

The Ties That Bind by Bertice Berry, Broadway Books, New York: 2009. (31 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Slavery Abolished

Slavery was officially abolished in American in 1865, a full two years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. It was not until 1866, when slave codes were nullified, that blacks were considered U.S. citizens. [pg 4]

2. The Negro is Still Not Free

... In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, “One hundred years later [after a great American signed the Emancipation Proclamation] the Negro is still not free.” African Americans have had a tremendous journey from slavery to the present; but true freedom is not just physical, it is emotional and spiritual as well. It’s obvious that the tremendous task of ending slavery in this country was only the beginning of freedom for blacks in general. This requires that we become free of the negative impact that slavery has on all Americans, black and white. It requires that we look closely at how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, and demands that we have a better understanding of our past history and that of our ancestors, both black and white. [pg 5]

3. Oldest Black Church

... The oldest black church in the country was chartered in Delaware in 1813 by former slave Peter Spencer, of the Union Church of Africans. Spencer started the first independent black denomination, know today as AUMP, or African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church. [pg 53]

4. The Church of God in Christ

The Church of God in Christ is the country’s largest Pentecostal and African American Christian denomination. COGIC was started in 1907 by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason when he was expelled from the Baptist Church for his radical beliefs of salvation, sanctification, and holiness. Every Sunday we marched to the church’s theme song:

This is the Church of God in Christ,
This is the Church of God in Christ,
You can’t join in, you’ve got to be born in,
I love the Church of God in Christ. [pg 53-54]

5. Official Freedom vs. Reality

There were several ways a person of bondage came to freedom. Some were given letters of manumission, which provided legal freedom. This often happened when a slave owner died and stipulated in his will that certain enslaved blacks be set free. In many cases, these enslaved blacks were also offspring of the slave owner.

Freedom also occurred in northern states before it did in the South. But it didn't happen at one time and rarely did slavery end when it officially ended. In other words, most free states had an official end date (when it ended on paper) and an actual date of cessation (when slaves were finally set free). In Vermont, slavery officially ended in 1777 and actually ended the same year, while in Pennsylvania, the official date was 1780 but the actual date when there was no slave trafficking, ownership of persons, of use thereof did not occur until 1845. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York had officially ended slavery as early as 1799, but the actual end dates for these states were as late as 1848. New Jersey officially ended slavery in 1804 but did not release all enslaved blacks until 1865. At the time of the Civil War, Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia (which included West Virginia), the District of Columbia, and the Nebraska Territory were all slave states. By the end of slavery, Delaware was the northernmost slave state. In the northern part of the state, by 1840 most blacks were free, with only 13 percent enslaved. I can only imagine what it must have been like to know that freedom was a short distance away. [pg 62-63]

6. Ignorance

“You're just ignorant, Bert,” she said. “That's ok, we can fix ignorant, but there's nothing I can do for stupid,” she said. [pg 65]

7. Power and Suffering

There is an old proverb that says, “Those who are in power write the history, while those who suffer write the songs.” This is true. African Americans are the ancestors of American music and folktales. [pg 72]

8. Methods of Slave Owners

Slave owners did their best to indoctrinate enslaved blacks with the idea that it was the right and privilege of all whites to own and control the lives of black people. These slave owners did their jobs “well.” They used forms of torture, religious indoctrination, and the art of pitting black against black in their efforts to maintain control. Enslaved blacks were taught to believe that no one would ever help them run away and that life

outside the plantation was worse than anything they endured on the plantation. Because laws prohibited slaves from reading and they were punished or put to death for trying to do so, they had little idea that some whites were writing and teaching against the bonds of slavery. Antislavery literature was also illegal in the South, thereby preventing the ideas of abolitionists from spreading among proslavery white folks. [pg 75]

9. The Slave Code

A Slave is one who is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, his labor, he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire any things but which must belong to his master.

-Louisiana slave code article 3 [pg 78]

10. History Repeats Itself

I can see how history repeats itself and how, as I wrote in *Redemption Song* in 2000, “we had traded in one form of slavery for another when we turned our backs on God, wisdom, and on love.” Exploring my family’s history and that of John Hunn has made me understand the ties that bind. I can agree with the Apostle Paul when he said in Roman 8:28 that “all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” Getting the call is easy; it’s the listening and responding that demand the work. [pg 80]

11. Delaware

We have a saying in my home state: “Delaware was the first state to have slaves and the last to let them go.” Most people don’t think of Delaware as a slave state and they certainly don’t think of it as southern. It borders Maryland to the south and Pennsylvania to the north. For many runaway slaves, Delaware was literally the gap between slavery and freedom. [pg 81]

12. The Degradation of Slavery

No part of slavery was good for anyone involved. In his book *A View of the American Slavery Question* (1836), Elijah Porter Barrows pointed out that the slave system “degrades the entire colored population of the United States.” Barrows felt that slaves were not the only ones to suffer under the hands of slavery.

In the free states too, the free negro is doomed to feel the oppressive influence of the unrighteous system. For he belongs to the race enslaved, despised, and trampled under foot for two centuries; with whom the community have always been accustomed to associate the ideas of servitude, infirmity and degradation. [pg 87]

13. The Quakers

The Society of Friends came to be known as Quakers when George Fox and his followers were brought before a judge in the court of England for refusing to pay tithes, take oaths in court, or remove their hats in the presence of kings and others in power. When Fox informed the judge that even he should tremble at the Word of the Lord, the judge called Fox a “quaker.” The term took and, though it was meant to offend, it was worn proudly. [pg 89]

14. William Penn

Still, there were Quakers who were slaveholders. Most notable is William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania Colony, who in 1701 freed his slaves and became part of the abolitionist movement. [pg 90]

15. Spiritual Transformations

Complete spiritual transformations are as wonderful as they are rare. When a person turns his like around, he creates opportunities for others to do the same. [pg 91]

16. Quaker Beliefs

The beliefs of Quakers played a very important role in the abolition of slavery. They were the first whites to denounce slavery in Europe and the United States. [pg 93]

17. The Underground Railroad

In his book *The Underground Railroad*, written in 1872, William Still cataloged the accounts of fugitives from slavery who made their way up to the Pennsylvania Vigilance Committee. He cites John Hunn as an important and very active conductor who guided many, including Harriet Tubman, up from the lower part of the Delaware to northern Wilmington, where Thomas Garrett would assist them on to Philadelphia: “Almost within the lions den, in daily sight of the enemy, in the little slave holding state of Delaware, lived and labored the freedom-loving, earnest, avid, whole-souled Quaker abolitionist, John Hunn.” [pg 94]

18. John Hunn’s Story

The following is an excerpt of John Hunn’s personal account to William Still, from *The Underground Railroad*.

I was washing my hands at the yard pump of my residence near Middleton, New Castle County, Delaware, I looked down the lane and saw a covered wagon slowly approaching my house. The sun had risen and was shining brightly (after a stormy night) on the snow which covered the ground to the depth of six inches...

Hunn goes on to tell how he noticed several men walking alongside the wagon. When the wagon and the men reached his house, one of them, a black man, Samuel Burris, handed him a letter addressed to him or two other abolitionists. The letter was from his cousin Ezekiel Jenkins and informed him that the travelers, a man and his wife, six children, and four “fine looking colored men” were fugitives from slavery. This was the first time Hunn and Burris had met; it would not be the last.

The wanderers were gladly welcomed, and made as comfortable as possible until breakfast was ready for them... The increase of thirteen in the family was a little embarrassing, but after breakfast they all retired to the barn to sleep on the hay, except the women and four children who remained in the house.

The care that was given to the “fugitives” is rather touching. The fact that Hunn expresses embarrassment lends credence to his belief that all people are equal.

Hunn goes on to tell how late that afternoon a neighbor came to spy on his household. The neighbor reported the activities to the constable, who came to arrest the travelers. When the constable asked Hunn if the runaways were in the house, Hunn told him they were not. As they were talking, the man, his wife, and their six children ran into the woods. One of the man-hunters, as they were often called, chased them into the woods. This was late December; the weather was cold and there was snow on the ground. For a northern state, Delaware’s climate is somewhat moderate. Still, it can be cold, with temperatures dropping to the single digits and ocean winds bringing snow and freezing rain. The group had already travelled twenty-seven miles to get to Hunn and were exhausted. One of the runaways came back near the house with a butcher’s knife in his hand. He would not be taken without a fight. The constable had a gun and threatened to use it. He told Hunn to get the knife away from the “fugitive.” Hunn said he would do so only if the constable handed him his gun. Amazingly, the constable did what Hunn asked and the man turned over the knife. The “fugitive” also handed over his pass, certifying that he was free. His name was Samuel Hawkins.

One of the constable’s assistants, a man named William Hardcastle, spoke up, saying that he also knew the man to be free; the woman and children, however, were not. He said that the two oldest boys “belonged” to his neighbor.

The group was then taken before the magistrate and John Hunn went along. Fortunately for them, the magistrate, William Street, was a friend of Hunn’s. When they arrived, William Hardcastle “lovingly” put his arm around Samuel Hawkins and

led him into another room. While there, Hardcastle told Hawkins that if he would give up the two boys, then he, his wife, and his four children would be released to the sheriff. Hunn told Hawkins that he did not think Hardcastle would keep his word, but Hawkins believed he would. The deal was put in writing. When the sheriff arrived, he listened to the group's story but said he did not think the written deal was legal and therefore could not hold the runaways lawful. The constable offered to get another "commitment" that would be binding and said that the group should be held until he could return.

While they were in jail waiting for the new contract, the sheriff's daughter heard the conversation and sent word to the famed abolitionist Thomas Garrett. Garrett went to the jail with attorney John Wales, who obtained a writ of habeas corpus from Judge Booth. The party was brought before the judge, who discharged them at once. He decided that since there was not enough evidence to hold them, the presumption should be made in favor of freedom.

... The family was now free. They travelled to Wilmington and then from there to Byberry, Pennsylvania, where they later settled. By the time John Hunn wrote his account of those events to William Still in 1871, Samuel Hawkins and his wife had passed away, but their descendants, who went by the name Hackett, still lived in that area.

Samuel Burris, the free black man who had accompanied the Hawkins family, continued to assist runaways and brought hundreds to the Hunn farm for food clothing, and shelter, but later was captured and tried himself. He was found guilty and was to be sold back into slavery to serve a term of seven years. According to William Still, "John Hunn and Thomas Garrett were as faithful to him as brothers." They solicited the help of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, who promptly raised the funds to purchase Burris's freedom.

John Hunn and Thomas Garrett were well-known abolitionists. In fact, Hunn's actions were reported in Maryland's newspapers, which also included the location of his home and made a plea for his neighbors to force him from the place. Hunn welcomed the news of the article. "It enabled many a poor fugitive escaping from the house of bondage to find a hearty welcome," he wrote.

Because he and Garrett were too well-known around the area, Isaac Flint, an abolitionist from Delaware, was chosen to "buy" Burris from the auction.

On the day of the auction, Flint watched the way the other traders inspected and handled the arms, leg, heads, and bodies of those held captive. He copied their behavior and readied himself for the sale. Burris had no idea who Flint was, but stood

tall and proud as he was inspected. When the auctioneer started, he quickly got a bid of five hundred dollars. Flint outbid the other auctioneer by one hundred dollars.

Samuel Burris knew he was doomed when Flint walked over to collect his “property.” His heart must have leaped for joy when Flint whispered into Burris’s ear, “Thee has been bought with the gold of an abolitionist.”

Burris went on to Philadelphia and never again returned to the South. Later, he moved his wife and children to San Francisco, California, where he died in 1869 at the age of sixty-three. Even after moving away, he sent financial support to newly freed slaves. [pg 97-101]

19. Acts of Freedom

One cannot help but be surprised by the number of people who participated in this one act of freedom; the black railroad conductor Burris, the Hunns, the judge, the sheriff’s daughter, the constable, Thomas Garrett, the attorney, and the judge all worked together for the freedom of the Hawkins family. [pg 101]

20. The Price of Freedom

In 1848, for their involvement with the Hawkins family, Hunn and Garrett were sued in the Newcastle Court House under the Fugitive Slave Act and found liable. The law served as a means to fine and punish those who assisted runaways. The loss was tremendous. It caused Hunn to lose his home and all of his inherited property and he was forced to move in with relatives. Still, he continued the fight for freedom. He vowed that he would risk life and limb to bring an end to that horrible institution of slavery. [pg 102]

21. Good and Evil

In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* we find the lines: “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” This was almost the case with John Hunn. I truly believe that we are the living embodiment of the unfulfilled longings of the ancestors. [pg 103]

22. Illegal Education

Be it enacted, that all and every persons whatsoever who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught or write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever... every such persons shall for every such offence forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds of current money.

-South Carolina slave code, 1740 [pg 107]

23. No Excuse for Ignorance

“You may be poor,” my mother would say, “but you will never be dirty and there is no reason for ignorance.”

I still marvel at the fact that in the midst of real poverty, we had profound intellectual wealth. We were told that having nothing should never translate into being nothing and that poverty was not synonymous with ignorance. [pg 109]

24. Odd Traditions

We have odd traditions and beliefs, many of which I have not found elsewhere. When a person comes to my home for the first time, he or she must use the front door, even though the side door is more convenient. My siblings and I were never allowed to say thank you for meals or clothing, or for having our hair combed. We were taught to instead to say, “I appreciate you.” If anyone in my family gets a fever, we put chopped onions in his or her socks. I do not know how this works, I just know that it does. In less than one hour, the fever is broken, and the house smells of fried onions. [pg 129]

25. The Effects of Slavery

The tendency of the slave system is in every way injurious to the slave-holding part of the community. One of its deplorable effects is to blunt the moral sensibilities of the master... Another is to encourage licentiousness... A female slave has no protection against the white man. -Elijah Porter Barrows [135]

26. The System of Slavery

The system of slavery and those who maintained it sought to tear families apart. It did whatever was necessary to keep those who were enslaved in fear and in total submission.

In the narrative *Reflection of My Slavery Days*, William Henry Singleton wrote in 1922:

Breaking up families and the parting of the children from their parents was quite common in the slavery days... [but] slaves were as fond of their children as white folks. But nothing could be done about it for the law said we were only things and had no more rights under the law than animals. I believe it was only the more cruel Masters who separated families. [pg 144]

27. No Friend of Slavery

In the narrative of Thomas Smallwood, published by James Stephens in 1851, he tells of how he and his sister were together “willed” to the wife of the Reverend J.B. Ferguson. The will required that Smallwood and his sister be set free when he was thirty and she was twenty-five. However, Ferguson (not being a friend of slavery) paid for Smallwood and his sister’s freedom before then. Smallwood then “hired” himself out for sixty dollars a year until the debt was paid back to Ferguson.

Smallwood was also taught to read and write in the household at which he was hired: “He employed many servants about his house; he hired all; for it to be said to his credit and humanity, he would own no slaves, although living in a slave holding country.” [pg 145]

28. Storytelling

If it had not been for storytelling, the black family would not have survived.
–Jackie Torrence [pg 147]

29. A Sense of Community

During slavery, children were the responsibility of all the adults. When a child’s parents were sold away or died, other blacks on the plantation cared for them. This practice became a part of the black community until the seventies, when society became more “me”-centered. When we decided that the problems of others were not our own, we lost the sense of community that we brought from Africa, a sense of community that was maintained through the horrors of slavery. [pg 164]

30. Doing the Right Thing

Hunn “vowed” never to withhold a helping hand from the downtrodden in their hour of distress. He later moved to South Carolina and became a successful farmer again. He made the trip down to South Carolina to help newly freed slaves to find their place in America working for the Freedmen’s Bureau. In doing so, he was able to restore some of what he lost. He moved back to Delaware near the end of his life. In 1901 through 1905, his son, also named John Hunn, became the governor of the state of Delaware, whose legal system had seen the Hunn family in ruin. He was responsible for signing the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments into the Delaware Constitution. Slavery had ended many years before, but these amendments had not been signed into Delaware’s constitution until Governor Hunn did so. It must be noted that the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship and overturned the Dred Scott decision, the one written by the same judge who ruled over John Hunn’s case. Hunn was doing the right thing at a time when many in society had said it was wrong. [pg 168]

31. Looking the Other Way

The tendency in the past for blacks and whites in this country has been to look the other way where slavery is concerned. We can no longer afford to do so. Our lives, and the lives of our descendants, require us to learn from history so we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. [pg 178]