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# **18 THE EMANCIPATION OAK COMMEMORATING FREEDOM, FAMILY, AND INTELLECTUAL PURSUIT**

**BRENDA E. STEVENSON**



**T**he Emancipation Oak, located on the historic grounds of Hampton University in southeastern Virginia, remains an iconic symbol to African Americans of much that was positive, and possible, about the outcome of the Civil War. Over the years, I have come to connect with it on a myriad of personal and professional levels. It represents freedom, family, and intellectual pursuit—both my investment in academic accomplishment and the subjects of African Americans, slavery, and the South that I have chosen to explore and elucidate.

Under the majestic limbs that reach upward and outward from this “southern live oak,” black people escaping slavery from the surrounding Tidewater counties found their entrée to a new life of freedom, education, and future purpose. Local free blacks, steeped in their generations-old traditions of self-help, Christian fellowship, and racial uplift, stepped in to shape the efforts of the workers assigned by the American Missionary Association to provide material aid for the thousands of fleeing “contrabands”<sup>1</sup> in the form of housing, food, clothing, bedding, and medical attention; to create a primary school for educational instruction; and to foster spiritual uplift and moral guidance through Christian conversion and teachings.

I grew up in the neighboring city of Portsmouth, Virginia, and the lingering duality of the Emancipation Oak as a site of higher learning for African Americans *and* as the place of one of the first public readings of the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) in the Confederate South played reassuringly in my imagination against the dim reality of black life in the segregated South where I resided.<sup>2</sup> It brilliantly undermined the two-step lessons of white supremacy and black inferiority that seemed to be everywhere

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*Emancipation Oak, Hampton, Virginia*

*(Photograph by Will Gallagher)*

external to my segregated community—the “whites only” signs at restaurants and movie theaters, in the spacious waiting rooms at doctors’ office, and on public bathrooms, water fountains, and buses; the grand Confederate monument in the center of our downtown—in the center of every local downtown; the special hours assigned for our use of the public library and the “nice” department stores; and the schools that I attended without libraries, science equipment, musical instruments, or art supplies.

Despite the obvious second-class status of our public school education and citizenship, my parents were determined that my sisters and I would fulfill their dreams for our bright future with a college degree as its foundation. They pointed to the elite education that young black adults could receive at Hampton Institute (formally Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute) as precisely the intellectual experience they wanted us to have. Graduates of Hampton populated our community as its shining professional and social stars. They were our teachers, physicians, ministers, dentists, military officers, business leaders, and government employees. Their sororities, fraternities, Masonic lodges, women’s organizations, mothers’ clubs, athletic leagues, and historical societies undergirded our social world and littered the pages of our local black newspaper, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*. Hampton Institute, we all knew, was a special place with a wondrous history exemplified by the image of its splendid Emancipation Oak.

My parents came of age in the Jim Crow South of the Depression era and regarded all of the region’s historic black colleges, but particularly the campus of the Emancipation Oak, as inestimable resources for the national African American community and even the global African diaspora. Their places of birth

in the rural Carolinas hardly boasted secondary schools for even the brightest of black youth, much less colleges. Indeed, one of my maternal aunts chose to remain in the eighth grade for three years while she waited for a high school for African Americans to be built in her hometown of Mullins, South Carolina. My grandfather Edmund Gerald contributed funds to and served on the “colored” board of a General Education Board school that all of the family attended—but it was only a one-room school that had to accommodate grades one through eight. It was this same grandfather who built my mother’s family a spacious home on his modest tobacco farm, planting his own southern live oak in the middle of the front yard. It was his own “emancipation oak”—symbolizing his elevation to a landholder on some of the same property where his mulatto father had been enslaved and across the dirt road from the slave cemetery where his relatives were buried.

As a child, I was both awed and frightened by that giant tree’s imposing limbs draped in wispy Spanish moss. Over the years, our own live oak in rural South Carolina provided front porch shade and comfort as generations of my maternal kin watched a parade of family weddings, funeral processions, birthday parties, and family reunions. “Oak Tree” reunions, my cousin Thurman, the family’s contemporary patriarch, has labeled them, take place every Fourth of July. That familial landmark connected me, visually and spiritually, to the Emancipation Oak at Hampton that I saw occasionally when we visited relatives who lived near it.

My affection for and interest in the Emancipation Oak also are linked to the tree’s visual beauty and its decidedly “Southern” identity—an identity that I own deeply, even though I have not been a true resident of the South since I left years ago for graduate school.<sup>3</sup>

The southern live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) is native to the southeastern region of the United States. Its location in lower Tidewater Virginia, where the Emancipation Oak grows, marks the northernmost part of its natural growing range, which extends south and west through the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico. At its maturity, the southern live oak is enormous, reaching 40 to 60 feet in height and 60 to 100 feet in the spread of its branches, with a trunk that can expand to 6 feet in diameter.<sup>4</sup> The oldest of these trees in the South, however, defies even these impressive dimensions. A 300-year-old southern live oak in Mobile, Alabama, known as the Duffie Oak, for example, has a limb span of 126 feet and a trunk of almost 31 feet in circumference.<sup>5</sup> The Emancipation Oak, which was planted in 1831, has limbs that today are more than 100 feet in width. Because of its age, its beauty, and certainly its historic significance, the National Geographic Society has designated Hampton's Emancipation Oak as one of the 10 Great Trees of the World. Likewise, the U.S. Department of the Interior selected it as a National Historic Landmark.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, the southern live oak at Hampton University that marks the beginning of the end of slavery in the American South also is an iconic symbol of the "Old South" and all that label suggests with regard to legends of brave cavaliers, beautiful belles, and complacent, if not "happy-go-lucky," slave men, women, and children. Indeed, these magnificent trees still adorn the grounds of richly endowed agricultural estates that are impressive architectural landmarks from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Virginia, George Washington planted live oaks on his Mount Vernon estate.<sup>7</sup> His neighbor Richard Fitzhugh named his Georgian-style home "Oak Hill" in 1790 because of the two live oak trees that still remain

on the property.<sup>8</sup> And there is no better example of antebellum splendor in the Deep South than Oak Alley Plantation, the famed sugar estate on the Mississippi River in southern Louisiana. The name was inspired by a double row of overarching southern live oak trees, purportedly planted in 1810, which lead away from the mighty Mississippi to the front of the Greek Revival mansion. Initially owned by the "King of Sugar," Valcour Aime, Oak Alley became the property of Aime's brother-in-law Jacques Roman in 1836. Legend has it that Roman actually chose that particular site for his estate's mansion not because of its strategic location next to the most important trading corridor in North America but because of the beautiful and imposing oaks that already were flourishing there when he acquired the property.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Chicora Wood rice plantation in the Low Country of South Carolina, in 1860 the home of Governor Robert Allston and more than 600 slaves, also boasted beautiful southern live oaks draped in Spanish moss. Not surprisingly, the White House of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, also had an imposing southern live oak in its back garden, allegedly planted on the occasion of the 1824 visit of the Marquis de Lafayette to its owner at the time.<sup>10</sup> While the presence of Lafayette, of American Revolution fame, and Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, determined the historical importance of this particular southern live oak in Richmond, the Emancipation Oak in Hampton has retained its prominence as a Civil War monument in its own right because of the early wartime efforts of three persons in particular—Lewis C. Lockwood, Benjamin F. Butler, and Mary S. Peake.

The Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood arrived at Fort Monroe in early September 1861, as the first representative of the American Missionary Association, a racially integrated organization created in 1846 in

part to oppose slavery.<sup>11</sup> The treasurer of the AMA, noted abolitionist Lewis Tappan, had written to Major General Benjamin F. Butler,<sup>12</sup> Union commander at Fort Monroe, on August 8, 1861, regarding what the organization could do to help protect and advance the cause of the “contraband of war,” as Butler labeled the freedom-seeking slaves who were arriving daily behind Union lines in southern Virginia and elsewhere in the South.<sup>13</sup> The AMA, as well as other abolitionist organizations, feared that these self-liberating bond people would be harmed or returned to slavery. The group also realized that most of those camped around Fort Monroe were in dire material support since Confederate soldiers, under the command of Major General John B. Magruder, and local sympathizers had burned much of Hampton.<sup>14</sup>

General Butler wrote back to ensure the AMA that the “contraband” would be protected from being returned to slavery or abused by Confederate sympathizers. He noted as well that he planned to have them either employed in the government’s service or put to work on confiscated land so they could support themselves. General Butler’s response prompted the AMA to send the Reverend Lockwood to Fort Monroe to establish and administer a mission with a mandate to address the material, spiritual, and educational needs of regional blacks, free and contraband.<sup>15</sup> One of the first persons Lockwood met, befriended, and came to rely on for the success of his plan was local free woman of color Mary Peake.

Mary Smith Kelsey was born in 1823 in Norfolk, Virginia. She was the daughter of a free biracial mother and a Frenchman.<sup>16</sup> As a young child, Mary’s mother sent her to live with an aunt and uncle in Alexandria in order for her to be formally educated.<sup>17</sup> Virginia had passed stringent laws banning black education and

restricting the movement of free blacks on the heels of the Nat Turner rebellion of August 1831, as part of a bevy of legislation meant to discourage free black state residency and to diminish white fears of a free black emergent status.<sup>18</sup> Virginia had ceded Alexandria as land that could be used for the nation’s new capital in 1791, which meant that the state’s antiliteracy laws did not hold sway there. It still was not part of Virginia in 1830 when Mary moved there, and elite free persons of color sent their children to free black and Quaker schools that were located there. Classmates remembered Mary as “very amiable” and a “good student.”<sup>19</sup>

Her first teacher was a free woman of color, undoubtedly providing a role model for Mary’s later work in Norfolk and Hampton. Local Quakers administered her second school. Mary came to acquire strong literary skills, including mastery of reading, writing, spelling, and grammar; basic mathematics; and the “female arts”—embroidery, knitting, pattern making, sewing, and music. Her female relations introduced her to Christianity, and she acquired a pronounced expertise in Bible scriptures. Virginia reannexed Alexandria in 1846, removing the education option for free people of color like Mary. Forced to end her formal academic pursuits by congressional legislation prohibiting education for free people of color in the District of Columbia, Smith, at the age of sixteen, returned to her family in Norfolk.<sup>20</sup> Five years later, she married Thomas Peake, a formerly enslaved man who had memorable blue eyes, dark wavy hair, and skin light enough for him to pass for white.<sup>21</sup> Like many enterprising men in the bustling port city, Thomas worked in the service of the merchant marine, he as a “wardroom boy.”<sup>22</sup>

Mary probably never stopped developing academically, no doubt continuing a course of self-education

throughout her young adulthood, as did many free women of color of her era, both in the South and in other parts of the nation. Soon after taking up residence again in Norfolk, she began to teach free blacks and also enslaved people clandestinely. Additionally, she contributed to local moral reform efforts by becoming a religious “exhorter” and by providing her community with a benevolent society that she created—the Daughters of Zion.<sup>23</sup>

Sometime during the 1850s, Thomas Peake moved Mary, their young daughter, Hattie, and his mother-in-law to Hampton. The family seemed to flourish there among the small number of free people of color (201 in 1860) and acquired an elite social profile and two homes—one worth \$2,200, the most expensive owned by a free black family in the city. Thomas worked in a local hotel. In Hampton, as in Norfolk, Mary Peake busied herself with service to the poor and sick within her community and carried on her teaching of black children.<sup>24</sup>

Soon after escaped slaves began to arrive at Fort Monroe, Union officers under the direction of Edward L. Pierce of the 3rd Massachusetts Infantry began to employ them, and also local free people of color, to work on rebuilding the artillery battery that had been partially destroyed.<sup>25</sup> They also had to build housing for themselves that too had been destroyed, including Peake’s home and furniture, which Confederate troops had burned during an operation in the vicinity of Hampton.<sup>26</sup> As a missionary, Lockwood was dedicated intently to the Christian conversion of those he encountered and wanted the contrabands to become literate. He readily admitted that he “aimed to teach self-development” and “proposed to commence Sabbath and week-day schools,” although he did not expect these tasks to be easily accomplished. Lockwood

acknowledged to the AMA that he, some among the Union Army at the fort, and the contrabands were “trying the very highest experiment.” “They [the contrabands] are here emphatically ‘turned loose,’ and are shifting for themselves,” he reported. “It is not to be expected that on the ‘sacred soil of Virginia,’ this experiment should be carried out without encountering difficulties.”<sup>27</sup>

Mrs. Peake, probably with the blessing of General Butler and through her own commitment, already had been in the business of teaching some of the local parents and youth under the large oak tree near the fort. Her students asked Lockwood to recruit her to teach for his organization. The reverend recalled that he soon realized that Mrs. Peake indeed was a “teacher of the choicest spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

Mary Peake conducted her first AMA-sanctioned classes under what was to become the Emancipation Oak on September 17, 1861.<sup>29</sup> Within a few days, the number of students she taught grew from about a dozen to more than fifty day-pupils and twenty adults at night. Peake continued to hold her classes under the shade of the large oak during the hot and humid days of the early fall while other accommodations could be arranged. Records indicate, for example, that she also began to teach classes at the “Brown Cottage,” a small two-story building that faced the missionaries’ seminary building. Peake gave lessons in literacy, math, geography, Christianity, and choral music.<sup>30</sup> With Lockwood’s support, Mary Peake became the first AMA teacher in Hampton and the first black teacher paid by that mission organization, which would come to dominate black southern education over the next several decades.<sup>31</sup>

Reverend Lockwood recognized not only that Mrs. Peake was a fine teacher and exemplary Christian but

also that she was physically frail. On February 22, 1862, five months after they met, Mary Peake died from complications related to pulmonary disease. She taught almost to the day of her demise.<sup>32</sup> Neither she nor Butler nor Lockwood could have imagined that “emancipation” for the contrabands would come so shortly thereafter. Still, on January 1, 1863, teachers, soldiers, local free blacks, and townspeople gathered under the “Emancipation Oak” to hear the reading of President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>33</sup>

That same year, the school that Mary Peake had helped to found became the Butler School for Negro Children—named after Benjamin Butler, who had given a large donation for that purpose—and was built next to the Emancipation Oak. It accommodated 600 students.<sup>34</sup> Five years later near the same site, the American Missionary Association opened the doors of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute under the leadership of Brigadier General Samuel C. Armstrong. The mandate that the organization established for Hampton was one that Lockwood, Peake, and Butler had articulated when Peake’s first classes were held under the Emancipation Oak—to prepare black Southerners to be of sound moral character and financially independent and to supply teachers who would carry out these instructions in lower schools.<sup>35</sup>

The Emancipation Oak remains a recurring stop on my biannual visits to my Virginia home. My husband, who is a native Hamptonian and grew up playing in the shadow of the oak, and I have introduced our daughter to the endearing, enduring, and inspirational leafy memorial. She has circled it with her cousins while hearing the stories of the contrabands, missionaries, teachers, and soldiers who helped to bring emancipation and education to her ancestors. The Emancipation Oak at Hampton University is a Civil War monument

that beautifully commemorates the values of freedom, family, and intellectual pursuit.

#### NOTES

1. Regarding the “fugitive slaves” who escaped behind Union lines and into Union-held military bases and life in the Hampton area during the Civil War, see, for example, Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861–1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004); and Howard Westwood, *Black Troops, White Commanders and the Freedmen during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 39.

2. Freedmen aid society workers and the Union military officers also had the Emancipation Proclamation read in Beaufort, South Carolina, on that same date with similar pomp, circumstance, and celebration that included the participation of local contrabands. See, for example, Charlotte Forten’s description in her diary of public reading along with the joint contraband/Union troops’ celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation at Camp Saxton at Port Royal (Beaufort County), South Carolina, on January 1, 1863. Charlotte Forten Grimké, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 428–32.

3. The National Arbor Day Foundation actually named the oak tree (the southern live oak is one of sixty species of oak that grow in the United States) as the official “National Tree” of the United States in 2004. See “Oak Becomes America’s National Tree,” Arbor Day Foundation Press Release, December 10, 2004, <https://www.arborday.org/media/pressreleases/pressrelease.cfm?id=95>.

4. Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson, “*Quercus virginiana*: Southern Live Oak,” *Fact Sheet ST-564* (October 1994), United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, <http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/trees/QUEVIRA.pdf>.

5. Rick Holmes, “On the Road with Rick Holmes: Off the Beaten Track in Mobile, Alabama, the Duffie Oak Endures,” *Carbondale (Ill.) News*, May 18, 2017, [www.thecarbondalenews.com/opinion/20170518/on-road-with-rick-holmes-off-beaten-track-in-mobile-alabama-duffie-oak-endures](http://www.thecarbondalenews.com/opinion/20170518/on-road-with-rick-holmes-off-beaten-track-in-mobile-alabama-duffie-oak-endures).

6. “Emancipation Oak,” Hampton University website, <http://>



www.hamptonu.edu/about/emancipation\_oak.cfm (accessed June 15, 2017).

7. "Ten Facts About the Landscape at Mount Vernon," George Washington's Mount Vernon, <http://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/gardens-landscapes/ten-facts-about-the-landscape-at-mount-vernon/> (accessed June 15, 2017).

8. Kathy Orton, "Oak Hill Was a Haven for Jefferson and Confederate Cash," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/where-we-live/wp/2017/03/24/oak-hill-was-a-haven-for-jefferson-confederate-cash/?utm\\_term=.e43683cff3f6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/where-we-live/wp/2017/03/24/oak-hill-was-a-haven-for-jefferson-confederate-cash/?utm_term=.e43683cff3f6).

9. "History of Oak Alley Plantation," Oak Alley Plantation website, <http://www.oakalleyplantation.org> (accessed June 23, 2017).

10. The house was then the home of Dr. John Brockenbrough, president of the Bank of Virginia. Lafayette visited the home twice in 1824. Legend has it that the marquis might have planted the tree himself. See "The Stories of the Historic Trees at the White House of the Confederacy," American Civil War Museum White House Wednesday Column, <https://acwm.org/blog/white-house-wednesday-story-historic-trees-white-house-confederacy> (accessed June 23, 2017).

11. Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake, the Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe* (Boston, Mass.: American Tract Society, 1862), 12.

12. Michael Thomas Smith, "Benjamin F. Butler (1818–1893)," *Encyclopedia of Virginia*, [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Butler\\_Benjamin\\_F\\_1818-1893#contrib](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Butler_Benjamin_F_1818-1893#contrib) (accessed June 23, 2017).

13. Michael T. Smith, "The Beast Unleashed: Benjamin F. Butler and Conceptions of Masculinity in the Civil War North," *New England Quarterly* 79 (June 2006): 250, 252.

14. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 19.

15. Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood, "Appendix," *Mary S. Peake, the Colored Teacher at Fortress Monroe* (Boston, Mass.: American Tract Society, 1862), An American Antiquarian Society Online Exhibition, Curated by Lucia Z. Noles, 2006,

<http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Freedmen/Manuscripts/marypeakeappend.html> .

16. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 9.

17. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 7.

18. Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 289.

19. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 7.

20. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 289–90; Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 7–8.

21. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 8–9.

22. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 11; Kay Ann Taylor, "Mary S. Peake and Charlotte L. Forten: Black Teachers during the Civil War and Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro Education* 74 (Spring 2005): 128.

23. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 10–11.

24. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 9.

25. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 140–43. Pierce would go on to expand his "experiment" among the contrabands of Beaufort County, South Carolina.

26. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation*, 15; Taylor, "Mary S. Peake and Charlotte L. Forten," 129.

27. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 28–29.

28. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 31.

29. "Emancipation Oak."

30. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 20–21.

31. Taylor, "Mary S. Peake and Charlotte L. Forten," 126.

32. Lockwood, *Mary S. Peake*, 45.

33. "Emancipation Oak."

34. "Emancipation Oak"; Ludwell H. Johnson, "Contraband Trade during the Last Year of the Civil War," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (March 1963): 641.

35. "Emancipation Oak"; Eng, *Freedom's First Generation*, 29.