would no doubt be severe. Even if he managed to escape, he was unsure how to even get to Pennsylvania and freedom – he could only guess at the distance from his plantation to the state border, and he had little sense of direction, save for following the North Star. Years later, Pembroke wrote of his mental anguish that day:

How the impression came to be upon my mind I cannot tell; but there was a strange and horrifying belief that, if I did not meet the crisis that day, I should be self-doomed - that my ear would be nailed to the door post forever. The emotions of that moment I cannot fully depict. Hope, fear, dread, terror, love, sorrow, and deep melancholy were mingled in my mind together; my mental state was one of most painful distraction. ...[B]ut the hour was now come, and the man must act and be free, or remain a slave forever. ¹

Pembroke put a piece of bread in his pocket, looked around his slave quarters one last time, and left behind Washington County and slavery forever.

Jim Pembroke's story is one of the great slave narratives of American history. After his escape, Pembroke changed his name to James William Charles Pennington, and against all odds, became one of the most distinguished and respected of all African American leaders of the nineteenth century.² We know about his early life as a slave primarily from his autobiography, published in 1849 as *The Fugitive Blacksmith, Or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington*.³ While Pennington's life as an abolitionist and a public figure is well known, few have examined his early years in Maryland. His story is certainly inspirational as one man's successful struggle against an evil institution, but it also tells us much about slavery and early African American history in mid-Maryland, as well as aspects of the cultural world of the ante-bellum white planter class in the region. His experiences in Washington County, moreover, were part and parcel of the influences that transformed Jim Pembroke the slave into James W.C. Pennington the gifted minister, abolitionist, and intellectual.

Pennington was born circa 1807 – no one is certain of the date – in Queen Anne's County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. His mother, Nelly Pembroke, and therefore Pennington, were slaves to James Tilghman, a judge on Maryland's Court of Appeals and the state's first Attorney General. Pennington's father, Bazil, was owned by a different slaveholder on a nearby plantation. When James Tilghman died in 1809, his will was administered by his eldest surviving son, Frisby Tilghman. Frisby several years earlier had emigrated from Queen Anne's County to Washington County in mid-Maryland, a wheat-growing region that was one of the most rapidly expanding sections of the state. After settling his father's affairs, Frisby Tilghman returned to his Washington County estate, Rockland, with Nelly and her two sons Robert and Jim. Pennington's father was thus

separated from his family by over 200 miles, but Tilghman soon thereafter purchased Bazil and brought him also to Rockland.⁴

Pennington did not know it at the time of course, but he had been inherited by one of Washington County's leading citizens. Frisby Tilghman had once studied to be a doctor, but after marrying into a prominent local family, the Ringgolds, he became a wheat farmer and an active participant in the civic life of his adopted region. He represented Washington County four times in Maryland's House of Delegates, served as a justice in the county's Orphans Court, formed and commanded a local militia company, helped to found the first agricultural society in the county as well as an academy in Hagerstown, championed the building of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal and other internal improvements in the region, served on the board of directors of local banks, and was influential as one of the more progressive farmers in the region.⁵

Pennington recalled in his memoirs that Tilghman normally had a kind disposition, but was a strict disciplinarian with his slaves and was ever vigilant to extinguish any sign of autonomy from them. Tilghman, for example, was an instigator of several laws in the county concerning the control of slaves, including one which prohibited slaves from going over a certain number of miles from their plantation on Sundays, when they were traditionally allowed to visit family members on nearby plantations. He also once had authorities disband a local Sunday school for free blacks which had been established by Methodist and Lutheran churches lest, according to Pennington, "the slaves should get some benefit of it." Tilghman's treatment of Pennington and his family, as we shall see, sparked Pennington's later determination to flee.⁶

As a young boy, Pennington helped his parents as much as he could around the plantation, until at around age eight or nine, he and his older brother Robert were hired out by Tilghman to learn trades. As in many other slave areas, there was a custom in the region for slaveowners to apprentice a few of their young slaves to tradesmen, in order for the slaves to learn a skill that could later be used on the plantation. Pennington was placed with a stonemason in Hagerstown, six miles from Tilghman's plantation. Pennington's brother Robert was apprenticed to a different tradesman in the same town, and since neither Pennington's nor his brother's employer were slaveowners themselves, the two boys enjoyed for a brief time relative freedom. Pennington stayed with the stonemason for about three years, and then returned home. His new skills were immediately employed in helping to erect a new blacksmith shop for the plantation. Tilghman's blacksmith was a slave who had learned his trade just as Pennington had learned stonemasonry, and Pennington was placed in the new shop to learn that craft. He worked as a blacksmith on Tilghman's plantation for nine years, and took great pride in his work. He wrote in his autobiography that this craftsman's pride was one of the things that reconciled him so long to being a slave: "I sought to distinguish myself in the finer branches of the business by invention and finish; I frequently tried my hand at making guns and pistols, putting blades in penknives, making fancy hammers, hatchets, swordcanes, etc., etc."⁷

But Pennington found little else in the life of a slave to give him satisfaction. In *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, he described aspects of the slave's life in Washington County. Compared with the tobacco-growing regions of eastern Maryland, western Maryland had comparatively few slaves. Still, at about the time Pennington was brought to Washington County, there were over 2600 people in bondage in the county, and that number increased

to over 3200 by 1820. In that year, slaves accounted for 14% of Washington County's total population, which was comparable to neighboring Frederick County, where slaves made up 16% of the population. By comparison, slaves composed 26% of the population for the entire state. The number of slaves in the county declined thereafter until slavery was abolished in the state in 1864. The number of free blacks in the county, on the other hand, increased until in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, there were more free blacks than enslaved blacks.⁸

Slavery, however, was manifested in Washington County through more than just the numbers of slaves. According to Thomas J.C. Williams' *History of Washington County, Maryland*, Hagerstown was always a noted slave market – slave catchers from throughout the southern states lurked in the county to catch fugitive slaves trying to escape to Pennsylvania. Once caught, many of these slaves were then sold at auction in Hagerstown to buyers from the Deep South. In his three years in Hagerstown, Pennington likely witnessed a few of these auctions.⁹

The prevailing attitude toward slavery in Washington County was recounted by Pennington in his retelling of the Gruber trial of 1819. Jacob Gruber was a Pennsylvania minister who, at a camp meeting near Tilghman's Rockland estate in 1818, delivered a sermon in which several Washington County slaveowners accused him of inciting slaves to rebel from their masters. Gruber was successfully defended, however, by Roger Brooke Taney, then a lawyer in Frederick County and the future author of the *Dred Scott* decision, in one of history's interesting ironies. Pennington claimed that his owner Frisby Tilghman was one of the planters behind Gruber's arrest. He also recounted meeting in 1848 a slave from the region who still remembered Gruber's sermon.¹⁰

Pennington recalled in his book many details of how slaves in Washington County lived, touching upon foodways, religion, and clothing, for example, but he was understandably more interested in describing for readers the cruelties of slavery. Remember that Pennington wrote his autobiography in 1849, when slavery was still legal. In the Preface of his book, he particularly criticized people who spoke of a “mild” form of slavery.

My feelings are always outraged when I hear them speak of ‘kind masters,’ ‘Christian masters,’ ‘the mildest form of slavery,’ ‘well fed and clothed slaves,’ as extenuations of slavery; I am satisfied they either mean to pervert the truth, or they do not know what they say. The being of slavery, its soul and body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle; the cart-whip, starvation, and nakedness, are its inevitable consequences to a greater or less extent...¹¹

Pennington cited many examples throughout his book to illustrate the cruelty and barbarity of slavery, even of the so-called mild kind. He witnessed slave children sold from the plantation to the Deep South, men and women flogged, a slave struck with a pitchfork by an overseer, and slaves shot. One slave tried to run from one of Frisby Tilghman’s overseers who was about to beat him with a club. The overseer grabbed a gun and shot the slave, hitting him in the legs. The slave managed to hide in the nearby woods, but the pain forced him to surrender that night. Tilghman did not immediately tend to his wounds, but had him locked up that night, and in the morning, had the overseer tie him down and flog him - only then did Tilghman pick the shot out of the slave’s leg. In another example, one of Tilghman’s sons coveted a young slave woman on the plantation. As a result, to save the honor of the son, Tilghman sold the slave to a buyer from Georgia, even though her parents pleaded with him to allow them to arrange a local sale.¹²

Pennington and his family did not escape the wrath of Tilghman and his overseers, either, and one particular incident produced a turning point in Pennington's conception of himself and his situation. Tilghman allowed his slaves who had families on other nearby plantations to leave on Saturday night to go to their families, but they had to be back early on Monday morning. Three of his field hands were not back one particular Monday morning, and Tilghman was very angry. Pennington's father was tending a lamb that morning on the plantation, and Tilghman vented his anger at Bazil. When Bazil replied in a way that Tilghman felt was insolent, he took out a cowhide whip and, in Pennington's words:

...fell upon him with most savage cruelty, and inflicted fifteen or twenty severe stripes with all his strength, over his shoulders and the small of his back. As he raised himself upon his toes, and gave the last stripe, he said, 'by the *** I will make you know that I am master of your tongue as well as of your time!'

Pennington was near enough, he wrote, to "hear, see, and even count the savage stripes inflicted upon" his father.¹³

Pennington recalled that this incident created "an open rupture" within his family, as "each member felt the deep insult that had been inflicted upon our head: the spirit of the whole family was roused; we talked of it in our nightly gatherings, and showed it in our daily melancholy aspect." And did this cause Tilghman to regret his actions? On the contrary. "The oppressor saw this, and with the heartlessness that was in perfect keeping with the first insult, commenced a series of tauntings, threatenings, and insinuations, with a view to crush the spirit of the whole family."¹⁴

Pennington's response was a portent of his later actions. "Although it was some time after this event before I took the decisive step, yet in my mind and spirit, I never was a *Slave* after it." He particularly never forgot the symbolism in the stark contrast between

the gentleness of his father's caring for the lamb and the cruelty of Tilghman. Pennington now despised Tilghman, and the slaveowner, knowing this, sought incidents in which he could punish the young man.¹⁵

Soon afterward, Pennington made his decision to emancipate himself by running away. On the afternoon of October 28, 1827, he left Rockland as if to visit his brother in Hagerstown. But once there, as night was falling, he kept walking, thinking only of freedom. In his story, Pennington remembered his feelings that night:

I felt like a mariner who has gotten his ship outside of the harbor and has spread his sails to the breeze. The cargo is on board - the ship is cleared - and the voyage I must make; besides, this being my first night, almost everything will depend upon my clearing the coast before the day dawns. In order to do this my flight must be rapid. I therefore set forth in sorrowful earnest, only now and then I was cheered by the *wild* hope, that I should somewhere and at some time be free.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Pennington's fears about direction were well-founded, for after two nights of walking, hiding in cornfields, and eating little, he found himself at a toll gate of the National Pike, only eighteen miles from Baltimore. Much to his dismay, he realized he had traveled east instead of north. But his troubles were only beginning. Pennington was soon captured near Reisterstown by a local farmer who suspected him of being a runaway. He managed to buy himself time by claiming to have been part of a gang of slaves that had contracted smallpox. Eventually he found a way to escape, and continued on his journey to Pennsylvania. Six days after leaving Washington County, he finally entered Pennsylvania near Littlestown in Adams County. He was taken in by William and Phoebe Wright, a local Quaker family who lived near York Springs, and sheltered for six months.¹⁷

Frisby Tilghman, meanwhile, upon discovering Pennington's departure, immediately placed an advertisement in the local papers. Tilghman was none too happy to lose a slave so skilled as Pennington. His ad offered a \$200 reward for Pennington, and described him as "about 21 years of age, five feet, five inches high, very black, square & clumsily made, has a down look, prominent and reddish eyes, and mumbles or talks with his teeth closed, can read, and I believe write, is an excellent blacksmith, and pretty good rough carpenter." Tilghman did not give up looking for Pennington. Over a year later Tilghman was still placing ads in newspapers in Lancaster and Philadelphia looking for his fugitive blacksmith.¹⁸

William Wright was a former schoolmaster, and while Pennington stayed in Littlestown, he began teaching Pennington how to read and write. As a slave, Pennington had spent many Sundays in his blacksmith shop, secretly studying the writing in the daybook kept by the shop's overseer. He had even fashioned a crude steel pen and had made ink from berries to practice writing. So he was an avid learner, and he always lamented what slavery had deprived him:

There is one sin that slavery committed against me which I never can forgive. It robbed me of my education; the injury is irreparable; I feel the embarrassment more seriously now than I ever did before. It cost me two years' hard labor, after I fled, to unshackle my mind; it was three years before I had purged my language of slavery's idioms; it was four years before I had thrown off the crouching aspect of slavery...¹⁹

Pennington soon left the Wrights, as Littlestown was too near the Maryland border, and he eventually arrived in New York City, and the beginning of a long career as a minister, teacher, abolitionist, writer, and international figure. One historian has written that Pennington was "one of the most distinguished of all fugitives from bondage," and

another referred to him as “one of the most educated and literate black men of his time.” Pennington became a minister in Presbyterian churches in New York and Hartford, was elected a delegate to several international abolition conventions, founded the American Missionary Association, wrote in 1841 one of the first histories of Africans in America, lectured widely, led the struggle to desegregate New York City’s public transit system, fought for the right of blacks to vote, and remained active in the Underground Railroad. In 1849, the University of Heidelberg awarded Pennington a Doctor of Divinity degree in honor of his achievements. His autobiography, also first published in 1849, has been called one of the ten most important slave narratives, and, as has been noted by literary historians, provided Mark Twain with several good ideas. *The Fugitive Blacksmith* went through three editions in eleven months, selling over 6,000 copies.²⁰

The title of Pennington’s book was apt, for he was technically still a fugitive in 1849. Pennington’s friends had tried earlier in the 1840s to purchase his freedom and that of his parents from Tilghman, but negotiations had failed. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, which placed new dangers on all runaways, Pennington’s very freedom was at stake. Frisby Tilghman died in 1847, and the administrator of his estate let it be known that \$150 would buy Pennington’s freedom. Abolitionists in Scotland raised the money, and in June of 1851, Pennington was technically a free man for the first time in his life.²¹

Many members of his family were not so lucky. Several were sold further south, a few managed to eventually escape to Canada, and others remained slaves in Washington County. One brother, Stephen, ran away from his Sharpsburg, Maryland, owner along with his two sons in 1854. Through the underground railroad network, they made their

way to Pennington in New York. But slavecatchers were on their trail, and Stephen and his sons were captured after less than 24 hours in the city. Stephen's two sons were immediately sold to a North Carolina lumber merchant, but Pennington was able to raise enough money to eventually purchase Stephen.²²

Prior to Frisby Tilghman's death, Pennington wrote a remarkable letter to his former owner. How many letters do we have from former slaves to their former owners? In this letter from 1844, Pennington turned the slave/master relationship on its head. Pennington warned Tilghman that he was an old man and would probably die soon, and he would have to stand "at the awful bar of the impartial Judge." He reminded his former owner that he would meet his former slaves, including Pennington, at that bar.

They will all meet you at that bar. Uncle James True, Charles Cooper, Aunt Jenny, and the native Africans; Jeremiah, London, and Donmore, have already gone ahead, and only wait your arrival – Sir, I shall meet you there. The account between us for the first twenty years of my life, will have a definite character upon which one or the other will be able to make out a case.²³

Most significantly, Pennington wrote, "I called you master when I was with you from the mere force of circumstances; but I never regarded you as my master." Pennington had emancipated himself.²⁴

Slavery is not an easy topic to study, yet it is a significant if tragic part of our history in the mid-Maryland region, and by studying such people as James W.C. Pennington and Frisby Tilghman, we will start to fill in that mosaic that is our complex past. Pennington's story is only one of many. We need to discover the others.

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- ¹ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith or Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington*, 3rd ed. (1850), in Arna Bontemps, *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 216.
- ² For Pennington's life, see R.J.M. Blackett, *Beating Against the Barriers, Biographical Essays in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 1-84; Herman E. Thomas, *James W. C. Pennington, African American Churchman and Abolitionist* (New York: Garland, 1995).
- ³ Pennington's autobiography has been reprinted in Bontemps, and in Yuval Taylor, ed., *I Was Born a Slave, An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume Two, 1849-1866* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 104-158.
- ⁴ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 207; Blackett, *Beating*, 1-2; Thomas, *James W.C. Pennington*, 37.
- ⁵ Blackett, *Beating*, 2; Thomas J. C. Williams, *History of Washington County, Maryland* (Baltimore: Clearfield Co., 1992 [1906]), 561; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland* (2 vols.; Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1968 [1882]), II, 1286-7.
- ⁶ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 212-3, 257.
- ⁷ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 209, 212.
- ⁸ Gary Jacobs, "Slavery in Washington County, Maryland" (Honors Paper, Hood College, 1978), 48-49.
- ⁹ Williams, *Washington County*, 250.
- ¹⁰ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 255; for Gruber, see W.P. Strickland, *The Life of Jacob Gruber* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860), and John B. Boles, "Tension in a Slave Society: The Trial of the Reverend Jacob Gruber," *Southern Studies* XVIII (Summer, 1979):179-197.
- ¹¹ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 253-4, 196.
- ¹² Pennington, *Fugitive*, 212-13, 197.
- ¹³ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 209-11.
- ¹⁴ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 211.
- ¹⁵ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 211.
- ¹⁶ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 217.
- ¹⁷ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 216-35; Blackett, *Beating*, 4; William Still, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno, 1968 [1872]), pp.691-93.
- ¹⁸ Blackett, *Beating*, 4-5; (Hagerstown, MD) *Torchlight and Public Advertiser*, 13 December 1827, and 5 February 1829.
- ¹⁹ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 236-37, 246.
- ²⁰ Yuval Taylor, *I Was Born a Slave*, 104; Horatio T. Strother, *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1962), p.145; for Pennington's career, see sources in note 2; for Twain, see, Lucinda H. MacKethan, "Huck Finn and the Slave Narratives," *Southern Review* 20 (April 1984): 252-57; on the success of *Fugitive Blacksmith*, see Blackett, *Beating*, 42.
- ²¹ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 250-51; Strother, *Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, 145-149; John Hooker, *Some Reminiscences of a Long Life* (Hartford: Belknap & Warfield, 1899), pp.38-41.
- ²² Pennington, *Fugitive*, 248; Blackett, *Beating*, 32; *Laws Made and Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Maryland* (Annapolis: William M'Neir, 1842), Chapter 67 [n.p.], "An Act for the Relief of Frisby Tilghman of Washington County;" Still, *Underground Railroad*, 173-4.
- ²³ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 266.
- ²⁴ Pennington, *Fugitive*, 263.