Henry McNeal Turner

Nationalist, Repatriationist, PanAfricanist, Minister, Author

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SECTION ONE

SOURCE: https://blackpast.org/aah/turner-henry-mcneal-1834-1915

Black Nationalist, repatriationist, and minister, Henry M. Turner was 31 years old at the time of the Emancipation. Turner was born in 1834 in Newberry Courthouse, South Carolina to free black parents Sarah Greer and Hardy Turner. The self-taught Turner by the age of fifteen worked as a janitor at a law firm in Abbeville, South Carolina. The firm's lawyers noted his abilities and helped with his education. However, Turner was attracted to the church and after being converted during a Methodist religious revival, decided to become a minister. He joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and became a licensed minister in 1853 at the age of 19. Turner soon became an itinerant evangelist traveling as far as New Orleans, Louisiana. By 1856 he married Eliza Peacher, the daughter of a wealthy African American house builder in Columbia, South Carolina. The couple had fourteen children but only four of them survived into adulthood.

In 1858 Turner entered Trinity College in Baltimore, Maryland where he studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew and theology. Two years later he became the pastor of the Union Bethel Church in Washington, D.C. Turner cultivated friendships with important Republican Congressional figures including Ohio Congressman Benjamin Wade, Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, and Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner. Turner had already become a national figure when in 1863 at the age of 29 he was appointed by President Lincoln to the position of Chaplain in the Union Army. Turner was attached to 1st Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, making him the first African American chaplain in the history of the United States Army.

After the Civil War, Turner returned to Georgia and quickly became active in Reconstruction-era politics. In 1867 he organized for the Republican Party in Georgia and the following year was elected a delegate to the Georgia State Constitutional Convention. In the same year he was also elected to the Georgia State Legislature. Although 27 African Americans were elected to that body, a coalition of white Democrats and Republicans declared the African American members disqualified and refused to seat them.

President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Turner postmaster of Macon, Georgia. He was forced to resign in a few weeks under pressure from local Democrats. The U.S. Congress intervened and allowed Turner to reclaim his legislative seat in 1870 but he was not reelected in an election marred by fraud. Turner abandoned politics and moved to Savannah, Georgia where he served as pastor of St. Phillips AME Church. In 1876 he was appointed President of Morris Brown College in Atlanta. Four years later he was appointed a Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Turner became the first AME Bishop to ordain a woman, Sarah Ann Hughes, to the office of deacon. He also wrote *The Genius and Theory of Methodist Polity* in 1885 as a guide to the policies and practices of the AME Church.

By the late 1870s Turner became increasingly disillusioned with the inability of African Americans to achieve social justice in the United States. He proposed emigration back to Africa, an idea much discussed in the antebellum period but which all but disappeared during the Civil War and Reconstruction. By 1880 Turner had become one of the leading advocates of emigration, particularly to Liberia. He founded two newspapers, *The Voice of Missions* (1893-1900) and the *Voice of the People* (1901-1904) to promote emigration. Between 1895 and 1896, Turner organized two ship voyages to Liberia which carried over 500 emigrants to Liberia. Many of them returned disillusioned and thus undermined Turner's emigrationist work.

Independently of his emigrationist efforts, Turner also promoted the AME Church abroad. Between 1891 and 1898 he traveled to Africa four times to promote the church in West and South Africa. He also sent AME missionaries to Cuba and Mexico.

Although he never completely relinquished his emigrationist ideas and remained in touch with numerous African leaders, Turner increasingly devoted the remainder of his life to church work. He died on May 8, 1915 in Windsor, Ontario, Canada while traveling on AME Church business.

Sources:

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Contributor: Spigner, Clarence

SECTION TWO

Henry McNeal Turner 1834–1915

SOURCE: https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/henry_mcneal_turner.html

Henry McNeal Turner's life was guided by a faith in the capabilities of himself and his people. He grew up in Abbeville, South Carolina. He was born free, and raised by his mother and maternal grandmother. Legend had it that his paternal grandfather was an African prince.

As a young boy, he dreamed that millions of people would look to him as a teacher, and he determined to act on that vision. But first, he had to learn to read and write; in South Carolina, teaching blacks to do either was forbidden. He writes that a "dream angel" taught him basic spelling; but his prayers were really answered when he became a janitor for an Abbeville law firm, around 1849. Four years later, at 19, he became a licensed preacher. He married Eliza Ann Preacher of Columbia, South Carolina, in 1956. The couple moved to Baltimore and eventually had 14 children, but only two sons survived.

Turner joined the African Methodist Episcopalian church in 1858, at 24, because he heard that within that church black men could become bishops. He was taken under wing by Bishop Daniel Payne and pastored at two of his churches.

Turner joined the lobbying effort to convince President Lincoln to enlist freedmen in the Union Army. In 1863, Lincoln acceded, and Turner became the first black chaplain.

After the war, Turner walked back to Georgia, and began organizing AME churches there. By some counts, he founded over one hundred churches. At the same time, he helped organize the Georgia Republican Party. In 1868, he was elected state representative, but he and 14 other black representatives were expelled from the Georgia legislature after whites combined in an 82-83 vote.

That rejection made Turner turn his back on the American political process. He turned his attention instead to developing the political potential of the black church.

In 1880, Turner rode a wave of populist popularity to become the first southern bishop elected in the AME Church. He would also prove to be the most controversial. He provoked white racists in print, and advocated a wholesale move of blacks back to Africa "to achieve our dignity and manhood." He ordained a woman, Sarah Ann Hughes, as a deacon in the church. He built alliances with Baptists. At the first Black Baptist convention, he gave the speech for which he would be forever known: "We have every right to believe that God is a Negro," he stated, proclaiming that a people needed to see their reflection in their deity.

Turner came close to becoming a national leader in the mold of Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington. But in the end, his outspokenness on the Africa issue undermined him. He died, isolated and bitter, in 1915.
"Turner was the last of his clan: mighty men, physically and mentally, men who started at the bottom and hammered their way to the top by sheer brute strength, they were the spiritual progeny of African chieftains, and they built the Afircan church in America." --Crisis Magazine, July 1915

KEY MOMENTS OF FAITH

FIRST, HE HAD TO LEARN TO READ

Turner was raised in the heart of the Confederacy, where it was illegal for blacks to learn to read and write. His mother arranged for lessons, but each time she was found out, and the lessons ended. Finally, an elderly slave taught him to sound out words, and Turner wrote that an angel would come to him in his dreams and teach him the connection between sounds and the alphabet. His education progressed when the lawyers at a firm where he worked as janitor tested his memory by teaching him science. Within four years, he had learned enough to become a licensed preacher.

A BLACK CHAPLAIN IN THE CIVIL WAR

Turner was the first of fourteen black chaplains who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Historians consider him an important primary source for researching the experience of black Union soldiers because of his prolific dispatches to the Christian Recorder, the weekly newspaper of the AME church. Chaplains organized prayer meetings, tended to and prayed for the wounded, ensured that the soldiers' pay was sent to their families, wrote letters for the illiterate, and acted as intermediaries between the black troops and white commanding officers. Most importantly, they taught the men in their unit how to read. Many black troops learned to read during the war. Their textbook was the Bible. Turner's unit, the 1st Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, served in Virgina and North Carolina.

A MISSIONARY AND A POLITICIAN

After the war, Turner became one of the AME church's hardest working missionaries. He sought to save the souls of the freedmen and to expand their minds. Missionaries from various denominations competed with one another for church membership, and joining a church became one of the ways in which a freedman claimed an identity. Turner loosened the strict rules requiring educated ministers, allowed congregants to sing their slave spirituals during worship, and dared the Klu Klux Klan to try and stop him. At the same time, he worked with white Republicans, trying to develop a multiracial coalition which would govern the South.

FROM A STATE REPRESENTATIVE TO AN EXPELLED LEGISLATOR

In 1868, Turner was elected a state representative; but his white colleagues couldn't countenance those they once considered chattel. After Turner had joined them in a vote grandfathering the right to vote to those who owned property, they used the clause to prohibit black officeholders because, under that same clause, blacks could not have held property. Turner filibustered for three days, but, finally, the black legislators were expelled.

POLITICALLY CHARGED SCANDALS

Georgian Democrats went to great lengths to discredit Turner's leadership and character. He was charged with carrying counterfeit money - the charges were thrown out in federal court - but, more damaging were accusations of extramarital affairs. The scandal destroyed his friendship

with Bishop Daniel Payne and damaged his reputation, particularly among women in the AME Church, who formed the bedrock of the organization.

BISHOP TURNER BUILDS A DENOMINATION

As Bishop, Turner dedicated himself to building a denomination. The AME Church had begun to lose ground to the fast-growing Baptist denomination, which allowed greater freedom of expression during service. Turner wrote a hymnal which included adaptations of many "slave ditties," as Bishop Payne called them. He worked to give southern congregations a greater voice among the AME hierarchy, which, dominated as it was by Northerners, tended to look down on their southern brethren. And he gave women a greater role in the denomination. He even ordained a woman as deacon, but that move was condemned so loudly that he rescinded it and never spoke about it again - the one subject on which he was silenced.

BACK TO AFRICA: EMIGRATION TO THE HOME LAND

Turner believed that Emancipation was the first Exodus for African-Americans and leaving the South would be the second. While many in the black community shared Turner's views on the limits of freedom in the South, most chose to remain in the United States instead of migrating to Africa. Turner's insistence on linking missionary work in Africa with mass emigration to the continent made him a divisive figure in the AME Church. At the same time, his four trips to Africa showed him the dignity of a people uncowed by slavery. In 1895, speaking before the first meeting of the National Baptist Convention, Turner declared that African-Americans should see God as a Negro.

SECTION THREE

SOURCE: https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/us-history-biographies/henry-mcneal-turner

Henry McNeal Turner (1834–1915)

Henry McNeal Turner was for many years the leading advocate of black migration to Africa as the only permanent solution to the problem of race discrimination in the United States. As bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Turner was a highly vocal and vehement critic of white America's continued oppression of its black citizens, and he became natural heir to nineteenth-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass as chief spokesman for black pride and self-determination. Turner's firsthand experience of white resistance to equality among the races led him to embrace the cause of African migration even before the rise of black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey in the 1920s. His "back to Africa" campaign never won effective support from a majority of African Americans, but Turner remained one of the most powerful black leaders

during the difficult years of widespread economic distress and segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws.

Turner was born to a family of free blacks in South Carolina in 1834. Although not slaves, the impoverished Turners found it necessary to put their children to work picking cotton side by side with slaves, and Henry's earliest memories were of hard labor under the hot Carolina sun. Already of a proud and defiant temperament, Turner ran away from home as a young teenager and found work as an office boy with a law firm. He swept floors and washed windows for a few pennies per day, but some of the law clerks noticed Turner's unusually bright and curious mind and offered to teach the young man how to read and write. (In most parts of the South, this was a criminal act.) Turner responded quickly to their help and soon became not only literate, but a powerful speaker as well. While still in his teens, the broad-shouldered, powerfully built Turner was offered a position as an itinerant minister by the Methodist Episcopal Church—South, beginning a career in the church that would continue for the remaining sixty-five years of his life.

Preacher and Politician

Throughout the 1850s Turner traveled widely in the deep South, preaching to slaves and free blacks under the auspices of the white-controlled Methodist Episcopal Church. Though himself a free man, Turner everywhere encountered the humiliations and restraints placed upon people of color in the prewar South, and he was not of a nature to suffer such indignities in silence. In 1858, Turner

At a Glance…

Born in 1834, near Abbeville, SC; died in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, May 8,1915; buried in Atlanta, GA; son of Hardy and Sarah (Green) Turner; married four times, in 1856,1893,1900, and to fourth wife, Laura Pearl Lemon, in 1907. *Education:* African Methodist Episcopal (AME) training in theology, 1858-60, *Religion:* AME. *Politics:* Republican during Civil War; later, black nationalist.

Traveling preacher for Methodist Episcopal Church—South, 1851-57; joined African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1858, became deacon, 1860, and elder, 1862; pastor of Union Bethel Church, Washington, DC, 1862-65; appointed first black U.S. Army chaplain by Abraham Lincoln, 1863; worked briefly as an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau following the Union victory to the Civil War; organized AME churches and missions in Georgia, 1865-67; delegate to Georgia constitutional convention, 1867; member of the Georgia state legislature, 1868; church pastor in Savannah, GA, 1870-76; business manager, AME Book Concern, Philadelphia, 1876-80; elected AME bishop, 1880; established Morris Brown College, Atlanta, c. 1890, and served as president for twelve years; traveled to Africa four times, 1891-98; organized national convention of African Americans, Cincinnati, OH, 1893; headed Georgia Equal Rights Association, 1906.

Author of *The Genius and Theory of Methodist Policy,* 1885; founder of *Southern Christian Recorder, Voice of Missions,* and *Voice of the People;* author of editorials.

Member: American Colonization Society (elected president, 1876).

first heard of a Christian denomination run by and for blacks, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and he immediately joined its mission in Baltimore.

The AME had been founded in Philadelphia in 1794 and was extensively represented in the northern half of the United States, but the threat posed to southern slaveowners by any all-black organization had prohibited its growth in the South. At the church's training mission in Baltimore, Turner studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and theology with professors from nearby Trinity College. He was appointed deacon in 1860 and two years later elevated to the rank of elder.

Upon completion of his training, Turner was named pastor of the Union Bethel Church in Washington, D.C., the capital's largest black church. Turner was outspoken in his support for President Abraham Lincoln's general emancipation of the slaves in 1863, and equally so in his call for the use of black troops in the Union Army during the Civil War. Once this became federal policy, the first black troops from the Washington area were mustered in the Union Bethel churchyard, and President Lincoln named Turner the first black chaplain in the history of the United States. Turner served his soldiers with great distinction, accompanying them into the field of battle while carrying out his duties as chaplain. The successful completion of the Union victory filled Turner with high hopes for the future of black Americans, and he joined the government's Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia to help blacks make the transition from slavery to freedom.

Turner soon found that racial discrimination was as strong as ever in Georgia, and he resigned from the Freedmen's Bureau after a short tenure to return to the AME. As would be true throughout his life, Turner preferred to work within all-black organizations rather than endure the insults faced by blacks in an integrated setting. As head of the AME's new mission in Georgia, he proved himself a tireless organizer, dispatching AME ministers to the remotest corners of the state, taking on the burdens of administration, and defending the AME and himself from the hostility of whites resentful of this new source of black independence. In the tense atmosphere of the postwar South, Turner's aggressive manner earned him the hatred of many whites, but under his direction the AME flourished as never before.

At the same time Turner was asked to help organize Georgia's blacks under the banner of the Republican Party (the party of Lincoln, and for many years of all African American leaders). He was elected as a Republican to the state constitutional convention in 1867, where he adopted a surprisingly conciliatory position on most questions of race and equal rights. At this point in his career, Turner was still optimistic about the future of race relations in America, and he believed that changes in race relations would evolve inevitably as whites and blacks learned to live together as fellow citizens.

When elected to the state legislature in 1868, however, Turner quickly learned otherwise: Georgia's white legislators passed a bill forbidding blacks from holding elected office, so enraging Turner that he led a delegation of African American representatives in a walkout from the capitol building. Before leaving the legislative chamber, Turner unleashed the full fury of his wrath in a speech that amazed whites and encouraged blacks everywhere. As quoted in a record of the Georgia state legislature, he proclaimed: "I am here to demand my rights and to hurl thunderbolts at the man who would dare to cross the threshold of my manhood. . . . Never in the

history of the world has a man been . . . charged with the offense of being of a darker hue than his fellow men."

Proponent of Black Pride and Colonization

Turner's disillusionment with the political process was redoubled the following year when he was forced to resign a federal appointment as postmaster of Macon, Georgia, after protests by local whites. His Washington connections did manage to secure Turner a minor job in the customs office of Savannah, Georgia, where he resumed full-time church duties as well; but his frustrations in the political arena had permanently altered his thinking about race relations in the United States. As early as 1862 the young clergyman had been impressed with the idea of African emigration for black Americans, and after his firsthand experience of the depth of white racism in the Reconstruction era, Turner returned to the dream of an African nation for blacks. The idea of African emigration was not new—as early as 1817 the American Colonization Society had begun the settlement of black Americans in Liberia, on the west coast of Africa—but Turner would become its most articulate and passionate nineteenth-century proponent.

Elected bishop in the AME in 1880, Turner used both pulpit and press to argue for the necessity of an African homeland for black Americans. He viewed as hopeless the efforts of blacks to achieve a decent life in the United States; racism was so ingrained in the American character, Turner believed, that people of color would never gain respect while living on American soil. Even if whites were to treat blacks with the best of intentions—which in the post-Reconstruction era they most emphatically did not— blacks would still suffer the psychic damage of living in a society founded, ruled, and defined by white culture. As cited by John Dittmer in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century,* Turner wrote in 1898: "As long as we remain among the whites, the Negro will believe that the devil is black. . . that he [as a black person] is the devil. . . and the effect of such sentiment is contemptuous and degrading." It was his insistence on black pride and black nationalism that set apart Turner from earlier proponents of emigration, many of whom were southern whites hoping to purge the country of its black population.

Turner's black nationalism was equally emphatic in the religious arena. "God is a Negro," he often repeated, pointing out that every culture had always imagined God as one of its own. Such statements were infuriating to segments of white society, but Turner's brilliant oratory and message of black pride won him a huge following among the majority of southern blacks, for whom life as "free men" had become nearly unendurable in the face of continued white oppression. As bishop in the AME, Turner traveled constantly throughout the southern states and Indian territories, preaching his doctrine of African migration and openly scorning those many black leaders who thought him too radical for the times. Indeed, Turner was always at the center of controversy, whether for his firebrand proclamations ("Negro, Get Guns" was the title of one of his editorials) or for such irregularities as ordaining a woman deacon in 1888 or marrying for the fourth time at the age of 73.

Africa: Dream and Reality

African emigration remained the polestar of Bishop Turner's life and thought. African Americans needed "an outlet, a theater of manhood and activity established somewhere for our young men

and women," he noted in an 1883 edition of *Christian Reporter.* "Until we have black men in the seat of power, respected, feared, hated, and reverenced, our young men will never rise." To further his dream of an African homeland, Turner urged the United States government to provide funds for the transportation of "5 or 10,000" blacks to Liberia every year, and he himself made the first of four trips to Africa in 1891.

Believing that the conversion of Africa to Christianity was part of God's plan for black Americans, Turner busily established churches and schools in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and later in South Africa. Everything he saw in Africa reaffirmed his belief in emigration for blacks, and back in the United States Turner organized a national convention for African Americans to meet in Cincinnati in 1893. The convention was attended by more than 800 delegates from around the country, Turner delivering a keynote speech which touched on the subject of emigration; but his plea for Africa as "the only hope of the Negro race" was rejected by the gathering, and Turner was forced to admit that his program was not acceptable to the majority of educated black Americans.

An even more serious blow to Turner's campaign was the bad publicity generated by the sending of two ships of black Americans to Liberia in the mid-1890s. Although reports varied, it appears that most of the colonists did not like or could not survive Liberia's tropical climate and backward economy. Many of the emigrants died of fever or made their way back to the United States, where their stories of hardship were widely publicized by the black press as proof of the folly of Bishop Turner's ideas. Turner reacted to the criticism with his usual scorn, referring, as quoted by Dittmer, to the failed emigrants as "shiftless no-account Negroes. . . accustomed to being fed and driven around by white men." The mismanaged expeditions effectively ended any real hope for a large-scale emigration to Africa by black Americans.

In 1895 Booker T. Washington seized black leadership with his speech at the Atlanta Exposition, in which he promised African Americans that if they remained patient and hard-working, they would eventually be accepted as equals by white society. Washington respected Bishop Turner as a powerful leader, especially among lower-class blacks, and the two men did not openly clash; but Washington's philosophy of accommodation had clearly prevailed.

Turner spent the balance of his life as an unapologetic and still virulent critic of America's social injustices. Though yielding to Booker T. Washington the title of national spokesperson for blacks in the United States, Turner remained a man of considerable power in both religious and political affairs. He was not above making alliances with southern white politicians of every variety, since he held all white leaders in similar contempt; and, as elder bishop of the AME for the last twenty years of his life, Turner's was the dominant voice in a church of some quarter million members. His last significant public role was as head of the Georgia Equal Rights Association, formed in 1906 by Turner, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other leading black figures. Turner's dream of African emigration already seemed outdated to younger men like Du Bois, but no one could deny the seventy-two-year-old bishop the courage of his words when he addressed the Georgia Equal Rights Association convention: "I used to love what I thought was the grand old flag, and sing with ecstasy about the stars and stripes," Dittmer quoted him as saying, "but to the Negro in this country the American flag is a dirty and contemptible rag." Turner died nine years later, his funeral attended by 25,000 mourners.

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SECTION FOUR

Henry McNeal Turner

SOURCE: https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/us-history-biographies/henry-mcneal-turner

Nothing but Freedom.

Henry McNeal Turner, the best-known evangelist among former slaves, was himself born free on 1 February 1834. His father died when he was young, and Turner was raised by his mother and grandmother until 1848, when Sarah Greer Turner married Jabez Story and the family moved to Abbeville, South Carolina. There he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Methodism had only recently separated into northern and southern branches over the issue of slavery). Turner found work as a janitor in a law firm, and his employers, impressed with his desire to learn, taught him reading, arithmetic, geography, history, law, and theology. However, religion, not law, was to be his career. A white Methodist circuit rider, Robert Jones Boyd, issued him a license as an exhorter in 1851 and another as a preacher in 1853. In December 1854 he obtained a guardian, John McLauren, and court papers that permitted him to leave his hometown and served as proof of his freedom, protecting him from slave patrols who might capture him for a reward.

Preaching in Whispers. Turner became a circuit rider himself, traveling throughout the Deep South to plantations and communities of free blacks. He was in a difficult position. Many churches, such as the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, accepted slavery as God's will. Also, even though churches accepted slavery, state governments did not trust black preachers, and many states required that at least one white male be present at black religious services to monitor the sermons. It must have been a relief when in 1857 Turner discovered the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church while preaching in New Orleans. Yet Turner hesitated before changing his denominational affiliation because he had married Eliza Ann Peacher the previous

year, and his work in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, allowed him to support his family. In 1858 Turner presided over a revival in Atlanta, and he converted to the AME Church and moved to Baltimore. There he simultaneously served as pastor of two churches, the Waters' Chapel and the Tissue Street Mission, and studied English grammar, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. In 1860 he became pastor of the Union Bethel Church in Baltimore, where he was ordained a deacon (1860) and then an elder (1862). He also became pastor of the Israel Church in Washington, D.C., in 1862.

Military Chaplain. Turner's first response to the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861 reflected his ministerial profession. He was appalled by the bloodshed and did not think the Civil War would serve any good purpose. In 1862 he studied the matter and concluded that God worked in mysterious ways and was using the war for the higher purpose of human freedom. Thus he was ready for the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Proclamation opened the way for blacks to join the armed forces. Turner's assistant, Thomas H. ? Hinton, turned Israel Church into a recruiting center and organized the First Regiment of the United States Colored Troops. Turner himself volunteered to be a chaplain and received his commission on 6 November 1863. Some idea of his dedication to duty may be had by learning that he contracted smallpox when he visited troops confined to the hospital. He was equally concerned for his soldiers' education, constantly soliciting donations of books, which he distributed to the troops. When a boat full of regimental supplies sank, he made sure to replace the lost spelling texts.

Political Leader. Turner's commission expired at the end of 1865, and President Andrew Johnson appointed him to a chaplaincy in the regular army, assigning him to work with the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia. When Turner got to Georgia, he found that the unit to which he was assigned already had a chaplain and that the man in charge of Bureau operations in the state, Gen. Davis Tillson, was more sympathetic to whites than to former slaves. Turner soon resigned his army commission to organize the AME Church in the state. Part of that work involved political leadership, organizing blacks to protect their interests in the face of unrepentant Georgia Democrats. In 1866 Turner returned to Washington to make political contacts and to solicit funds for the black Georgians' Equal Rights Association. By the next year he was urging black Georgians to join the Republican Party. From December 1867 to March 1868 he was a member of the Education Committee of the Atlanta Constitutional Convention, in which position he lobbied unsuccessfully for funds for black higher education and universal public elementary education. He served two terms in the state legislature, but his career as an elected civil servant soon came to a dramatic end. He had been elected partly on the strength of an alliance between blacks and poor whites, who had united to overcome the power of the state's longtime political leaders, landowning white Democrats. Once elected, the whites wanted their black colleagues barred from the legislature, effective immediately. Turner and the other black representatives stood up, walked up the aisles among the seated white delegates to the door, and then, in biblical fashion, shook the dust from their feet. Turner's final departure from politics was more ignominious. Congressional Republicans arranged for him to be appointed postmaster of Macon, Georgia. Local whites, though, did not want him to have the job. During this time, also, Turner was caught in a local scandal: he was seen in the company of a woman who was not only a confirmed counterfeiter, but a prostitute as well.

Bishop. Turner found new work in 1872 as pastor of Saint Philip's AME Church in Savannah. In 1876 he moved from that job to a new one as head of the financially troubled church publishing department. A volume he wrote himself, *The Hymn Book of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1876), became a popular seller. On 14 May 1880 he was elected bishop and assigned to Georgia. In that capacity he not only worked to build up his own flock, but also labored to extend the AME faith. In addition, he traveled to Africa as a missionary, visiting Sierra Leone (1891), Liberia (1893), and South Africa (1898).

Institution Builder. Turner's election as bishop was not a foregone conclusion. He smoked, claiming he had become addicted to tobacco during his youth, when one of his chores was to keep his grandmother's pipe lit. Other Methodists took this breach of self-discipline seriously. Some also pointed out that the price of the rapid expansion of the AME in Georgia was the acceptance of many uneducated, even illiterate, ministers that compromised the status of the whole denomination. Nevertheless, Turner received the position and quickly became involved in the practical and theoretical aspects of church organization. Not only did he build up local churches, but he edited the newspaper *Voice of Missions* to develop a sense of unity in the denomination. He also wrote a book on *The Genius and Theory of Methodist Polity in* 1885.

A Black Christian Identity. Turner both reacted to and shaped an emerging black identity. His experiences before, during, and after the Civil War convinced him that the federal and state governments were determined to marginalize blacks. Some would extend that analysis to Christianity, arguing that it was really a European religion whose doctrines were useful for oppressing and exploiting the poor by promising them that accepting the status quo on earth would lead to rewards in heaven. As a clergyman, though, Christianity meant liberation for Turner; personally, it gave him a professional career. For black people generally, Christianity promised that a just God would look after the oppressed, and it encouraged blacks not to revolt, but to develop useful strategies to improve their lot. Late in his life, Turner was impressed with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible* (1895-1898) and pondered whether it might not be desirable to do a translation and commentary on Scripture from an African American point of view.

Death. By the 1880s Turner was so disappointed in the prospects for blacks in the United States that he claimed he did not want to die in a place where his race was so maligned. Invited to preside over a church meeting in Canada, he had just disembarked from a ferry that carried him from Detroit to Windsor, Ontario, when he was felled by a massive stroke at the wharf. He died on 8 May 1915, and his body was brought back to Atlanta for burial.

Source

Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).
