

# **Elihu Embree—a Forerunner**

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Elihu Embree--industrialist, publisher, scholar, and idealist--lived in Tennessee at the turn of the 19th century. He and his family were committed to abolishing slavery in the American South. Over a few short years, Embree raised the public consciousness and achieved wide recognition with the publication of two periodicals devoted to the abolitionist cause. Elihu Embree's crusade was cut short by his early death in 1820, and racial exploitation quickly worsened, leading to that dark period in this nation's history: the Civil War and its aftermath. Nevertheless, Embree's contribution was important, and he is remembered as a forerunner in the quest for human freedom.

## **The Quakers and Slavery**

Elihu Embree came from a family of Quakers. The Religious Society of Friends was founded by Englishman George Fox in 1652 and soon spread to the American colonies. Fox preached that "God was in every man," making possible an inward experience of God without the need for a structure of organized religion. The Society played a leading role in efforts to abolish slavery, and, by the end of the 18th century, Quaker John Woolman claimed that "there was not a slave in the possession of a Friend in good standing, except where slaves were held by trustees, and state laws did not allow them to be set free." The claim may not have been entirely true, but the Society's commitment to emancipation was unquestioned.

From the time of the American Revolution, the northern states opposed slavery, and the U.S. Constitution banned the importation of slaves in 1808. But the southern states institutionalized slavery and built their economies around it. Cotton production required large numbers of slaves, as did numerous other rural and urban industries. Slaves already in the United States continued to be bought and sold in market places across the South. Restricted supply coupled with the increasing demand served to enhance sales prices. By the late 1850s, a strong, young male slave could fetch as much as \$1,800.

## **The Embree Family**

Elihu Embree's ancestors were Protestant Huguenots from southern France. In the late 16th century many Huguenots, including the Embrees, fled to England to escape religious persecution. Sadly, this was only the first of several such flights. In due course, the Embree family set out for the American colonies. According to Quaker records, one Robert Embree lived in New England in the 1640s and 50s. Robert was Elihu Embree's great-great-great grandfather. His descendants migrated through Long Island, New Jersey, Virginia and the Carolinas, eventually to settle in what is now East Tennessee.

The first to arrive-- in the late 1770s--was Robert Embree's great-grandson and Elihu's grandfather, Moses Embree III. Moses established an iron business in what was to become Washington County, Tennessee, and his eldest son, Thomas, greatly expanded the business. Thomas Embree and his wife Esther had four children of whom Elihu, born in 1782, was the oldest. In 1791 Thomas Embree built a rock house in the county, proclaiming: "On this rock I have built my house and the powers of Hell shall not prevail against it." The house is believed to have been used as a link in the "underground railway" along which large numbers of slaves escaped to the free states in the North.

Elihu Embree spent the latter part of his childhood in the rock house. Elihu had a good education for the time. Some accounts state that he attended nearby Washington College and was taught by the famous Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Samuel Doak. When he and his younger brother, Elijah, grew up, they further expanded the iron business and accumulated considerable wealth. Elihu married twice, first to Annes Williams, and after her death to Elizabeth Carriger. The two marriages produced several children, all daughters.

## **Elihu Embree And The Slavery Issue**

As a young man Elihu Embree regarded himself as a Deist. Deism was a popular philosophy among intellectuals, including several of the Founding Fathers, in late 18th-century America. While rejecting revelation in favor of human reason, Deism held that justice was a divine attribute attainable at least in the hereafter. Only later did Elihu Embree join the Society of Friends. Perhaps his early thoughts on justice together with the Quaker commitment to the abolitionist cause explains the zeal with which he embraced the cause. The 19th century historian, Rev. E. E. Hoss, portrayed Elihu as a man with great compassion, despite a fiery temper. Hoss called him “a dreamer of dreams” and “a radical, outspoken, and aggressive abolitionist at a time when New England had only a nascent conscience on the subject of slavery.”

Although the Embrees opposed the concept of slavery, at times they themselves owned slaves. Even Elihu came to own several slaves as a result of his second marriage. In November 1809 he sold these slaves, who were all members of a single family, to two different buyers. However, no doubt reflecting his increasing personal commitment to the abolitionist cause, he bought the slaves back in 1812. Elihu is believed to have freed some of the slaves soon thereafter “at considerable financial sacrifice.” However, he kept a female slave and her children until the end of his life. It is not known whether Elihu Embree simply acted as a trustee or put the slaves to work, but he was concerned about their ongoing welfare. His last will and testament provided that

faithful servant and slave black Nancy together with her children Frames a yellow boy or young man Abegil & Sophea her two black daughters and Mount her yellow daughter and John her son nearly black (should be) legally emancipated as soon as they can.

The will set aside the sum of forty dollars to educate each of the children.

The fact that Elihu Embree remained a slave owner long after becoming a leader of the abolitionist movement is paradoxical. He admitted to being “not very scrupulous in adhering to what I believed to be right, as respected much of my moral conduct.” However, it must be remembered that the cost of freeing a whole family of slaves may well have been prohibitive, and prevailing state laws prohibited owners from freeing child slaves separate from their parents.

The emancipation of individual slaves had been in progress for many years. Originally, emancipation required action by the Tennessee State legislature, but in 1801, legislation was passed empowering the county courts to make the necessary decisions. Upon petition, the clerk of the court recorded the event and issued a certificate of emancipation.

However, the abolitionists wanted to go further and ban slavery altogether. In 1815, antislavery groups--most of them Quakers--founded the Tennessee Manumission Society. It committed itself to working to eliminate slavery and extend the Declaration of Independence to all Americans. Within a year, the society had 474 members divided into 16 chapters, and Elihu Embree became one of its leaders. In 1818, Elihu visited Philadelphia and met leading members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the oldest such society in the United States.

## Elihu Embree's Publications

Upon his return, Elihu Embree decided to publish a weekly newspaper, the *Manumission Intelligencer*, in Jonesborough, Tennessee. The *Intelligencer* was intended to promote the abolitionist cause, but it also reported other issues and included paid advertisements. Publishing a weekly paper was too much for its editor, and early in 1820 Elihu Embree replaced it by a monthly magazine, *The Emancipator*, devoted solely to abolitionist topics. In promoting the new publication, Elihu wrote:

This paper is especially designed... to advocate the abolition of slavery, and to be a repository of tracts on that interesting and important subject. It will contain all the necessary information... on the progress of the abolition of slavery of the descendants of Africa, together with a concise history of their introduction into slavery."

The first edition of *The Emancipator* appeared on April 30, 1820 with six subscribers, but its circulation increased quickly, and by June, more than 2,500 copies had to be printed.

*The Emancipator* proved to be a considerable financial burden, even for a wealthy man. Elihu Embree accepted this burden "hoping that it will... in some small degree hasten an even balance of equal rights to the now neglected sons of Africa." Nevertheless, he sought some relief by becoming a postmaster, a position that gave him free mailing privileges. Elihu justified this step on the grounds that "the government (should bear) the expense... of distributing these communications... for the purposes of preparing the public mind for a practical reform from imposing unconditional slavery on a portion of its subjects."

Not surprisingly, the newspapers evoked much opposition, and Elihu Embree had some angry confrontations with pro-slavery advocates both inside and outside the state. However, he never became discouraged. In one issue of *The Emancipator* he wrote:

Twenty years ago the cause of abolition was so unpopular in Tennessee, that it was at the risk of a man's life that he interfered or assisted in establishing the liberty of a person of color that was held in slavery... But by little & little, times are much changed here, until societies of respectable citizens have arisen to plead the cause of abolition.

## Elihu Embree's Death

Elihu Embree died from nervous collapse and fever on December 4, 1820, a few months after his wife Elizabeth's death. He was 38 years old. In her grief, Elihu's mother's wrote tenderly:

The top of Carmel has withered  
Elihu has gone; my first born  
Has stept out of time  
And left me to mourn.

To date, seven issues of *The Emancipator* had been published. They have all been preserved and recently were republished. Despite the end of *The Emancipator*, Elihu had achieved much success. His brother, Elijah, expressed widespread appreciation for Elihu's achievements:

Great lamentations are made for the loss of Elihu... and great encomiums were given him by a preacher at his funeral and some newspapers give large descriptions of his worth and the loss sustained by his death. He seemed to be gaining on the minds of the people... and the opposition to slave holding seems to be gaining ground.

Optimism about the abolitionist cause seemed justified at the time. At the 1834 Tennessee Constitutional Convention, one third of the members voted for emancipation. But opinions soon

hardened, and by the 1840s free debate on the abolition issue was no longer tolerated, and during the administration of President Andrew Jackson, censorship laws were passed prohibiting abolitionist literature. The Civil War brought about the final confrontation between the southern slave states and the North.

The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1865, finally declared that “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude” shall exist in the United States. Sadly, it did not end discrimination against the slaves or their descendants, and the lot of African Americans did not significantly improve until the civil rights legislation of the 1950s and ’60s. Emancipation took a long time. But all great reform movements have their defining moments in history, and Elihu Embree played a pivotal role at one of those moments.

Born into a well-to-do family, Elihu Embree could have enjoyed a life of ease. But he was sensitive to the plight of fellow human beings and embraced the cause of freedom at a time when the majority exploited slavery for material gain or at best turned a blind eye. Elihu wrestled with his own shortcomings, but he was single-minded in his determination to end the outrage of slavery. In the end he sacrificed his fortune and life to the cause. As the Tibetan pointed out,

A few souls... are the key people in any age, and the determining factors, psychologically, in any historical period. It is they who set the pace and do the pioneering work. They focus in themselves both the hatred and the love of the world; they work as the Builders or as the Destroyers, and they return eventually to their own place, carrying the spoils of victory in the shape of the freedom which they have won for themselves or for others.

Elihu Embree set the pace, did the pioneering work, and served as a focus of hatred and love. Although he did not live to see the fruits of his work, he helped win freedom for many people. In 1974, the Tennessee State Legislature honored the memory of Elihu Embree for his work on behalf of the “universal and equal liberty of all men.” We honor him as a forerunner in the long struggle for right human relations.

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