

James Monroe Whitfield, 1822-1871

James pushed back his scratchy sheets and rose from his four-poster, moving to sit at his desk. He lit the candle that resided on the small table and retrieved a piece of parchment from beside him.

He could not sleep. Just like he had been for many years, he was kept awake by thoughts of a letter informing him that his cousin, William Hall, had been captured into slavery. This signified the third child of his family to be enslaved. William's father, Jude, had been too in shock by the news of his capture, which led a relative named Robert Roberts to send the letter in his place.

The third child of his family to be captured. It had been nearly half a century after the writing of the Constitution, since the birth of the new nation, and free black citizens were still being enslaved and killed, forced to do white society's labor. Despite progress being made, even as slavery became less and less common in Northern states, the marks left by the cruel institutions continued to wound black folk all around America.

Holding his quill to his lips, he sat back and continued to mull it over. His eyelid twitched from fatigue but everything else in his mind was on fire. The flames engulfed his thoughts and the words that would soon sear his page, and he could not stop his internal monologue from running circles around his brain. If he were this upset, and he was this distant from the issue, he could not begin to imagine the headspace his uncle, Jude, had been in. Had he, too, been losing sleep? Had he been angry? Or had he been mourning the loss of yet another child to the demon that he had escaped from years and years ago?

Jude had escaped slavery to fight in the Revolutionary War that would take the lives of many and bring liberty to the nation. He fought for his own freedom and the freedom of his country, and how did America return the favor? By ripping three of his children away.

James could not keep standing idly by while his family was taken. He had to do something that would allow Jude and himself to sleep at night.

So, dipping his quill into the ink, he lowered it to the parchment and began writing a letter to America.

*America, it is to thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,—
It is to thee I raise my song..*