



Source: Sketches of the Life and Character of the Rev. Lemuel Haynes (1837)

“Liberty is a jewel which was handed to man from the cabinet of Heaven.” – Lemuel Haynes

Lemuel Haynes was born July 18th, 1753 to a black father and a white mother. However, he had no memory of them as they abandoned him at the age of five months at which time he was given to a blind farmer from Granville, Massachusetts named Deacon David Rose. Technically, Haynes was an indentured servant of the Rose family, but they treated him as one of their own children. With great affection, he would later recall the unconditional love he was shown by Elizabeth Rose, Deacon’s wife.

Elizabeth recognized Lemuel’s keen intellect at an early age and made sure he had access to books. As a young boy, he would work hard in the fields during the day and read books and memorize their content at night. He soon became known as the “disciple of the chimney-corner,” a reference to the room where he would sit for long hours surrounded by his books.

The only diversion he seemingly preferred to those evenings of private study was the opportunity to attend the

services of a local church. At a young age, Haynes became a committed Christian. At the end of his life, he would write his own epitaph in which he described himself as “a poor hell-deserving sinner who ventured into eternity trusting wholly on the merits of Christ for salvation.”¹ But that was many years in the future, and for now, Haynes was simply a young man exploring his newfound faith. As his Bible knowledge deepened and his speaking skills grew, he would often read a published sermon for the Rose family as they gathered in the evening. One night, Haynes read a sermon he had written on his own but told no one of the source. The family was convinced he had read a sermon authored by the famous evangelist, George Whitfield. “Was that a Whitefield?” they asked with intense curiosity. “No,” replied a beaming Lemuel, “it was a Haynes.”

Haynes’ indenture to the Rose family expired in 1774. He was now free to pursue what he perceived to be his theological calling. However, it was that same year that Lemuel Haynes answered another call. One of his first acts as a free man was to join the minutemen of Granville, Massachusetts and a few months later, he marched with his militia following the Battles of Lexington and Concord. By 1776, the young nation had officially declared its independence and Haynes’ unit was asked to garrison the recently captured Fort Ticonderoga. However, his arrival in October coincided with several Continental setbacks at the Battles of Valcour Bay and the Battle of White Plains. In the weeks that followed, the Continental forces suffered additional casualties (perhaps as many as 3000) in additional skirmishes. More troops were needed and it seemed inevitable that Haynes would soon join his brother-in-arms on the front lines, an idea he enthusiastically embraced. However, that excitement came to a sudden halt on November 17, 1776 when he contracted typhus and was sent home.

“Every privilege that mankind Enjoy have their Origin from God; and whatever acts are passed in an Earthly court, which are Derogatory to those Edicts that are passed in the Court of Heaven, the act is void.” – Lemuel Haynes

Lemuel Haynes may have been denied his chance to defend freedom with a bayonet, but this zealous patriot never lost his enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause. For the next 50 years, he would use his considerable influence to support the principles of the Revolution. One in particular would capture his attention early. The same year that he took up arms, he also wrote an essay titled *Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping*. Calling liberty “a Jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven,”² Haynes confidently proclaimed that “he that would take away a man’s Liberty assumes a prerogative that belongs to another.” “An African,” he stated bluntly, “has the same undeniable right to his Liberty as any other.” He offered several Bible texts as evidence including Acts 17:26 which says that “It hath pleased God to make of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell upon the face of the earth.” To Haynes, the freeing of American slaves was a logical application of the principles of the Revolution. He did not live long enough to see the legal emancipation of American slaves, but his powerful words helped ignite the work of the 19th century abolitionists who would continue to fight to make the creed that “all men are created equal” a reality.



Rev. Lemuel Haynes, A. M. Preaching in the First Church
Bennington, Vermont
Painting by William Tefft Schwarz, in the Bennington
Historical Museum and Art Gallery

Source: James R. Tanis Collection
of Church Postcards at Princeton
Theological Seminary

During his brief military service, Haynes continued writing sermons. After his discharge, he returned to the Rose homestead to continue his theological studies. He was admitted to Dartmouth College but declined the offer to instead study Latin and Greek under two area pastors. In November 1780, Haynes accepted a position in an all-white congregation in Granville, Massachusetts and preached his first public sermon. Five years later, he

became the first black American to be ordained as a minister. He soon became the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Torrington, Connecticut. His appointment was resisted by several small-minded congregants including one individual who protested Haynes’ appointment by “wearing a hat” to Sunday services. By all reports, the individual was soon won over by Haynes’ impassioned preaching and removed his hat. Haynes was soon enjoying a successful ministry and three years later he added to the blessing of his post when he married twenty-year-old Elizabeth Babbit, a young white teacher with whom he eventually shared ten children.

News of Lemuel’s preaching skills soon spread and he accepted a call to pastor a church in Rutland, Vermont, where he faithfully served for the next thirty years. Lemuel became a much-admired leader during his many years of service and the church grew from 42 to over 350 members under his leadership. Even more remarkably was the fact that the pastor of this little congregation in rural Vermont, who unapologetically challenged the social attitudes of the day, became much admired across the country and around the world. Eventually, his sermons and other writings were published throughout America and Europe. Several additional honors came his way including the distinction of being the first black man to receive an honorary degree from Middlebury College.

At the time of his death in 1833, Lemuel Haynes was known as “one of colonial New England’s finest minds.” He was certainly one of its most intriguing figures. The American Experiment had no stronger supporter than Lemuel Haynes. He truly believed that “All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” In short, he loved the idea of America. But this same commitment to human equality that made him an ardent admirer of the young American republic also reinforced his determination to combat the racial prejudice he saw around him.

What motivates an individual to live with that type of courage? Timothy Cooley, Haynes’ original biographer, wrote in 1837 that “Never did he wait to inquire whether a particular doctrine was popular. His only inquiries were, ‘Is it true? Is it profitable? Is it seasonable?’”³ Almost two centuries later, Haynes remains a wonderful example of what happens when conviction, courage, and charity all rest in a single individual. In Cooley’s words, “he cannot fail to be regarded as an extraordinary man.”

Key Question

1. Lemuel Haynes is the first black person to be ordained a minister in the U.S. Using the internet, compile a list of five “firsts” for black Americans (for example, Barack Obama – U.S. President).

Sources

- 1 Timothy Mather Cooley, *Sketches of the Life and Character of the Rev. Lemuel Haynes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1837), 312.
- 2 Lemuel Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping” *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* (originally published 1776): [web](#).
- 3 Cooley, *Sketches of the*, 79.