

Jea, John

(1773–1817?),

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Methodist preacher and seaman, was born in the port town of Old Calabar, in Nigeria, West Africa, to Margaret and Hambleton Robert Jea. At age two Jea and his family were captured in Old Calabar and transported to America on a slave ship. With his parents and several siblings he was immediately sold to the family of Oliver and Angelika Tiehuen, members of the Dutch Reformed Church who owned land outside New York City. This knowledge comes from Jea's narrative, *The Life, History, and Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, written and published in 1815; it is the only source of information about most of Jea's life and travels.

The newly enslaved family was set to work as field hands and quickly felt the hardship of poor conditions and physical abuse. Jea found little comfort in the message of obedience and humility preached to him each Sabbath at Dutch Reformed services, and he resented his master's attempt to instill docility in him by sending him to a church school. "My hatred was so much against going to the chapel that I would rather have received one hundred lashes," Jea later recalled (Hodges, 21). Rejecting organized religion Jea found solace in private prayer and often meditated in secret. Discovery of his alternative practices of worship led to beatings, and his master, frustrated by Jea's rebellious nature, sold him. His subsequent masters were soon equally frustrated, and his third owner was furious to discover that Jea had been secretly baptized. Taking Jea to the magistrate the master demanded that the baptism be annulled. Yet Jea made a public testimony of his faith sufficient to convince the magistrate of the truth of his conversion and so was vindicated.

The fifteen-year-old Jea returned to fieldwork and prayed for guidance. Mistakenly believing that slaves who could read would be automatically freed, the illiterate Jea turned to the Bible and "held it up to my ears, to try whether the book would talk with me or not, but it proved all to be in vain" (22). Six weeks later a dream brought an angel to answer Jea's prayers. Imagining himself in a dungeon with a Bible beside him Jea heard the angel tell him, "Thou hast desired to read and understand this book" (22). That wish was granted, and Jea awoke newly able to read the Gospel of John. The next day he repeated the feat before a Presbyterian minister who validated his abilities. Jea's miraculous story soon spread, and "people flocked from all parts to know whether it was true or not" (115). In 1789 a group of magistrates, apparently fearful that he might share his newfound literacy with fellow slaves, ordered his emancipation.

Liberated at last, Jea soon married Elizabeth, a Native American former slave, who bore him a child but soon fell into a deep depression under pressure from her employer to remain in near bondage as a domestic. Stress and anxiety led her to kill both her mother and her child, and she threatened to kill her husband. She was tried and hanged, events that Jea reported in his autobiography with the detachment of a man who would lose three wives and several children during his life.

In the aftermath Jea began to preach and travel, inaugurating a twenty-five-year itinerant ministry. Merging some elements of the Dutch Reformed tradition with some holdover African beliefs, Jea began identifying himself as a Methodist. Freedmen were flooding into Methodist ranks in the 1790s, drawn in by a rhetorical blend of antislavery, egalitarianism, and Loyalism. The denomination's acceptance of black members even propelled some, like Jea, into positions as itinerant preachers who traveled into rural areas to minister to enslaved populations. Thus Jea joined the first generation of black American preachers, alongside men such as Absalom Jones , Richard Allen , John Marrant , and George White, most of whom identified with evangelical denominations like Methodism.

The mushrooming growth of Methodism in the early nineteenth century did not preserve the denomination's early egalitarian principles for long. As organized Methodism grew, the church made increasing accommodations with pro-slavery power blocs. A schism soon emerged between black Methodists working to end slavery and white Methodists content to abandon abolition. This growing divide helps explain the degree to which John Jea eschewed formal church affiliation and any sort of Methodist sponsorship. Preferring the independence of transience and poverty Jea moved freely across borders and oceans preaching a personal gospel of salvation and individual liberty. His first preaching tour took him across New York State and eastern New Jersey. Every few miles he would hold a two-day outdoor revival similar to love feasts in order to reach the rural slave communities of which he had once been a part.

His calling first took him to sea in the early 1800s. As W. Jeffrey Bolster has shown, the life of a seaman was a popular and often profitable vocation for free blacks in the early republic; every year perhaps as many as 20,000 became so-called black jacks. Jea used his months aboard ship, often serving as cook, to preach the gospel to disbelieving crewmates, and he took every opportunity to discover providential signs in each storm and harbor that his vessels encountered.

Jea made landfall in 1805 and began the first of several European preaching tours, covering hundreds of miles in Ireland and England before returning to sea. Next came brief residences in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Helder near Hamburg before Jea returned to the United States. He spent more than two years in Boston before traveling south to New Orleans. There Jea met his greatest challenge, finding the city's residents distinctly uninterested in his message of moral rectitude and spiritual supplication. He departed after only three months, concluding that "all was in vain, for the people were like those [of] Sodom and Gomorrah, for it appeared that they neither feared God, nor regarded man" (137). He reached Liverpool, Boston, and the West Indies in quick succession before his ship was sent to aid in the failed British invasion of Buenos Aires in 1807.

His next destination was Ireland, by way of the West Indies, Virginia, Baltimore, and Boston. In Ireland he married his third wife, the second having died while Jea was away in the Netherlands. The fate of the third is unrecorded because Jea was soon back at sea, alone again. In 1810, while working as a cook aboard a British ship off the southern English coast, Jea was captured by a marauding French privateer and imprisoned in Brittany. His Loyalist sympathies were clearly discernible when he rejected the U.S. consul's offer of freedom in return for service aboard an American vessel in the War of 1812. Lambasting the American ship as a "floating hell" that was servant to a nation of tyrants, Jea refused to "ever fight against Old England, unless it be with the sword of the gospel, under the captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ" (29). His sojourn in prison did not last long, and Jea soon returned to England to begin a makeshift retirement in Portsea, a rough neighborhood of Portsmouth. The violent seaport community of Portsea was teeming with likely candidates for reform and rebirth, and Jea

seems to have found some financial patronage for his foray into evangelical publishing. Between 1815 and 1817 Jea printed a collection of hymns and then his own autobiography, which he had dictated to a scribe.

Jea's autobiography marks a significant stage in the development of African American personal narratives. Henry Louis Gates Jr. called *The Life, History, and Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* a “missing link of sorts” that continues the conventions of earlier generations of slave narratives while prefiguring the tropes of abolitionist-era autobiographies (Gates and Andrews, 23). Though Jea's text incorporated the convention of using animal metaphors to describe slave life, it also marks the literalization and apogee of the trope of the talking book.

Jea's narrative also stands at the cusp of two major transitions in the history of the autobiographies of former slaves. First, Jea is one of the last autobiographers to be born in Africa. Indeed, despite the brevity of his Nigerian childhood, his African origin looms large throughout the narrative: Jea continually referred to himself as a “poor African,” a “black African,” and an “African preacher.” Second, the *Life, History, and Sufferings* is among the last slave narratives to place religion at the core of the story: the miraculous appearance of an angel would appear strangely anachronistic within the decade. Stylistically Jea's personal history also incorporated a new element that soon became standard in antebellum autobiography: the visual representation of the author. In profile and in silhouette the image of Jea featured on the title page draws attention to the African physiognomy and dark skin of the book's author.

As a piece of evangelical literature Jea's autobiography also established an important precedent. His voice, soon to be joined in chorus by other black preachers of the nineteenth century, was one of the first to mount a radical attack on slavery through personal evangelism. Stressing rebirth and often drawing comparisons between himself and the raised-again figure of Lazarus, Jea's gospel prefigured the radicalism of black Pentecostals by several decades.

In recent years some historians have questioned the veracity of some elements of Jea's account. In particular John Salliant has cast doubt upon Jea's assertion that he was born a free man in Africa. Noting the certainty with which Jea declaims his year of birth and questioning the likelihood of a whole family being captured and sold together, Salliant provides a timely reminder of how little we know of Jea's life beyond the autobiography.

Indeed, after the publication of *Life, History, and Sufferings* the details of Jea's life are largely unknown. All that is known is that in 1816 he married Jemima Davis, his fourth wife, and a year later attended the baptism of their daughter Hephzabah at an Anglican chapel in Portsmouth. This is the last public record of John Jea, and it is likely that he returned to the sea, only to die soon afterward.

Further Reading

Hodges, Graham Russell, ed. *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (1993).

Bolster, W. Jeffrey. *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1997).

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Salliant, John. "Traveling in Old and New Worlds with John Jea, the African Preacher, 1773-1816," *Journal of American Studies* 33.3 (1999).

See also

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Gates, Henry Louis "Skip," Jr. <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36461>>

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