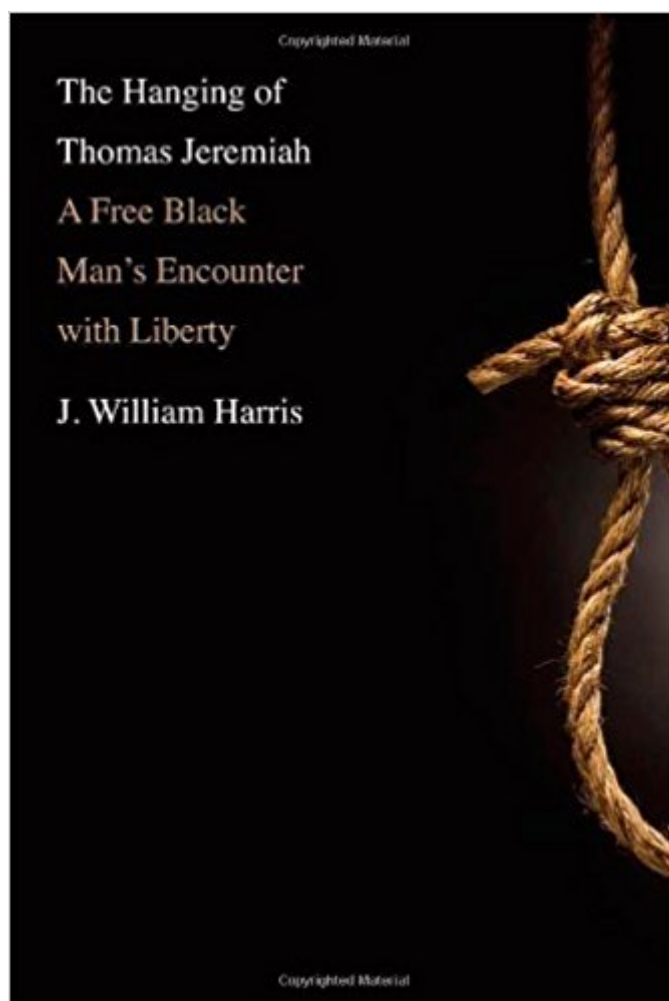


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# The Hanging Of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter With Liberty



## Synopsis

The tragic untold story of how a nation struggling for its freedom denied it to one of its own. In 1775, Thomas Jeremiah was one of fewer than five hundred "Free Negroes" in South Carolina and, with an estimated worth of £1,000 (about \$200,000 in today's dollars), possibly the richest person of African descent in British North America. A slaveowner himself, Jeremiah was falsely accused by whites who resented his success as a Charleston harbor pilot of sowing insurrection among slaves at the behest of the British. Chief among the accusers was Henry Laurens, Charleston's leading patriot, a slaveowner and former slave trader, who would later become the president of the Continental Congress. On the other side was Lord William Campbell, royal governor of the colony, who passionately believed that the accusation was unjust and tried to save Jeremiah's life but failed. Though a free man, Jeremiah was tried in a slave court and sentenced to death. In August 1775, he was hanged and his body burned. J. William Harris tells Jeremiah's story in full for the first time, illuminating the contradiction between a nation that would be born in a struggle for freedom and yet deny it often violently to others.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Intrepid historian Harris (Pulitzer finalist for *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation*) presents a carefully research account of nebulous historical figure Thomas Jeremiah, who, at the time of his death in 1775, "had risen as high as it was possible for a free black man" in South Carolina, where at least "ninety-nine in a hundred blacks were enslaved." Owner of a

fishing company and worth \$200,000 in 2009 dollars, Harris was probably the richest black man in North America; he was also a slave-owner. That didn't stop him from becoming a scapegoat, accused by patriot leader Henry Laurens—a wealthy plantation owner with hundreds of slaves—of secretly leading a British-sponsored slave insurrection. Though Governor William Campbell, aggrieved by the unlawfulness of Jeremiah's trial, interceded, it didn't stop those determined to hang Jeremiah. Alongside a rigorous narrative, Harris offers sober but forceful reflections: though he was "free, Christian, and a slave owner," Jeremiah proved an unworthy ally in the eyes of patriots like Laurens, who believed "the America being born...would be a white man's country." Readers will learn much about the darker side of American institutions; students of American history and civil rights will appreciate Harris's impassive approach and thorough standards. 18 b&w photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"A searing portrayal of the central paradox of the American Revolution—the centrality of slavery to the struggle for political liberty. By focusing on a single event, it exposes another paradox as well—that making a story small can also make it bigger."—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Harvard University (Laurel Thatcher Ulrich) "Beautifully written, this intense study of the conflict between liberty and slavery is told through the lives of colonial Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. In unraveling the mystery of a slave insurrection plot, Harris provides a wonderfully thick description of colonial life in Charles Town, South Carolina, in 1775. Harris weaves together lives of three slaveowners: wealthy merchant Henry Laurens, son of a British duke William Campbell, and harbor pilot, African American Thomas Jeremiah. This model microhistory opens up wonderful new insights about liberty in the context of the American Revolution: what liberty meant and for whom. This is history at its best, history as it should be."—Orville Vernon Burton, author of *The Age of Lincoln* (Orville Vernon Burton) "This well told tale, brilliantly illustrating the American contradiction, centers on a black slaveholder, dubiously hung for allegedly fomenting a slave revolt at the time of colonial whites' revolt against English 'enslavement.' The book's excruciating dedication reinforces its continued relevance to consistency about human liberty."—William W. Freehling, author of *The Road to Disunion* (William W. Freehling) Honorable Mention in the Non-Fiction category of the 2009 New England Book Festival sponsored by the Larimar St. Croix Writers Colony, The Hollywood Creative Directory; eDivvy, Shopanista and Westside Websites (New England Book Festival 2009-12-01) "Fast-paced, deeply researched. . . . gripping. . . . Harris's book reminds us that throughout history, liberty for some has rested on the denial of freedom for others."—John David

Smith, Raleigh News & Observer (John David Smith Raleigh News & Observer

2010-02-14)“Intrepid historian Harris presents a carefully researched account. . . . Readers will learn much about the darker side of American institutions; students of American history and civil rights will appreciate Harris’s impassive approach and thorough standards.”  
•Publishers Weekly (Publishers Weekly 2009-12-21) “J. William Harris tells a fascinating and finely researched story of principles in conflict and of individuals holding conflicting principles.”  
•Charleston City Paper (Charleston City Paper 2010-02-25) A Best Book of 2009, Library Journal (Library Journal)Winner of the Silver Medal in the History category for the 2009 Book of the Year Award, presented by ForeWord magazine (Book of the Year Award ForeWord Magazine 2010-07-15)"This detailed examination of a little-known episode provides an insightful reflection and commentary on the vexed relationships among liberty, slavery, and the British Empire in the era of the Declaration of Independence."  
•Richard D. Brown, The Journal of Law and History Review (Richard D. Brown The Journal of Law and History Review)

The book is basically new. It feels like it was never opened before.Odd: there is a straight line cut on the back cover. Doesn't bother at all. Worth \$8

Good experience.

This book is very well written and flows smoothly for the most part. The book is about a free black man during our nation's time of slavery. Not much information about Thomas Jeremiah exists, other than secondary sources. Therefore, while the author cannot go into great detail about Jeremiah himself the author discusses in detail the circumstances which led to the hanging of Jeremiah, as well as the aftermath of the hanging. The book is more of an analysis of society and culture in colonial south in the 1770's than it is a book about Jeremiah - but the circumstances surrounding Jeremiah's hanging serve to put all the social and cultural aspects into perspective. In a nut shell, the books shows how the events leading up to the American Revolution fueled the always present fears of a slave revolt past normal levels to the point of hanging someone who probably did not have any plans to incite any revolt.

The case of Thomas Jeremiah, from what little is known of it, sounds fascinating. He lived in South Carolina in the 1770s, one of only about 500 or so free blacks in the entire state. Somehow he was

able to claw his way upward, profiting from his skill as a ship's pilot, and by the time of his death he was one of the richest black men in the North American colonies, worth the equivalent of \$200,000 in modern money. As the epilogue notes, he "did not need to gather arms or preach revolution to undermine slavery, because his whole life was a refutation of whites' basic justification for slavery." Then he was accused of trying to incite a slave insurrection, duly framed in a slave court in spite of his status as a free man, and executed in short order. It's a great, multilayered and tragic story, and it would make a great novel or movie. The problem is, the life and death of Thomas Jeremiah is simply not well-documented enough to make a full-length nonfiction book out of. Most of the records of his trial have been lost. We don't know anything about his personal life, who his wife was, whether she was born free or not, or if they had kids. There are no records about his property, either, though it is known that he was himself a slaveowner. (I wonder how he justified that to himself?) That doesn't matter much to Dr. Harris, though, who uses the case as a jumping-off point to discuss larger issues. The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah might best be summarized like this: "This is how the sociopolitical climate was in Charleston, South Carolina just before the American Revolution broke out. Oh, and a guy named Thomas Jeremiah was hanged." The book isn't about the hanged man at all; he isn't even discussed in detail until over 90 pages in. I feel deceived. Don't get me wrong -- this is a good history book about South Carolina around the time of the Revolution, and in particular about the slavery issue. But I didn't want to read about that. I wanted to read about a particular historical criminal case and miscarriage of justice, which is what the title and jacket flap promised and didn't deliver.

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