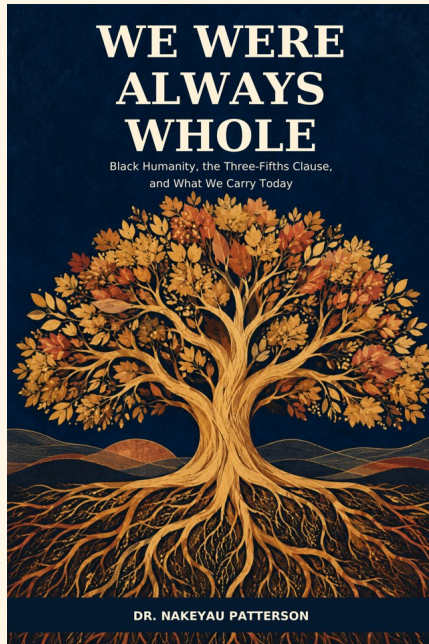


RootED Equity

FREE READING PREVIEW

We Were Always Whole

Black Humanity, the Three-Fifths Clause, and What We Carry Today



Dr. Nakeyau Patterson

Contents, introduction, Chapter 1, and the source notes for this excerpt.

Selected pages from the published book.
Original book pagination is retained.

We Were Always Whole

*Black Humanity, the Three-Fifths Clause, and What We
Carry Today*

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INTRODUCTION

Never a Fraction

The words three-fifths can follow you out of a history lesson. You may understand the math and still have a harder question: how could people discuss human beings that way?

That hurt is where this book began for me. I wanted to understand how people could demand freedom for themselves while keeping others in slavery. Learning how the political deal worked helped answer part of my question. I also needed to ask what the people making that deal were willing to let happen to others.

The people whose lives were part of that deal already had families, friendships, and hopes. They were whole before anyone debated how to count them. We will listen to what they asked for and examine how people in power responded.

By whole, I mean fully human. You can be hurt, need help, or still be trying to understand what happened and deserve care. Being whole does not mean being untouched by harm. It means that harm cannot take away your worth. Taking someone's humanity seriously means caring about what happened and what needs to change.

We will first hear Black people argue for freedom. Then we will look at what the Three-Fifths Clause counted and who gained power from it. We will follow families searching for one another and students demanding better schools. We will also examine decisions about homes and policing. We need evidence for each connection. One clause cannot explain every later injustice.

We will also ask what happens when an unfair message begins to sound like something a person believes about themselves. We will distinguish that from knowing your worth while expecting someone else to judge you unfairly. Neither experience belongs to every Black person. The people responsible for fair treatment have work to do in either case.

If you are a young Black reader, you deserve to learn this history without being asked to prove your worth. You may feel anger, sadness, curiosity, or something you cannot name yet. You may feel differently from the person beside you. You do not owe anyone a certain reaction or a personal story.

Your life includes things you enjoy, mistakes you make, and times when you need help. You deserve respect through all of them. If you are not Black, this book is for you too. You can learn the history, question unfair treatment, and think about your own choices. No classmate has to speak for an entire race or share a painful memory to help you learn.

I wrote this book for middle and high school readers. You do not need to know the history already. New terms are explained as we go, and a word guide appears at the end. The timeline puts events in order. Small numbers beside the text lead to the sources. Made-up examples are clearly labeled.

Read at your own pace. You can use the questions on your own or with someone you trust. Keep one question beside you: what would it mean to take this person's life seriously? We begin with people who told public officials what they wanted.

CHAPTER 1

People who spoke for their own freedom

On January 13, 1777, Prince Hall and seven other free Black men petitioned lawmakers in Massachusetts for freedom for people held in slavery. A petition is a written request to someone who can act. Less than a year had passed since the Declaration of Independence. Black people were challenging a country that called for freedom while allowing slavery. ^[1]

The petition asserted a “natural & inalienable right to that freedom.” Inalienable means a right that cannot rightly be taken away. It described enslaved people being separated from loved ones and asked lawmakers to restore their freedom. Its question was direct: how could the country seek freedom while denying it to others? ^[2]

The petition did not win the freedom it requested in 1777. ^[2] That failure tells us about the lawmakers' response, not the petitioners' ability to recognize injustice. These people explained what was wrong to those who could act. Their words belong in the history of American freedom alongside the words of the officials they addressed.

Whose ideas get heard

A history lesson can spend so much time on powerful people that everyone else seems to be waiting for them to decide. This petition shows something else. Black people were choosing their words, making demands, and asking for answers.

That matters when someone says slavery was simply accepted at the time. Accepted by whom? This petition shows that people living then challenged it. People in power could protect an unfair practice while ignoring those who wanted it to end.

Learning about a time and place helps us understand the choices people made. We also need to hear from people who objected. If we

listen only to those who benefited, we may mistake their power for everyone's agreement. When you read a defense of slavery, place a demand for freedom beside it. Ask whose words became a law and whose words officials could refuse to answer. That difference is evidence about power, not about whose ideas mattered more.

Asking for a share of the wealth her work created

In February 1783, Belinda Sutton sent another petition to Massachusetts lawmakers. She asked for money from the estate of Isaac Royall, the man who had enslaved her. An estate is a person's money and property. Her petition described fifty years of forced work. She argued that she had helped create wealth she could not enjoy. She asked for support for herself and her daughter, whose health was poor. ^[3]

Sutton's request asks us to look at who gained the wealth and who was forced to help build it. Her work had helped make Royall rich. Now she needed money to live and to care for her daughter.

Lawmakers approved a pension, a regular payment, of fifteen pounds and twelve shillings each year. But the money did not always arrive. The Royall House and Slave Quarters museum records missed payments and Sutton's repeated requests for the money she had been promised. ^[4]

An approval could look like an ending in a short history lesson. For the person waiting for the money, it was only useful if the payment arrived. Sutton's persistence gives us a question we will return to throughout this book: what happened after a promise was made?

Asking Jefferson to live by his own words

On August 19, 1791, Benjamin Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson, then secretary of state. Banneker was a free Black man who studied the stars and mathematics. He sent Jefferson a draft of an almanac, a book of information about the coming year. Banneker had worked out its calculations. He also challenged unfair ideas about Black people and called for freedom for those held in slavery. ^[5]

Banneker reminded Jefferson of the fight against British rule and quoted the Declaration of Independence. He accused Jefferson of denying others the liberty he demanded for himself. Banneker also explained that his astronomical work grew from a long desire to understand nature. The letter challenged slavery while sharing a subject he loved to study. ^[6]

Jefferson replied on August 30. He thanked Banneker and said he had sent the almanac to a scientific leader in Paris as evidence against doubts about Black people's abilities. ^[5] Notice what the reply addressed: Banneker's work could serve as proof of talent. The reply did not offer a plan to end slavery. What did Banneker ask Jefferson to confront, and what did Jefferson choose to answer?

Banneker's accomplishments deserve attention. So does a question we should bring to any story of achievement: would someone with none of those accomplishments deserve less freedom?

A person who never wrote an almanac deserved the same freedom. So did someone who could not read or needed care. An achievement can challenge a stereotype, an assumption about a whole group of people. But no one should have to do something amazing to earn basic rights.

You can care deeply about your education and pursue demanding goals. A disappointing grade still cannot reduce your right to fair treatment. Asking for help cannot make you less deserving of respect. We will return to the pressure to prove yourself in Chapter 7.

Seeing more of a person's life

Sutton's petition tells us about work and caring for a daughter. Banneker's letter tells us about science and freedom. Together, they help us see people with different interests and needs. Officials had a responsibility to hear both of them.

For many other people, only a few records remain: a name in a population count, a notice of sale, or a court document. Each person had a life beyond that record. We may never know every detail. We can still ask what else there is to learn.

Try reading the evidence yourself

A primary source comes from the time or experience we are studying. A letter, a photograph, or a person's account can be a primary source. The petitions and Banneker's letter are examples. A source can help us understand the past, but it may leave out details or tell only one side.

For example, Sutton asked Massachusetts lawmakers for money from the estate her labor had helped build. Her petition supports that statement. It cannot, on its own, show whether she later received the money. That question requires the later records discussed in this chapter. [3, 4]

Also ask how a document was made. Sutton's surviving petition ends with her mark. [3] A petition can be prepared with help, so its wording alone cannot prove that the person signing it composed every sentence. We can study the request she brought to lawmakers while remaining careful about what the record does and does not establish.

Now choose the petition associated with Prince Hall, Sutton's petition, or Banneker's letter using the source notes. Write down the change requested and who could make it. Find a sentence in the document that supports your answer. Finish with one question the document leaves unanswered. You can discuss your notes with someone else or keep them for yourself.

How would a history lesson feel different if it began with one of these petitions or Banneker's letter? Whose ideas would you hear first?

The people in these documents asked officials to act. Next, we will meet men deciding how states would share power. Keep the requests for freedom in mind as we ask who benefited from counting people.

Source notes

The small numbers in the chapters lead to these sources. They support the facts in the book; made-up examples are labeled. The notes explain dates, research, and each source's limits. If a link moves, search for the source title and, for museum items, the object number listed.

1. Massachusetts Historical Society. "Analyzing the Meaning and Legacy of the Declaration of Independence." Source entry for the petition for freedom dated January 13, 1777. Establishes the date, the petition's context, and Prince Hall and other free Black men as signers. [Read source](#)
2. Prince Hall and other petitioners. Petition to the Massachusetts Legislature, 1777. Historical document and contextual introduction, National Constitution Center. The brief quotation in Chapter 1 follows this transcription. [Read source](#)
3. Belinda Sutton. Petition to the Massachusetts General Court, February 14, 1783. Transcription of the Massachusetts Archives manuscript, Royall House and Slave Quarters. The petition describes forced labor, wealth, and the request for support for Sutton and her daughter. [Read source](#)
4. Royall House and Slave Quarters. "Belinda Sutton and Her Petitions." Documents the pension authorization, missed payments, and subsequent petitions. The name Sutton follows the museum's account of her later signed petitions. [Read source](#)
5. National Park Service. "The Letters of Benjamin Banneker & Thomas Jefferson — August 1791." Includes a transcription of their published correspondence and identifies Banneker's scientific work and the almanac he sent. [Read source](#)

6. Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson, August 19, 1791. Founders Online, National Archives. This is the primary source for Banneker's challenge to Jefferson and his account of his astronomical study. [Read source](#)
7. Constitution of the United States, 1787. National Archives transcription. See Article I, Section 2 for apportionment and Article II, Section 1 for electors. [Read source](#)
8. Paul Finkelman. "Garrison's Constitution." Prologue, Winter 2000, National Archives. Historical analysis of constitutional protections for slavery, including the three-fifths formula and its effects on representation and presidential elections. [Read source](#)
9. James Madison. Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention, July 11, 1787. Avalon Project, Yale Law School. See the proposal by Butler and General Pinckney and Butler's argument about labor and representation. These are Madison's recorded notes, not a verbatim recording. [Read source](#)
10. James Madison. Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention, July 12, 1787. Avalon Project, Yale Law School. See Davie's statement and the discussion linking representation, direct taxation, and Congress's April 18, 1783 proposal. The final constitutional text is cited separately. [Read source](#)
11. Publius. Federalist No. 54, "The Apportionment of Members Among the States," February 12, 1788. Avalon Project, Yale Law School. The chapter describes the defense put in the voice of an imagined Southern speaker. It reports that historical argument without adopting its treatment of people as property. [Read source](#)
12. James Madison. Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention, August 21, 1787. Avalon Project, Yale Law School. See Ellsworth's argument about importation, state authority, and shared economic interest. This debate concerned the slave trade, distinct from the representation formula. [Read source](#)

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