

Teaching American History
Final Project: Book Review: A Slave No More
Mark Lemieux

For my final project I chose to do a review of the book "A Slave No More" written by David W. Blight. In his book, Blight tells the story about two men, John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage and their escape from slavery during the Civil War. Blight provides us with copies of the narratives of both men. In my review I will break down Blights book regarding the stories of John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage. In my paper I will share a critique of the book and give my opinion of this book. This is an incredible story of the first person narratives of two men who escaped to freedom.

In the first part of his book Blight tell us the stories of John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage. From research he has gathered, he tells the story of both of these men and uses information from both of the narratives. Blight breaks the book down into chapters telling us the story of John Washington first.

In the first chapter Blight tells us about Washington's life as a slave up until his escape to freedom. "John M. Washington was born a slave on May 20, 1838, in Fredericksburg, Virginia (Blight, 17). John knew his mother Sarah, who was twenty – one when she gave birth to John, but did not know his father. Blight does a nice job explaining Washington's life as a youngster and his life as a slave. We learn about how he met his future wife Annie and he goes on to discuss John's ability to become very clever and a good con man early in life which eventually helps him escape to freedom. Blight wrap up this chapter with Washington's escape to freedom.

Blight then uses the second chapter to discuss Wallace Turnage. "Wallace Turnage was born on August 24, 1846, in the Tyson's Marsh district of Green County near Snow

Hill, North Carolina”(Blight, 55) Wallace knew both his mother Courtney, who gave birth to Wallace when she was just 15, and his father Sylvester Turnage. Like John Washington Wallace Turnage was of mixed race. Blight discusses the life of Wallace as a young man who had it very tough. As a young man Turnage was sold to a plantation owner in Pickensville, Alabama named James Chalmers. Blight does a good job describing Turnages life as a young slave who fought his bondage at a young age and continues to do so until he was able to escape to freedom. Blight does a great job interpreting Turnages narrative in this chapter. An example of this, is Blight describing Turnages third escape attempt. Blight says Turnage wants his readers to know his third escape almost succeeded. He stresses that he was never taken without a fight and that he never surrendered to his dehumanization.

In chapter three, Blight discusses Washington and Turnages lives after they became free. As little information that was available on how these two men lived after emancipation, Blight does a nice job describing their lives from the information he was able to find. John Washington, his wife and their family lived in Washington DC after he became free. In DC John and his wife Annie became involved in the Baptist Church. They became very active members of the Baptist church and looked to the church as a place where they could feel free. In 1865 John’s son Johnnie died and this great affected John who wrote a eulogy for his son. Blight provides the eulogy in his book. As far as could be determined John worked as a laborer by day and a painter by night. John was very active in the black community in Washington and got involved in community events. By 1873 John and his wife had five children and this was about the time John wrote the narrative. John was able to get his youngest son Ben into a prominent public

high school in Washington and he went on to live a successful life. In 1913, John and Annie were retired and they moved to Cohasset, Massachusetts to live with their son James and his wife. John Washington died in 1918 and is buried in Cohasset at the Woodside Cemetery.

Blight covers Wallace Turnages life next. After Wallace left his regiment he lived in Baltimore and married his first wife. John eventually moved to New York City in 1870. Turnage eventually married again and moved to New Jersey to escape the harshness of the New York neighborhood he lived in, but he continued to work in New York as a janitor. Turnage lived a hard life and struggled mightily. Like Washington, Turnage was involved in the Baptist church. John and his wife Sarah would have seven children but lost four to illness. John's wife Sarah died in 1889 and John married his third wife Sarah in 1889. Turnage definitely had a more harsh life than did Washington. Wallace Turnage eventually died in 1916 and was buried in New York in Cypress Cemetery. Turnages youngest daughter Lydia lived until 1984 and had kept her fathers narrative in a clamshell box. When Lydia died her things were gathered by a neighbor Gladys Watts who eventually shared the story.

Blight uses chapter four to talk about the struggle for emancipation and the struggles before and after emancipation. Blight very nicely leads up to the narratives of John Washington and Wallace Turnage. Blight gives us the narratives in their original form, but he did a good job making them easier to read by adding paragraph breaks and helping with spelling when needed. This was very helpful because both of the narratives were hard to read at times.

At this point in the book Blight gives us the narratives of John M. Washington and Wallace Turnage. John Washington's narrative was first. This was an amazing story about a man who overcame so much to become free. John begins his story by talking about his days as a young boy. He remembers being taught by his mother. Washington says in his narrative, "at about 4 years of age Mother taught me the alphabet from the "New York Primer," I was kept at my lessons an hour or Two each night by my mother"(Blight, 169). In the next paragraph he states "My first great sorrow was caused by seeing one morning, a number of the "Plantation Hands," formed into line, with little Bundles strapped to their backs, men, women, and children, and all marched off to be Sold South away from all that was near and dear to them, Parents, Wives, husbands and children; all Separated one from another; perhaps never to meet again on Earth"(Blight, 169). I thought this was quite an amazing thing for a young boy to see and interpret, and it is obvious that this incident left a lasting impression on him. At about the age of eleven or twelve John's mother and his siblings were sent away to live in Staunton, Virginia. John did not like being separated from his family but did have a fairly easy childhood. John was kept under close watch by his owner Mrs. Taliaferro as he began to grow into a young man and he often dreamed of escaping to the North. An important moment in John's life was being baptized in the Rappahannock River in Fredericksburg, Virginia. John was hired out many times by his owner and landed in Richmond and lived with a Mr. Wendlinger and when the war heated up and Union troops closed in on Richmond, John was sent to Fredericksburg with the expectation he return January first. John would never return instead he acquired work at the Shakespeare in as a steward and barkeeper. In July of 1862, the Union army was closing in on Fredericksburg and this

was John's chance to escape. He cleverly made the owners of the Inn believe he was afraid of the Yankee soldiers. When he was able to convince them they left him to take care of settling up with the help and locking up the Inn. John did so and then escaped across the Rappahannock River into the Union lines. Washington became a mess servant to General Rufus King. John was able to help the Union army as they went into Fredericksburg by pointing out the individuals who supported the rebels. John served in this capacity unofficially. As the rebel army was moving in on Fredericksburg John would return to check on his family, but was fearful because of a three hundred dollar bounty put on his head. If he were to be captured he would be put to death. John stayed in Fredericksburg for about a week before he was forced to leave. He could not take his wife because she was pregnant and could not travel. John made it back across the river and back to the Union lines. He eventually found his way on a train that took him to Washington DC where he would eventually settle and be joined by his wife.

Turnages narrative was shared next by Blight. Wallace Turnage had it much tougher than Washington. I thought it was interesting that Wallace Turnage begins his narrative with an apology for his book. "My book is a sketch of my life or adventures and persecutions which I went through from 1860 to 1865. I do not mean to speak disparagingly of those who sold me, nor of those who bought me. Though I seen a hard time, it had an at tendency to make a man of me"(Blight 273). Turnage begins his narrative in 1860. Wallace was taken to Richmond Virginia and sold to a Mr. Chalermers, who took him to his plantation in Pickensville Alabama. From the very time he arrived on this plantation Wallace was exposed to the fields and the harshness of slavery. He was whipped often because he fought against his bondage and refuses to

succumb to the overseer's violence. In the fall of 1860 Wallace was to be whipped along with two other women slaves for not picking enough cotton. When Wallace saw the whipping that the first women got, he ran away. He stayed in the woods until hunger overcame him. He returned to the plantation because he did not know his way around and he was hungry. When he returned he was to be whipped by the overseer, but he was determined not to be whipped. Turnage fought back and ended up wrestling with the overseer. He was eventually held down by a plantation hand and he was whipped 95 times. Wallace would continue to fight against his bondage continually planning ways he could escape. The spring of 1861, Wallace ran away again to avoid a whipping. Wallace made it as far as Columbus, Mississippi and decided to return to Pickensville due to being tired and hungry. He was caught in Pickensville on the way back and returned to his master. He had made it much farther this time and learned more about the area. This time he was not returned to the fields but was kept to work in the house as a servant. He would not stay long. His master's wife had him whipped several times and to avoid another whipping he ran away. In the month of November, he left the plantation and headed off. This was his third escape attempt and he made it to just outside Okolona Mississippi where he was caught in the month of January. He was whipped by white men and he was eventually returned to Pickensville. This time he made it further than the last time. It was amazing how he was able to work his way past rebel guards and his resourcefulness was incredible. After his return to Pickensville, Wallace became tired of being whipped and ran away again. This was his fourth attempt he and he was able to get within a couple of miles of Corinth, Mississippi. He was eventually caught and this time his master retrieved him. Wallace was taken back to Pickensville. This was

October of 1862. Wallace was taken to Mobile Alabama and was sold to a Mr. Minge. Soon Wallace would make his fifth and final escape attempt. This journey was incredible and amazing. Turnage was able to make it pass a regiment of rebel soldiers, being caught and whipped, walking through snake infested swamps. He would make it across the Foul River and to the safety of the Union Army, which he would go on to serve in.

In conclusion I want to say that I found this book utterly enjoyable. It was very well written and presented. These were amazing stories by two men who wanted freedom so badly. Wallace Turnages many escape attempts and his tremendous will and perseverance was amazing. I would definitely recommend this book to others.

Bibliography

Blight, David. A Slave No More. Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt