
“FREEDOM, AIN’T FREE”

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One of my favorite quotes is from my colleague Jasiah who often remarks, “There is not just one form of resistance, there are many forms of resistance.” In the times of slavery, resistance came in the form of breaking tools, faking like one was injured or sick, destroying crops, poisoning enslavers, rebellions, insurrections, escaping along an underground railroad, etc. Resistance also came in the form of socioeconomic empowerment.

In the mid-1850s, shortly after the passage of The Fugitive Slave Act, a new hotel opened its doors to the public here in the city of Niagara Falls. Its name was the Free Soil Hotel, named after the Free Soil Party; a national political party that opposed the expansion of slavery into the western territories of the United States. Its owner was James Paterson; a formerly enslaved freedom seeker turned entrepreneur who previously worked as a charismatic porter at the world-renowned Cataract House Hotel. He saved up tips for fifteen years before purchasing the Falls Street property and converting it into a hotel. In our local history census records Paterson is listed as owning

an estate valued at \$8,000 in the 1860s. That would be equivalent to over \$270,000 in that time period. Paterson was not an anomaly. His colleague, Lewis L.F. Hamilton, whom he worked alongside at the Cataract House, opened several businesses. One of those businesses was an employment agency right across the street from Cataract House. Hamilton would put ads in our local newspaper for “Hamilton’s General Agency and Intelligence Office” and is listed in the 1870s census record as owning an estate equivalent to well over \$100,000 at that time. You also have John Hunter, a former barber at the International Hotel who was listed in the same 1870s census as a servant working at the Spencer House Hotel who owned an estate valued at over \$125,000. By 1900, Charlotte Washington Dett who was an activist, suffragist, and mother of the famous pianist R. Nathaniel Dett, owned and operated a seventeen-room boardinghouse in walking distance from the Cataract House. Dett’s successful enterprise entertained guests like Madame C. J. Walker, the first woman to be a self-made millionaire, Mary McLeod Bethune, President of Bethune-Cookman College and future cabinet

member in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, Robert Moton, the president of Tuskegee Institute, and Dr. William Pickens, Field Secretary for the N.A.A.C.P. None of these Niagarians were anomalies, nor were they rugged individualists amassing wealth to flaunt in the face of our people. They were community builders who represented a consistent theme of self-determined Black folks living in proximity to, and politically under, white -often violently racist- communities. Demographically, Paterson, Hamilton, Hunter, and Dett were part of a small Black community that was 3.5% of Niagara Falls' total population between the 1850s and 1900s. Based upon the sheer size, the historic "Black Wallstreet" Greenwood District in Tulsa Oklahoma, had dozens of Lewis L.F. Hamiltons. The Hayti District in Durham North Carolina, known as "the Black Capitol of the South", had many James Patersons and John Hunters. Jackson Ward, dubbed "the Harlem of the South", also had a self-sufficient economy and a monumental figure like Niagara Falls' Charlotte Washington Dett; her name was Maggie L. Walker, founder of the first Black and woman-owned bank in this country. So, it stands to reason that with a growing Black population similar to what we have seen across the South, we could have seen even greater economic success right here in Niagara Falls.

Oftentimes when we speak about anti-slavery and the black liberation movement, we fail to discuss their socioeconomic backdrop. Most Black folks can tell you a story about a great-grandparent, a great-aunt, a cousin, or other kinfolk who were formally enslaved, and uneducated, yet came to own acres of land and successfully raise a dozen children with no government assistance. What happened? Another story not far behind it is how those family members were either tricked and/or terrorized to give up that land by white supremacists, who like today, masquerade as Patriotic Americans. I grew up hearing numerous stories about how Black family members were denied employment, restricted from living in certain neighborhoods, denied loans, resources, and public services, and forbidden to attend institutions, enter businesses, or socialize with white people. All because local, regional, state, and federal laws declared us as Black and by proxy, systematically inferior to white folks. To young people today, I am sure this sounds unbelievable. It probably sounds just as unbelievable when I tell them how radio stations refused to play rap music when I was a child and it was often called "jungle music."

These are just some of the transgenerational traumatic odds that Black people overcame, and still strive to overcome, to simply survive and maintain some semblance of sanity in an insane society. A society of American Dementia that denies that its sadistic history

even existed. What we are taught regarding this history, both explicitly and implicitly, is that poverty, health disparities, crime statistics, and lack of education in Black communities are solely because of Black people. Not because in America's 247 years, this country legally denied Black people were human, the right of citizenship, and restricted our ability to socioeconomically participate in this society for 188 of those years or 76% of the time that America has existed. It seems like whenever something is wrong with a Black person, psychology is used to pathologize us, but whenever something is right, we are assessed through a sociological lens. All of this is enough to drive a person crazy! Then imagine going to a culturally incompetent therapist who classifies our inability, over-ability, or outright unwillingness to articulate this racist experience as paranoid schizophrenia or any number of Drapetomania-like mental disorders. And to think, there are people born with the "privilege" of not even having to think about any of this. And now that they are thinking about it because they read this, they still have the privilege to not address it. See how that works? No pun intended.

My heroes and sheroes are not the Black Capitalist celebrities whom the mainstream media would like us to praise for their material gains. I acknowledge, yet rarely celebrate Black firsts. You know, like the first Black MLB player, the first Black Grammy

Award Winner, the first Black Congressman, etc. For many of us, they are just traumatic reminders that they were the first Black people who were not killed [yet] after crossing the alligator-infested mote around America called the color line. I find inspiration in everyday Black folks, doing extraordinary things to quietly build and sustain our communities while finding joy in what it means to be Black and human. From the times of slavery, through generational movements of Black liberation, their acts all distilled in the form of socioeconomic resistance. From the seamstresses and tailors along the underground railroad and the candy lady who sold penny candy out of her home, to the Greenbook Bed & Breakfasts before Airbnb and the green thumb neighbors who created a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) before that was an idea. From the storefront church that served meals for the sick and shut-in, to the barber and hairdresser serving clients in their basements. From the volunteer sports coaches and Big Momma babysitting everyone's child on the block, to the teachers who tutored at their homes, and the children who shoveled our elder's walkways.

Historically, one of the most liberating acts one could perform in the interest of Black liberation is where you put a dollar, consistently. When it comes to white allies, this is also what makes the most cents [sense]. Why? Because freedom, ain't free.