

Dark Sky Rising

**RECONSTRUCTION AND
THE DAWN OF JIM CROW**

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
with Tonya Bolden

SCHOLASTIC
FOCUS
NEW YORK

To Edward Austen Burke, Nathaniel Louis Gosdanian, and Ella Edith Parke Heinrich: May you live in a world in which racism is a historic memory.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., author. | Bolden, Tonya, author.

Title: Dark sky rising : Reconstruction and the dawn of Jim Crow / Henry Louis Gates, Jr with Tonya Bolden.

Other titles: Reconstruction and the dawn of Jim Crow

Description: New York : Scholastic Focus, [2019] | Audience: Grades 4-6. | Audience: Ages 9-12.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016732 | ISBN 9781338262049 (hardcover : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: African Americans—History—1863-1877—Juvenile literature. | Reconstruction (U.S. history, 1865-1877)—Juvenile literature. | African Americans—Social conditions—19th century—Juvenile literature. | African Americans—Segregation—Southern States—History—Juvenile literature. | Southern States—Race relations—History—Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC E185.2 .G37 2019 | DDC 973/.0496073—dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, February 2019

Book design by Len Small

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Let Freedom
Ring!

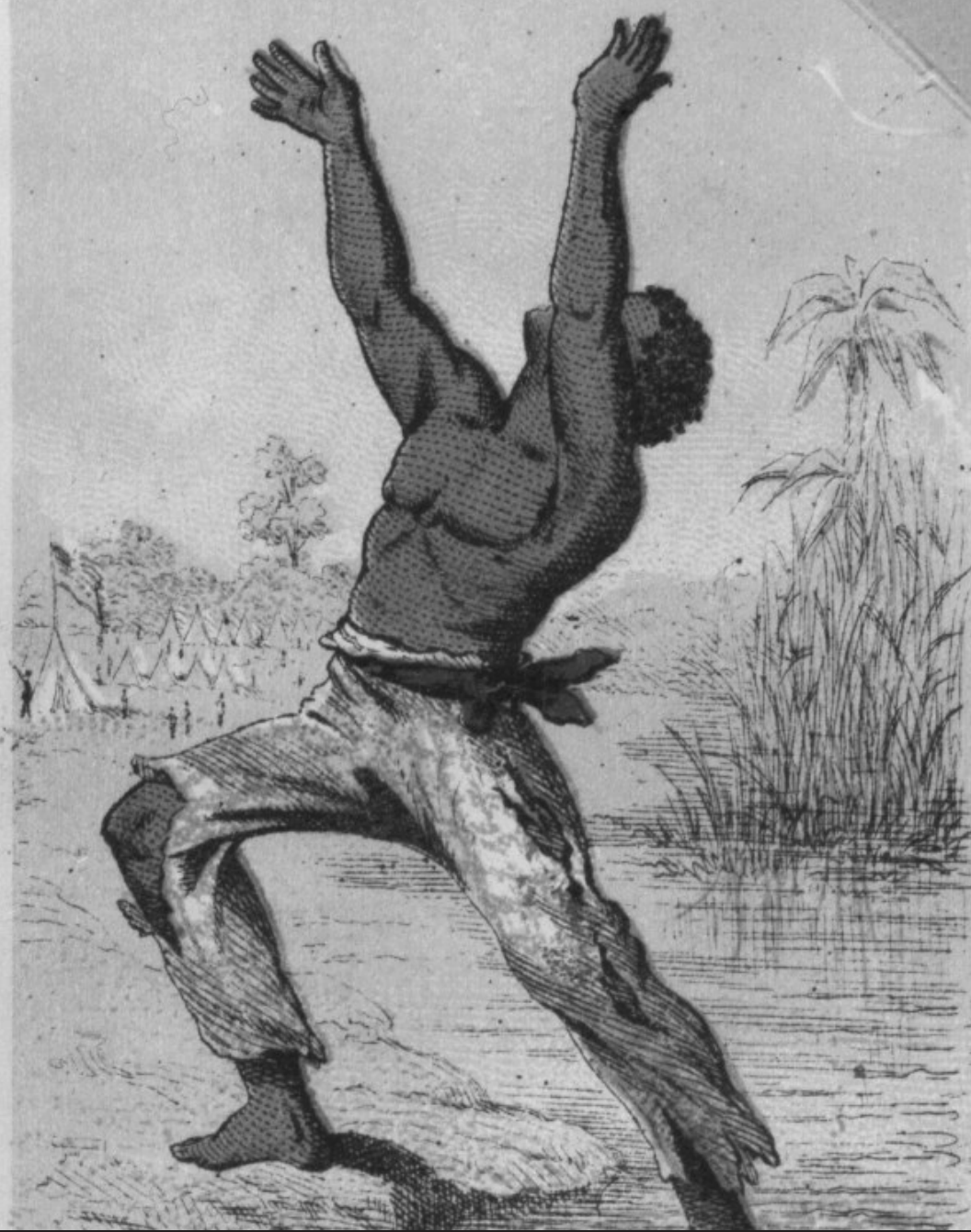
A sacred moment in a grove of live oaks draped in Spanish moss.

A song, impromptu, from the souls of black folk moved witnesses to tears.

*My country 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing . . .*

It began with an elderly man possessed of a strong, if gravelly, voice. Between one moment and the next, two women joined in. Soon more black voices were aloft singing of “rocks and rills,” of “woods and templed hills,” of freedom ringing out.

When white people lent their voices to the song, “I motioned them to silence,” remembered Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, remarking upon his tearfulness that day. “I never saw anything so electric,”



REACHING AND REJOICING: News of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, declaring freedom for people enslaved in Rebel-held territory, was cause for joyous celebration and for millions of black people to set their sights on a bright future.

he added, “it made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed.”

This electric, majestic moment happened on Thursday, January 1, 1863, more than six hundred bloody days into the Civil War, America’s second revolution.

That grove of live oaks was next to Camp Saxton in Port Royal, South Carolina, which had been under Union occupation since late 1861. The gathering in the grove was a celebration of what the formidable Frederick Douglass called “the trump of jubilee”: President Abraham Lincoln’s grand Emancipation Proclamation. It declared people enslaved in Rebel-held territory *free*.

On the 1st of January, 1863, we held services for the purpose of listening to the reading of President Lincoln’s proclamation. . . . It was a glorious day for us all, and we enjoyed every minute of it.

—Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (1902)

It was shortly after the reading of Lincoln’s proclamation that the singing of “My Country ’Tis of Thee”

swept over the vast crowd of thousands, roughly seven hundred of whom were members of a proud black regiment under Colonel Higginson's command: the 1st South Carolina Volunteers.

*Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From ev'ry mountain side
Let freedom ring!*



COMMANDER AND ABOLITIONIST: Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson's abolitionist activities included involvement with the Underground Railroad.

Dr. Seth Rogers, the regiment's white chief surgeon, also witnessed that moment of soaring song. When he wrote to his wife, Hannah, of "the most eventful day" of his life, he said that the "spontaneous outburst of love and loyalty to a country that has heretofore so terribly wronged these blacks, was the birth of a new hope in the honesty of her intention."

"Just think of it!—the first day [black people] had ever had a country," Colonel Higginson later proclaimed, declaring that "the life of the whole day was in those unknown people's song."

After Higginson addressed the crowd in that grove of live oaks, he presented the color bearers, Sergeant Prince Rivers and Corporal Robert Sutton, with the flags they were to keep flying high and out of enemy hands in battle. Prince Rivers vowed that he would *die* before he surrendered his flag.

Prince Rivers, a five-foot-ten dark-skinned man with light eyes, had endured some forty years in slavery on Henry Middleton Stuart's plantation along the Coosaw River near Beaufort, South Carolina, not far from Port Royal. A house servant and coachman, Rivers learned to read and write while enslaved. He did so at great peril. Rivers risked a brutal whipping, being sold farther south, or other forms of punishment if found out.