

PENNINGTON, JAMES W. C.

JANUARY 1807

OCTOBER 22, 1870

Born James Pembroke, a slave in Queen Anne's County, Maryland, minister and abolitionist James Pennington early on became an expert blacksmith and carpenter and taught himself to read, write, and do figures. In 1827 he escaped via the Underground Railroad and was hidden by a Quaker couple in Petersburg, Pennsylvania, for whom he briefly worked. Around 1830 he traveled to the Brooklyn area (Kings County, New York), taking the name James William Charles Pennington. While there Pennington worked as a coachman and gained fame in the black community for his forthright opposition to the American Colonization Society. In the year 1831–1832 he was elected a delegate to the Negro Convention in Philadelphia. In the meantime, he began teaching, and after deciding to become a minister, he taught himself Greek and Latin. Yale College Divinity School, which barred blacks, allowed Pennington to listen to lectures. In 1840 he was hired as pastor of the Talcott Colored Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1848 he was hired by the First Colored (later Shiloh) Presbyterian Church in New York City. He returned to Hartford in 1856.

Pennington did not confine himself to ministerial duties. He took on the position of teacher at Hartford's Free African School. In 1841 he wrote for school use *A Textbook of the Origin and History of Colored People*, one of the earliest African-American history books. Pennington glorified blacks' African heritage and denounced negative racial stereotypes. He was also the first black member of the previously all-white Hartford Central Association of Congregational Ministers. In 1841 he formed and became leader of the Union Missionary Society, a forerunner of the American Missionary Association.

Pennington's chief fame, however, was as an abolitionist. In 1843 he attended the World's Antislavery Convention in London and subsequently toured Paris and Brussels, giving antislavery speeches and sermons. In 1849 he wrote his autobiography, *The Fugitive Black Smith*, which achieved a major success. Having revealed his identity, Pennington feared recapture, and in 1849 he accepted an invitation to England, where he attended the World Peace Conference and gave antislavery lectures under the auspices of the British and Foreign Antislavery Society. He was lionized in England and Europe and raised a great deal of money for African missions and abolitionism. In 1849, "in trust" for other black Americans, Pennington was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Heidelberg in the German States. After the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, he visited the island of Jamaica. Despite his continuing opposition to African colonization, he recommended black settlement in Jamaica. British friends eventually bought his freedom, and he returned to America in 1853.

Pennington's later years were plagued by troubles. He was accused by opponents (mainly anticlerical Garrisonians) of misusing the funds he had raised for his freedom. In 1853 he was criticized for joining a Presbyterian association that included slaveholders. Like most black ministers, he was poorly paid and faced financial problems. His reputation was finally destroyed when his alcoholism was revealed. In 1858 Pennington

left Hartford and served six different congregations in the North and postbellum South over the next twelve years. A trip abroad in 1861 was financially unsuccessful, and while in England, he was briefly imprisoned for stealing a book. Shortly after taking a teaching post in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1870 he became sick and died.

Bibliography

Blackett, R. J. M. *Beating Against the Barriers: Biographical Essays in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

Grant, Callie Smith. *Free Indeed: African-American Christians and the Struggle for Equality*. Urichsville, Ohio: Barbour, 2003.

GREG ROBINSON (1996)

Updated bibliography

Source Citation: ROBINSON, GREG. "Pennington, James W. C." *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*. Ed. Colin Palmer. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. 1747-1748. 6 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale. Univ of Texas at San Antonio. 3 May. 2007