

# Spirit of Resistance

BY DR. JOHN T. REIL

**T**he whites did not know they would die that night. They slept peacefully in their beds, secure in their knowledge that they were in control. Their tomorrows would be the same as their yesterdays. At the break of day they would be awakened, bathed, dressed and pampered by their black slaves, who lived and labored only to please and profit them. This was the design of God and nature which made whites supreme over blacks. But die they did, hacked to pieces and burned to a crisp by the same Africans who had attended them humbly the day before.

"Brethren, arise! Arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Rather die free men than



*Was the Amistad rebellion the only black uprising in pre-Civil War America?*

*Were blacks docile or deadly during slavery?*

WEST AFRICAN SENGBE PIE, KNOWN IN THE STATES AS JOSEPH CINQUE, LED A SLAVE REVOLT ABOARD THE LA AMISTAD.

## \$150 REWARD



RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of the 2d instant, a negro man, who calls himself *Henry May*, about 22 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, ordinary color, rather chunky built, bushy head, and has it divided mostly on one side, and keeps it very nicely combed; has been raised in the house, and is a first rate dining-room servant, and was in a tavern in Louisville for 18 months. I expect he is now in Louisville trying to make his escape to a free state, (in all probability to Cincinnati, Ohio.) Perhaps he may try to get employment on a steamboat. He is a good cook, and is handy in any capacity as a house servant. Had on when he left, a dark cassinett coat, and dark striped cassinett pantaloons, new—he had other clothing. I will give \$50 reward if taken in Louisville; 100 dollars if taken one hundred miles from Louisville in this State, and 150 dollars if taken out of this State, and delivered to me, or secured in any jail so that I can get him again.

WILLIAM BURKE

Burdston, Ky., September 3d, 1838.

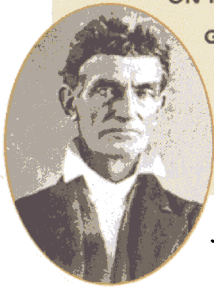
be slaves. Let your motto be resistance Resistance! Resistance!"

This was the battle cry of these daring black rebels. The date was 1526 Their cry echoed from a source 300 years older than the 1839 revolt aboard the slave ship La Amistad, which Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen faithfully recreated in the new film "Amistad." The place was a 16th cen-

tury Spanish settlement in the southern region of America, the first white settlement to contain slaves. Within a year the blacks drove those oppressors out of the country and thereby signalled the bloody fate of slavery in America: slavery would end by violence.

In years to come, over 250 black insurrections exploded within U.S. ter-

**J**OINED BY BLACKS, INCLUDING THE ONES BELOW, WHITE AMERICAN JOHN BROWN LED AN 1859 RAID ON HARPER'S FERRY, A GOVERNMENT ARSENAL, TO SEIZE WEAPONS USED TO ENFORCE SLAVERY.



JOHN BROWN, HUNG



LEWIS LEARY, HUNG



OSBORN PERRY ANDERSON, ESCAPED



DANGERFIELD NEWBY, HUNG

ritories. Instances of this were murderous uprisings of blacks either alone or with allies of Indians or white indentured servants in Connecticut in 1657, Virginia in 1663, Long Island in 1708, New York in 1712, Massachusetts in 1723, and South Carolina in 1739. Many others occurred in the British West Indies, such as Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. In South America blacks waged full scale wars against whites and sometimes established independent states, such as the legendary Palmares Republic in Brazil, to govern themselves. Wherever blacks were enslaved, they rebelled.

African descendants in America were by nature and culture an heroic, self-determining people. Perhaps the most successful insurrection was the Haitian/San Domingo rebellion led by Francois Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture against the French in 1791. After brilliantly mobilizing thousands of blacks, he destroyed the plantation aristocracy and took control of the nation. Of equal significance, he inspired slave revolts throughout North and South America.

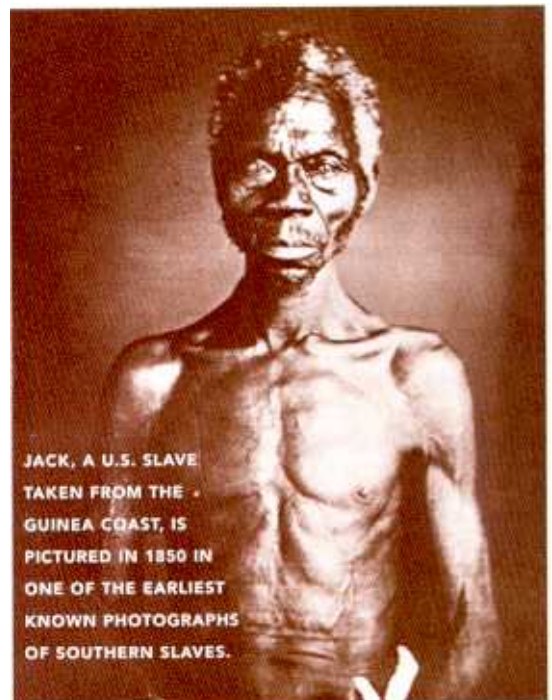
For instance, in 1800 Gabriel Prosser, a Virginia black of great stature and shrewd intelligence, organized several hundred slaves to attack Richmond, kill the whites, overtake the arsenals, arm the black population and wage war on slavery throughout the region. His banner copied that of the Haitian rebels, "Death or Liberty." Prosser declared with great dignity and candor, "I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and put on trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause."

The spirit of Prosser's statement echoes through John Quincy Adams' defense of the Amistad blacks in the film's Supreme Court scene. Blacks have always fought for their freedom. Following

Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey of Charleston in 1822 and Nat Turner of Southampton in 1831 rallied large bands of slaves to destroy slavery and its white perpetrators. Then came the Civil War in which blacks fought for freedom as bravely as their black ancestors had done in the 1776 Revolutionary War for American independence.

After achieving emancipation, blacks struggled body and soul against the Klan, Jim Crowism, segregation, inequality and lynchings. Though denied equal benefits of American democracy, blacks distinguished themselves as soldiers in the War of 1812, Spanish American War, the War of the Philippines, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and Desert Storm to defend this democracy.

The Amistad insurrection, the hundreds of other slave rebellions and the many national wars that African descendants in America bravely fought tell us the obvious: blacks have been a warrior people who loved freedom. Thus, contrary to popular racist myths, blacks were ill-suited for slavery and domination by whites. Far from dampening their African spirit of rebellion, their American experience helped to fuel it. Why? *continued on page 30*



JACK, A U.S. SLAVE TAKEN FROM THE GUINEA COAST, IS PICTURED IN 1850 IN ONE OF THE EARLIEST KNOWN PHOTOGRAPHS OF SOUTHERN SLAVES.

# Black Revolts

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America idealized freedom despite her racist practices. Guns and guts were America's primary means of achieving this freedom. When guns were not available, blacks had no shortage of guts. Where they could not deal lethal blows against their oppressors, they struck back in subtle and covert ways. Their defiance was evident in how they would slow down the pace of their labor, make deliberate accidents and fake stupidity or illness to frustrate overseers.

Also, blacks created stories, songs and religious practices that preserved their dignity, vented their resentments of whites and communicated plans for escape and resistance:

*I fooled Old Master seven years,  
Fooled the overseer three.  
Hand me down my banjo,  
And I'll tickle your bellee.*

From historical uprisings, such as the Amistad rebellion, down to the more contemporary 1992 Los Angeles insurrection, blacks have shown that slavery, racism and discrimination did not subdue them as whites might have hoped. If anything, these evils along with the lip service America has paid to liberty, justice and equality have firmed the resolve of blacks to be

**WHEREVER BLACKS WERE ENSLAVED, THEY REBELLED.**

free, boosted their warrior spirits and sharpened their killing instincts.

These facts require that the history of blacks should not be read as an easy adjustment to a bad situation. Rather it should be seen as a never-ending story of militant resistance and rebellion to attain a freer life. Blacks should be seen as the defiant, warrior people they have been. Their story henceforth should be told as an heroic epic. It would be learned with pride by new generations of Americans of African descent. **TP**

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The following is a partial list of protests, demonstrations and insurrections for black freedom in the U.S.

- 1526 Blacks and Indians against Spanish, probably near South Carolina.
- 1663 Black and white slaves and servants against whites in Virginia.
- 1708 Blacks kill seven whites in Long Island.
- 1712 Blacks kill nine whites in New York City.
- 1723 Blacks burn several white-owned properties in Massachusetts.
- 1739 Blacks kill 22 whites in South Carolina.
- 1741 Blacks burn several white-owned properties in New York City.
- 1800 Gabriel Prosser organizes black slave rebellion in Richmond.
- 1804 Underground Railroad establishes network for runaway slaves.
- 1818 Blacks and Seminole Indians battle Andrew Jackson at Suwanee.
- 1822 Denmark Vesey organizes a slave revolt in Charleston.
- 1831 Nat Turner leads a slave revolt in Southampton County, VA.
- 1839 Africans led by Cinque revolt aboard the La Amistad.
- 1841 Slaves revolt on the ship Creole and overpower the white crew.
- 1851 Blacks attack a group of slave catchers in Pennsylvania.
- 1859 Blacks join John Brown in raid on Harper's Ferry, a U.S. arsenal.
- 1860 Blacks form volunteer troops to fight Confederate Army.
- 1867 Blacks protest segregation in New Orleans.
- 1867 Blacks vote for first time in state elections in the South.
- 1870 First blacks elected to the House of Representatives.
- 1896 National Association of Colored Women starts attack on lynchings.
- 1906 Black soldiers raid Brownsville in retaliation for racial insults.
- 1909 NAACP founded.
- 1919 Race riots throughout America during this "Red Summer."
- 1920 Marcus Garvey's UNIA/ACL holds national convention.
- 1933 NAACP begins legal attacks on segregation.
- 1942-43 Blacks rebel in major American cities.
- 1954 Supreme Court landmark decision against segregation.
- 1955 Historic bus boycott begins in Montgomery.
- 1961 CORE takes first "freedom riders" on bus trip through South.
- 1964 Malcolm X delivers his famous "Ballot or Bullet" speech.
- 1964 Blacks rebel in major American cities.
- 1966 Stokely Carmichael coins "black power" as new battle cry.
- 1966 Black Panther Party founded in Oakland.
- 1967 Thurgood Marshall named to Supreme Court.
- 1967-68 Blacks rebel in major American cities.
- 1970 Blacks rebel in major American cities.
- 1971 Congressional Black Caucus organized to fight for black rights.
- 1971 Blacks rebel in Attica State Correctional Facility in New York.
- 1972 Blacks rebel on aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk off North Vietnam.
- 1980 Blacks rebel in Miami.
- 1992 Blacks rebel in Los Angeles.

Sources: "Before the Mayflower" by Lerone Bennett Jr.; "The Atlantic Slave Trade" by David Northrup; "There is a River" by Vincent Harding; and "Slavery" by Stanley Elkins.