

# The Panthers and the Patriots

By **Michael Mccanne**, jacobinmag.com

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In July 1969, the Black Panther Party convened a huge meeting in Oakland that attracted radical groups from across the country. They called it the Conference for a United Front Against Fascism.

On a Saturday afternoon, between speeches from representatives of the Communist Party, the Farm Workers Union, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a man wearing a huge belt buckle with crossed pistols took the stage. Dark glasses covered his eyes, and his jacket and military-style beret bore Confederate flags.

“We come from a monster,” he said in a heavy Southern accent. “And the jaws of the monster in Chicago are grinding up the flesh and spitting out the blood of the poor and oppressed people, the blacks in the South Side, the West Side; the browns in the North Side; and the reds and the yellows; and yes, the whites — white oppressed people.”

The speaker’s name was William “Preacherman” Fesperman, and he belonged to the Young Patriots Organization, a radical group formed by young men on Chicago’s poverty-stricken North Side. Its mission was to organize poor whites to stand up for themselves, in solidarity with communities of color.

While the organization survived only a few years, it embodied a radical notion: that disenfranchised whites could throw off the shackles of racism and struggle alongside black and brown people to create a new society.

Decades later, the Young Patriots and their “Rainbow Coalition” still offer a striking model for left-wing politics.

## "Hillbilly Harlem"

The Young Patriots sprouted from the neighborhood of Uptown, a dense slum filled with poor whites that had migrated from the rural South after World War II. Most were fleeing Appalachia’s dying coal industry, and they brought their culture with them: Confederate flags hung in the bars, country music spilled out of the pool halls. By the mid-1960s, the local papers were referring to Uptown as “Hillbilly Harlem” and portraying it as a den of crime and depravity.

Hy Thurman was typical of the young men who lived in the impoverished neighborhood. He grew up in Dayton, Tennessee. His entire family had worked as farm laborers, scraping together a living by picking beans, corn, and strawberries. Poverty stalked his young life. “My mother and my elder sister had the same foot size,” he recalled in an interview, “but they only had one decent pair of shoes. My sister would go to school in them and she’d come home, and my mother would use them to go into town.”

His older brother Rex left for Chicago around the time Hy dropped out of ninth grade. In 1967, Hy followed his brother north. “We thought of Chicago as a kind of promised land,” he said. “It was where you could get a new start. But I found out really quickly that that wasn’t true.” When he could find work, he took short-term jobs as a day laborer. When he couldn’t, he sold his blood to survive.

By the time Hy arrived in Uptown, his brother had joined a street gang called the Goodfellows, which had recently developed ties with the community organization Jobs or Income Now (JOIN). An SDS initiative, JOIN agitated for

things like housing rights and welfare reform. It fought against Mayor Richard J. Daley's sprawling political machine, which used patronage and police brutality to control residents and spur on gentrification.

Organizing against police harassment was at the top of the Goodfellows' list of priorities: the young men faced constant stops, searches, and beatings from local officers. The SDS activists urged caution but nevertheless helped the Goodfellows organize a march to the neighborhood police station in August of 1966. Almost three hundred neighbors came out for the demonstration.

But the police quickly hit back, raiding JOIN's office and a church sympathetic to their efforts. A few days later, a police officer killed one of the Goodfellows' brothers, shooting him in the back as he ran away from a fight.

The march and its aftermath brought the already-simmering tensions in JOIN to a boil. Feeling stifled by SDS's mostly middle-class organizers, the Goodfellows struck out on their own and founded the Young Patriots Organization: a movement, they proudly proclaimed, by and for "hillbillies." They drafted an eleven-point program and adopted symbols: the Confederate flag, balanced with black power buttons on their lapels.

Before long, Thurman, his brother, and the other Patriots were haunting Uptown's bars and pool halls, recruiting gang members and spreading their doctrine of radical hillbilly self-determination — a mix of Hank Williams and Frantz Fanon.

## **The Original Rainbow Coalition**

In the fall of 1968, a Methodist church invited the Young Patriots to give a presentation about their work alongside Bob Lee of the Illinois Black Panther Party. The audience — mostly white, liberal, and middle-class — treated the

Panthers with curiosity, but expressed open hostility toward the Patriots. Lee had never seen anything like it: white people attacking poor whites. He rose to the Patriots' defense. Afterward, he suggested the two groups collaborate.

It was an ambitious undertaking. Then as now, Chicago was sharply segregated along racial and ethnic lines. Lee spent three weeks in Uptown getting to know the Patriots and their neighbors before mentioning the idea of an alliance to Fred Hampton, the chairman of the Illinois Panthers.

But Hampton was enthusiastic upon hearing Lee's proposal, and dubbed the fledgling alliance the "Rainbow Coalition." He even accepted the Patriots' use of the Confederate flag. According to Thurman, Hampton said, "If we can use that to organize, if we can use it to turn people, then we need to do it."

From this initial partnership, the Rainbow Coalition grew to include the Young Lords, a radical Puerto Rican group. Recruiting from youth gangs, the coalition tried to organize on points of solidarity like police brutality and poverty. They held unity demonstrations in Grant Park, decrying Mayor Daley's program of gentrification, poverty, and police brutality. They occupied buildings to demand better health care and housing for their communities.

The Young Patriots expanded as well, gaining new members — including "Preacherman" Feserpman, whose rhetorical skills helped spread the Patriots' message to wider audiences — and building relationships with Uptown's Native American community. They started a free breakfast program and opened a neighborhood clinic, putting to good use the lessons the Panthers taught Rainbow Coalition members about establishing basic services in long-neglected neighborhoods.

The Daley administration knew a threat when it saw one. It quickly moved to repress the budding coalition. The Chicago Police Department shut down the Patriots' free breakfast program and pressured their landlord to close the

health clinic. Officers worked with the FBI to infiltrate and disrupt the growing interracial coalition.

And then, the worst blow of all. On December 4, just five months after the conference in Oakland, a detachment of Chicago police, operating as a special task force for the district attorney, killed Hampton in a predawn raid.

His death devastated the movement and shot fear through Chicago.

Thurman and the other Patriots went into hiding. “No one knew what was going on,” he said, describing the frenzied days following the assassination. “You didn’t know if they were coming after you next.”

Hampton’s murder also sharpened tensions within the group, which was already splintering. Fesperman and the Panther leadership wanted the Patriots to start organizing on a national level, but the Patriots insisted on staying at the local level for the time being.

In 1970, Fesperman broke away and formed the Patriot Party, establishing headquarters in New York and setting up a handful of chapters across the country. But repression followed Fesperman, as police raided offices in New York and up and down the Eastern seaboard.

Back in Chicago, the police accused the Young Patriots of planning a bombing and rounded up their leadership. They also detained people from allied churches and community groups. Those who weren’t arrested dropped out of sight, and many moved away, effectively putting an end to the Patriots’ efforts.

The Rainbow Coalition lived on in name, if not form. In 1983, using the interracial coalition model, Harold Washington circumvented the Daley machine to become the city’s first black mayor. Jesse Jackson appropriated the name and the approach for the organization that grew out of his insurgent

1984 presidential campaign and carried him into his 1988 run. David Axelrod, drawing on what he learned during Washington's 1987 reelection campaign, retooled it to help Barack Obama get elected president.

But as mainstream Democrats like Axelrod picked up the strategy, they tossed aside the appeals to class solidarity. They pushed a politics that promoted a *mélange* of colors and ethnicities but few material benefits — to say nothing of radical change.

## Another Path

Since last November's presidential election, a battle over race and class has raged that's been as acrimonious as it's been misguided. The Young Patriots and their partners offer another path.

“The Rainbow Coalition was all about identity politics,” said scholar Jakobi Williams, author of *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*. “Folks were not asked to abandon their identities, but to use their identities as a way of building bridges to form alliances on poverty or whatever other issue that they believed to be important.”

Though short lived, the Young Patriots and the Rainbow Coalition showed that working-class movements can overcome significant divides (even Confederate flags) to unite around issues like poverty, corruption, and police brutality. The fierce resistance they faced from elites, both liberal and conservative, underscores the potency of their radical project.

A few years ago, Hy Thurman restarted two chapters of the Young Patriots in Alabama. Already he's attracted a younger cohort of supporters. A multiracial group of teens and twenty-somethings, after learning of Thurman's history,

reached out to him and became his collaborators. Thurman has also linked up with Chuck Armsbury, a former Patriot Party member who lives in rural Washington State. Their goal: to revive the organization as an antidote to the pervasive despair in poor and working-class white communities.

It's a tall order. But we can be sure of one thing: Fred Hampton and "Preacherman" Fesperman would be proud.

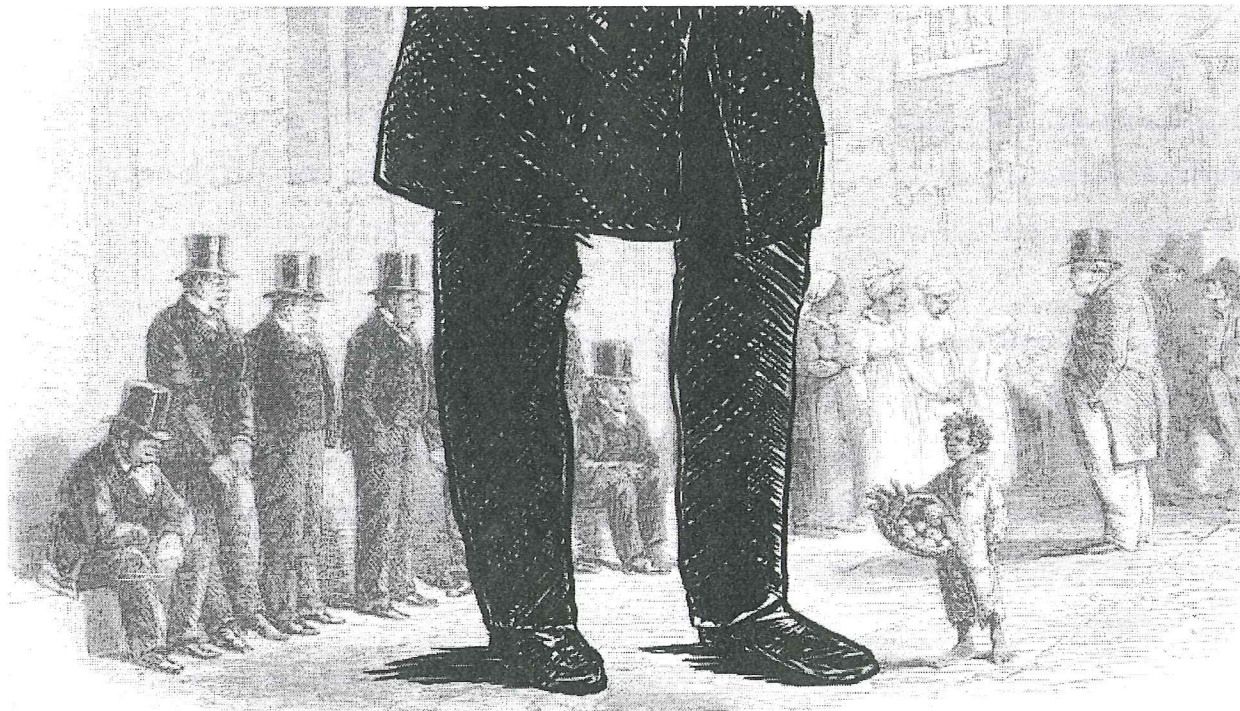
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# Ellen Craft, the Slave Who Posed as a Master and Made Herself Free

By **Angela Serratore**, jezebel.com



A few days before Christmas, 1848, a man named William Craft gave his wife Ellen a haircut—in fact, he cut it to the nape of her neck, far shorter than any other woman in Macon, Georgia, where the Crafts lived. They picked out her clothes—a cravat, a top hat, a fine coat—and went over the plan for what felt like the hundredth time.

Ellen was scared. "I think it is almost too much for us to undertake; however, I feel that God is on our side," she would later write, "and with his assistance, notwithstanding all the difficulties, we shall be able to succeed."

Ellen and William were Black, and they were enslaved. The morning after the haircut they would leave Macon forever, disguised—William as a slave, Ellen as his white master.

If it worked, they would be free.

Ellen Craft was born in 1826, in Clinton, Georgia. Like many slaves, she was the biological daughter of her mother, also a slave, and James Smith, her mother's wealthy white master. Ellen's own mother was the daughter of a plantation owner, and Ellen's complexion was so light she was often confused for another member of her master's family (his white family, that is).

Smith's wife was troubled by Ellen's presence—she looked too much like her own daughters, too much like her husband—and at the age of 11 she was removed from the only life she'd ever known and given as a wedding gift to one of Smith's older daughters, Eliza. Eliza and her husband, a physician, lived in Macon, and Ellen became their house slave.

As a domestic slave in a mid-sized town, Ellen took frequent trips out of the house, and on one of these errands, the year she turned 20, she met William Craft. William was partly owned by Ellen's master, Dr. Robert Collins, and partly by another Macon businessman, who'd been given ownership of him to cover a gambling debt. To maximize their investment, William was also loaned to a town carpenter, who taught him the trade and used his labor as the backbone of a successful business.

William and Ellen married in 1846—their masters allowed the union, but would not allow the couple to live together. At the time, this seemed just as well to the couple: despite their love for one another, both were too familiar

with the horrors the institution of slavery brought upon families, and Ellen in particular was fearful of giving birth to a child she might later be forcibly separated from.

But after two years of living in limbo—together, but apart; in love, but each belonging (according to the law) to another—the Crafts made another commitment to each other. They were going to escape.

The actual number of slaves who successfully escaped before the end of the Civil War is extraordinarily difficult to calculate. One Underground Railroad website puts the number at 100,000, while the National Park service suggests just a thousand slaves a year (between 1820 and 1860) made it to safety in the North or in Canada. Most who made it were from border states like Virginia, Kentucky, and Maryland. From Georgia, where the Crafts lived, fewer made it out alive, and Ellen and William were acutely aware of the punishments that could await them if they were captured.

Still, the Crafts had a few advantages. Both had worked in the comparatively bustling Macon, and so knew how to interact with clerks, salespeople, and busybodies. Virtually all of the money earned via William's carpentry work went to his masters, but he was allowed to keep a small wage, and to ask for time off, which, during the week of Christmas, he'd been given by both his boss at the carpentry shop and his master.

The only thing left to do was come up with a plan.

In the end, it was Ellen's skin color, the same thing that had sent her to Macon in the first place, that was going to drive their journey to freedom. William, who was darker in complexion than his wife, was going to dress as a slave, though he'd look shabbier and sound less intelligent than he actually was.

Ellen was going to be white. She was going to be a man. She was going to be rich.

Some of William's wages went to buying her a set of clothes that would allow her, if no one looked too closely, to be a Georgia plantation owner. The night before they left her hair was cut, and they wrapped one of her arms in a sling—despite their comparative positions of privilege in the slave hierarchy, neither Craft knew how to read or write. She would genteelly explain to whomever asked that her writing arm was damaged, allowing her to avoid filling out forms or signing her name.

Ellen bought two tickets to Savannah—one for herself, in the front carriage, and one for William, who would travel in slave cars where they were available and wherever he could find to stand when they were not.

The first clerk, the one they dealt with in Macon, was polite and deferential to Ellen, who, William would remark later, "made a most respectable looking gentleman."

Sitting in the train car before departure, Ellen spotted someone who'd known her master. She thought they'd been found out, that this man was there to collect them and bring them back to bondage. The scene was later described in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, the account of December, 1846 the Crafts would co-author:

After a little while, Mr. Cray said to my master, "It is a very fine morning, sir." The latter took no notice, but kept looking out of the window. Mr. Cray soon repeated this remark, in a little louder tone, but my master remained as before. This indifference attracted the attention of the passengers near, one of whom laughed out. This, I suppose, annoyed the old gentleman; so he said, "I will make him hear;" and in a loud tone of voice repeated, "It is a very fine morning, sir."

My master turned his head, and with a polite bow said, "Yes," and commenced looking out of the window again.

One of the gentlemen remarked that it was a very great deprivation to be deaf. "Yes," replied Mr. Cray, "and I shall not trouble that fellow any more." This enabled my master to breathe a little easier, and to feel that Mr. Cray was not his pursuer after all.

And why would Mr. Cray, or anyone else for that matter, suspect the Crafts of being who they were, presenting themselves as they had? Whiteness was a status, and it was a commodity, but not something that could be achieved—it just *was*. And the idea that someone without it could successfully pretend to have it was a threat to the order of things so great it could hardly be fathomed.

As a slave, Ellen's fair skin had been nothing more than a minor embarrassment to her owners—knowing she had even some Black blood was more than enough justification for thinking of her as property. Now, on the

train, dressed in clothes that signified status and wealth and whiteness, she was every inch the Southern male archetype.

Gender, too—at least in public—was prescriptive and essentialized, and during enslavement, Ellen's womanhood had marked her for particular danger. At her age, Ellen's mother had already borne at least one child by her white owner, and Ellen would have been keenly aware the same fate could befall her, and that any children she might give birth to (if she survived childbirth, if the children survived infancy) would not, in the eyes of the law, truly be her own. But in her scheme, she was able to use society's limited views to her advantage. The idea that a woman could successfully mask herself as male was beyond disbelief in 1840s Macon, and so there, too, Ellen was able to use the rigidity of those around her to remain undetected.

The final disguise Ellen put on—would have been, to any whites she met during the journey, the most unusual. The Ellen who had short hair and wore a man's suit and hat wasn't just any man—she was a man who had money, and slaves, no less. Just look at William, silently attentive at every possible moment! If to have money was to be moral, to be right, to *be*—Ellen was.

From Savannah, the Crafts took another train to Charleston, South Carolina. During both trips Ellen listened to the conversation of her fellow white men, and the topic often found its way to slavery, and to slaves—their worth, their stupidity, their troubles and their virtues. She had to remain stoic when one man suggested Blacks were grateful to their masters, and to deflect the advances of another who suggested that taking William into the northern parts of the South was a mistake, and wouldn't she rather just sell him to this man, who ran a plantation near New Orleans, where the enslaved were much more content?

From Charleston they planned to board a steamship to Philadelphia—not as far north as they'd like to go, but a free city nonetheless. Not realizing direct ships would not run during the winter months, they were forced to continue their journey by rail, every stop in every city a possible site of discovery.

On December 24th, 1848, the Crafts were at Baltimore. It was the last slave city before the free Northern states.

The clerk at the Baltimore station, despite being shown two tickets marking passage from Charleston to Philadelphia, refused to let the Crafts pass without some kind of endorsement marking William as Ellen (now calling herself Mr. Johnson)'s property.

Could anyone vouch for them? There was no one. Could Mr. Johnson not try, with his wounded arm, to write some kind of note assuring the clerk that William was his? He could not. The arm was not usable.

The Crafts and the clerk, the last person to stand between them and Philadelphia, had come to an impasse, when a character they'd met on a previous leg of the trip appeared:

While our hearts were crying lustily unto Him who is ever ready and able to save, the conductor of the train that we had just left stepped in. The officer asked if we came by the train with him from Washington; he said we did, and left the room. Just then the bell rang for the train to leave; and had it been the sudden shock of an earthquake it could not have given us a greater thrill. The sound of the bell caused every eye to flash with apparent interest, and to be more steadily fixed upon us than before. But, as God would have it, the officer all at once thrust his fingers through his hair, and in a state of great agitation said, "I really don't know what to do; I calculate it is all right." He then told the clerk to run and tell the conductor to "let this gentleman and slave pass;" adding, "As he is not well, it is a pity to stop him here. We will let him go."

And so they went, and on Christmas Day, 1848, found themselves at the home of Quaker abolitionists in Philadelphia.

From Pennsylvania the Crafts went further North, to Boston, where they quickly became acquainted with the abolitionist publisher William Lloyd Garrison, whose newspaper, *The Liberator*, was in the habit of printing escape narratives of newly arrived slaves.

The Crafts settled in Beacon Hill, a community of free Blacks. William found work as a carpenter and Ellen as a seamstress, and they frequented the lecture circuit, where, despite her lead role in their escape, William did most of the talking. Garrison at one point suggested Ellen redon her men's costume and have a portrait taken; audiences were delighted by the handsome white man in the photo and the lovely, soft-spoken Black woman in front of them. This served, in a sense, to heighten the drama of what they'd done—Southerners



they'd encountered on the train couldn't see Ellen for who she was. Northerners, electrified by the Crafts' bravery and their love for one another, couldn't imagine her as anything else.

In 1850, barely a year after the Crafts' arrival in Boston, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Protestations from wealthy Southerners (and their government representatives) convinced President Millard Fillmore to insert the Act into the Compromise of 1850, a bandage on the increasingly tense relations between the Northern and Southern states.

The Fugitive Slave Act made any free Black person a target—Fillmore at one point promised to devote Army resources to the capture of escaped slaves, and bounty hunters quickly realized they could collect rewards from masters whilst being assisted by the Federal government—but the Crafts, whose story had been widely circulated in newspapers like Garrison's, were particularly vulnerable. What better way to send a message, Southern masters thought, than to bring back into chains two people who had defied not just their owners but the very natural order that separated White from Black, man from woman, rich from poor?

The Act did have one unintended side effect—it mobilized many Northern abolitionists. Even those who privately opposed slavery had been able to look the other way before 1850, but now any White person in any free city could claim as a slave virtually any Black person they saw and drag them, against their will and the will of city and state governments, back below the Mason-Dixon line.

Garrison and his supporters were particular in their opposition, and again the Crafts were in the pages of the *Liberator*, this time in a reprint of something that had ran in the *Constitutionalist*, a Georgia newspaper. It was the narrative

of Willis Hughes, a slave hunter come to Boston specifically to capture Ellen and William:

All the time the excitement was going on with me, there was no protection of the city officers offered me, and none turned out in my favor. But when George Thompson, the English abolition lecturer, was expected, and a meeting was announced to receive him, it was rumored that a mob might assemble on his reception, and the Mayor instantly ordered out the city officers to attend and suppress any mob—showing that the city authorities were disposed to give protection to an abolitionist, which they had withheld from me while engaged in my lawful business; and my opinion is, if we had succeeded in arresting the negroes, that they would have been rescued by the citizens.

Despite the support of many Bostonians, Black and white, the Crafts decided it prudent to sail to England, where they were well-received and quickly became involved with abolitionists working abroad. Both Crafts learned to read and write, and in 1852 Ellen released her first official written statement, presented as a response to a Southern rumor that she was homesick for Macon, her masters, and slavery:

I write these few lines merely to say that the statement is entirely unfounded, for I have never had the slightest inclination whatever of returning to bondage; and God forbid that I should ever be so false to liberty as to prefer slavery in its stead. In fact, since my escape from slavery, I have gotten much better in every respect than I could have possibly anticipated. Though, had it been to the contrary, my feelings in regard to this would have been just the same, for I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent.

They were to remain in England for nearly twenty years, during which time five Craft children were born. In 1860 they published their narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (while the book was initially credited to both Crafts, later reprints named William the sole author—some gender constructs are harder than other to shake, it seems. In the later century, academics at the intersection of Black Studies and Women's Studies worked to restore Ellen's place on the title page of the book, and in fact suspect she contributed more to the work than has been previously assumed). The book ends with a declaration of haunting elegance and power, one that refuses to allow their story to be turned into one that makes anyone feel too good, too comfortable:

It is well known in England, if not all over the world, that the Americans, as a people, are notoriously mean and cruel towards all coloured persons, whether they are bond or free.

In 1870, after the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments of the Constitution, the Crafts returned to Georgia. With funds raised from the sale of their book and wealthy supporters, they purchased land upon which to farm, and upon which to open a school for former slaves, the Woodville Co-operative Farm School. Ellen and William took equal roles in the school's curriculum, with her instituting a particular ban on the whipping of pupils.

They ran the school until it closed in the early 1880s, and lived their final years in Charleston, with their daughter, also named Ellen, and her husband, a doctor, like their master had been.

Ellen Craft died in 1891; William in 1900. She was buried under a tree near their Georgia property, a tree she by all accounts loved very much.

She is still there. She is still free.

**Previously:** "Lady Colin, the Not-Quite-Divorcee Who Scandalized London"

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*Illustration by Jim Cooke, source image via Getty.*

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# Resources

- National Museum of African American Museum History and Culture—<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/educators>
- Smithsonian Education—[http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/resource\\_library/african\\_american\\_resources.html](http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/resource_library/african_american_resources.html)
- National Education Association—<http://www.nea.org/tools/lessons/black-history-month.htm>
- National Archives—<https://www.archives.gov/research/aic/reference/black-history.html>
- PBS.com—<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2015/01/black-history-month-resources-for-the-classroom/>
- WHYY—<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/black-history-month-facts-and-films/#.WnDa8KinE2w>
- Zinn Education Project—<https://zinnedproject.org/?s=black+history>
- Atlanta Black Star—<http://atlantablackstar.com/category/global-black-history/>
- Library of Congress—<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/commemorative-observations/african-american.php>
- Anti-Defamation League—<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/black-history-month>





# Thank You

**To the Ancestors,**

For your relentless pursuit of freedom and for your righteous struggle for justice. The African Diaspora in the Americas is in debt to you for our strength, courage and resolve

**To My Ancestors,**

Thank you for enduring the whip, acres in Attapulgus, escape to the North and for South Jersey.

Thank you for America



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