



The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty

J. William Harris

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The tragic untold story of how a nation struggling for its freedom denied it to one of its own.

In 1775, Thomas Jeremiah was one of fewer than five hundred “Free Negroes” in South Carolina and, with an estimated worth of £1,000 (about \$200,000 in today’s dollars), possibly the richest person of African descent in British North America. A slaveowner himself, Jeremiah was falsely accused by whites—who resented his success as a Charleston harbor pilot—of sowing insurrection among slaves at the behest of the British.

Chief among the accusers was Henry Laurens, Charleston’s leading patriot, a slaveowner and former slave trader, who would later become the president of the Continental Congress. On the other side was Lord William Campbell, royal governor of the colony, who passionately believed that the accusation was unjust and tried to save Jeremiah’s life but failed. Though a free man, Jeremiah was tried in a slave court and sentenced to death. In August 1775, he was hanged and his body burned.

J. William Harris tells Jeremiah’s story in full for the first time, illuminating the contradiction between a nation that would be born in a struggle for freedom and yet deny it—often violently—to others.

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