

REVEALED: Season 1, Episode 12 | [THURMOND] Thurmond, Part 2

[STONE]: [00:00:00] Welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed, brought to you by Lance Toland Entertainment. I'm Richard Stone, your host and co-creator of the historical drama Flames of Freedom. In these bonus episodes accompanying our dramatic stories, we explore the historical roots of the Jewish quest for liberty with world-renowned scholars, authors, and historians.

We'll delve into the background of the characters in our story who were escaping from the cruel inequities of the Portuguese Inquisition, murderous pogroms in Eastern Europe, and virulent anti-Semitism. Why were they willing to risk their lives to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in the untamed wilderness of the new American colony of Georgia, founded by James Oglethorpe?

But with no assurances that they'd even be allowed to come ashore. Today on Flames of Freedom Revealed, we [00:01:00] continue our conversation with [THURMOND] the Chief Executive Officer of DeKalb County, Georgia. He's the author of James Oglethorpe, Father of Georgia, Freedom, Georgia's Anti-Slavery Heritage, 1733 to 1865.

And a story untold, black men and women in Athens history. Thurmond has previously served in the Georgia legislature as the director of Georgia's Division of Family and Children's Services, Georgia Labor Commissioner, and as superintendent of DeKalb Schools. In 1997, he became a distinguished lecturer at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

[THURMOND]:], it's a pleasure to have you back on Blames of Freedom Revealed. So, Oglethorpe founds the colony. There's a prohibition against owning slaves. Yet, uh, literally up the road in South Carolina, there is a vibrant slave trade going on. And this set up a tremendous tension, I think, within the Georgia [00:02:00] colony as there was a kind of a growing voice of people saying, Hey, we should own slaves too.

Look, they, we don't have the same economic advantage. And Oglethorpe resisted it really right up until his leaving. It was only after he left that the trustees finally threw up their hands and gave in. Tell us a little bit about the dynamics politically of what was going on and how Oglethorpe resisted a lot of pressure from a number of people moving into the colony to allow slavery to come to the colony.

[THURMOND]: Overthrow was also a very astute politician. And so part of the narrative that he promoted and the trustees in order to get support from King George and Parliament was that England needed a buffer colony between.

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British controlled South Carolina and Spanish controlled Florida because Florida for decades have been trying to [00:03:00] undermine and destabilize the majority black South Carolina colony.

And so part of at least the public narrative that Overthorpe projected was that we need a slave free colony as a buffer colony. to protect, to some people would argue, slavery in South Carolina. Eventually though, and that's part of the reason there's been a prevailing narrative, that even though slavery was prohibited in Georgia, the prohibition lacked concern for enslaved black people.

But very quickly, Oglethorpe's evolution takes him from that argument, buffer colony, to expressing concern for black people in, uh, Africa. I think it was in 1739 January, the first recorded statement where he states unequivocally That slavery would harm free people in Africa and that slavery should not be [00:04:00] legalized in Georgia.

[STONE]: So in the historical debates about Oglethorpe, whether he was anti-slavery or whether just maybe it was a convenience for him or not. And some have said, Oh, he was a hypocrite. You know, here he wants you to be involved with the slave trade. He's suddenly gone over to the other side. Tell us a little more about you've learned in your research about him.

And just what you were talking about is that there was a shift in an understanding about this for him. He was not a perfect human being, but his perspective was evolving. Because as I understood it, initially he thought, Well, we don't want to have slaves there because we don't want these people who are coming over who are poor from England to suddenly rely on other people for their labor.

We want them to work hard and to earn their way, not to have someone else do their work for them. But that shifted for him, correct?

[THURMOND]: Correct.

[STONE]: Okay.

[THURMOND]: It's an evolution. Oglethorpe, before he became an abolitionist, he became anti-slavery. One [00:05:00] of the key points in understanding this art and evolution, and even my book, is to recognize that we, in a contemporary way, use the terms anti-slavery and abolitionism interchangeably.

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But they represent and are two very distinct moral and political positions. A person could be anti-slavery and not support abolitionism, i.e., the Christianization of enslaved blacks was an anti-slavery strategy. But Thomas Bray, I've not been able to find, ever argued for the abolition of slavery. He argued that black people should have access to these teachings and potentially access to the throne of grace.

So, Overthrow evolves from this awareness that I should be concerned about the plights, not just of poor British subjects, but also of poor enslaved black people. A slave-free Georgia, a prohibition of slavery in [00:06:00] Georgia, was an anti-slavery strategy. In and of itself, it did not advocate or support the idea of abolition.

That evolves over 140 years to become an abolitionist strategy. In this book, I try in my research to look at prehistory and give it as much credence as we often do history. In terms of events, we often look at the result, we celebrate Martin Luther King for being the titular head of the modern civil rights movement.

We don't spend a lot of time focused on the often failed efforts by black people and their allies in the decades, whether it was the 40s, the 30s, the 20s, or the teens. that led up to what we know as the modern civil rights movement. Overthought breathed life in what became the abolitionist movement. And to be anti-slavery, frankly, was more revolutionary than being an [00:07:00] abolitionist.

60 years later, just because of the evolution of thought and ideas, to consider black people as being a human being was a revolutionary idea in the early 18th century.

[STONE]:: Interesting. So this whole Georgia colony was a remarkable experiment, both in really starting new ideas that weren't really around in the wider society at the time.

It was a welfare experiment. The idea of creating a place for poor people to be able to thrive and exist. There were a number of economic things they were experimenting with that some of which did not work. They were going to create a thriving silk trade business that sort of never quite took off. It's almost laughable when they thought they could grow great wine on the coast of Georgia.

Although we now know that when the mountains of Georgia, some people were producing some decent wines. So there were a lot of things that went well. But a

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lot of things did not go well in this [00:08:00] experiment. The colony struggled in large part during his tenure. Is that correct?

[THURMOND]: That's part of the narrative.

But one other thing that distinguished Georgia from the other 12 colonies was that Georgia was the only non-profit. It was the only charitable colony. All the other colonies were for-profit ventures. So that is why Oglethorpe and the trustees adopted as their motto, the non-CBZ elite. Latin, not for self, but for others.

They could not profit from this venture. And that created an environment where you could have more progressive, i.e., sometimes revolutionary ideas about how people would engage and treat each other in North America at that point in our history. We celebrate Georgia, and we celebrate beautiful Savannah because of the architecture and the squares.

I argue the most compelling part of Oglethorpe's legacy. along with urban design are his ideas, [00:09:00] ideas that have stood the test of time. And I'll leap forward. I often hear, and it's described as Oglethorpe's, and the ideas fail. He wanted a slave free Georgia, but obviously, by 1751, slavery had been legalized and the idea of prohibiting slavery just didn't work economically.

I argue that looking further, stepping back, his idea did not fail. We live in a slave free Georgia. We live in a slave free America. His idea stood the test of time, and he ends up on the right side of history. And those who argued for enslavement, and invested in enslaving millions of people, they failed.

And they're the ones who now must shoulder the burden of living on the wrong side of the historical spectrum.

[STONE]:: Thank you for that. Let's fast forward to the early 1740s. Actually, Oglethorpe attempted twice, I believe, to go down and [00:10:00] capture St. Augustine. And if any of our listeners have ever seen that fort in St.

Augustine, it was quite formidable. I think the walls are about 20 feet thick, he failed, but he did enough to aggravate the Spanish that they decided they wanted to put it into the Georgia colony. And I think they sent an armada of about 30 ships and it didn't look good. And they landed on St. Simon's Island.

Oglethorpe had a ragtag group of some soldiers, a number of Indians, some of the settlers, and the militia. And, uh, through a series of probably lucky

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circumstances. And perhaps knowing the terrain a little better than the Spanish did, because St. Simon's was pretty swampy, the Spanish retreated. Tell us a little bit about that altercation.

And then that was pretty much the conclusion of Oglethorpe's tenure as the leader of the colony. He returned to England to basically defend his name because he was [00:11:00] accused of malfeasance in the execution of the war. So maybe you could tell us a little bit about that period of time, and then maybe tell us as we wrap up, what was Oglethorpe's life like as he returned to England to never return again to Georgia?

Another

[THURMOND]: a key element of Oglethorpe's philosophy and advocacy, he was the first, maybe only British leader who publicly argued that enslaved black people would actually fight for their freedom, that given the opportunity, they would ally themselves with the enemies of their enslavers and fight for their freedom and the freedom of other enslaved people.

Part of the pro-slavery narrative was that black people were docile. Cowardly and in most instances actually prefer to be enslaved as opposed to freedom. Oglethorpe would hear none of that. The irony of it is he goes to St. Augustine and maybe unbeknownst to him, [00:12:00] there's a Fort, Fort Mose North of St.

Augustine and these formerly self-emancipated black men. have allied themselves with the Spanish and the Seminoles and play a key role in defeating Oglethorpe and, his invasion force. Oglethorpe never forgets that. Two years later, he tries again, the Spanish came and try to destroy not just Georgia, but they wanted to go further, I think, up to South Carolina and gain control or strategic control of the Southeast United States.

What's interesting to me, when Oglethorpe invades Florida, the Battle of Bloody Mose, that's what is known as in Spain, of course, the Spanish were victorious. When Spain invades Georgia, Oglethorpe defeats them at Bloody Marsh, what we study in school is about the Battle of Bloody Marsh. Nothing about the Battle of Bloody Mose.

Oglethorpe [00:13:00] not just saves Georgia, I think he saves the Southeast United States by defeating the Spanish and the black allies there at Bloody Marsh. And for his efforts, he wasn't just going to save his reputation. One of the charges against him was treason. He was going to defend his life. The pro-

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slavery forces who had tried to discredit him and undermine his authority had succeeded, along with some disgruntled militiamen who went to Florida, in having 19 charges against Oglethorpe.

So Oglethorpe has to go home to defend not just his reputation, but also his life. Also the Parliament had not reimbursed Oglethorpe for substantial sums of money that he had invested into the Georgia colony. So he went to save his wealth, his reputation, and his life. Because a conviction for treason can be punishable by death.

So the father of Georgia is literally run out of Georgia in disgrace [00:14:00] in July 1743.

[STONE]:: So we know he was successful in defending himself and he was done with Georgia, but he had a long life after that. Could you tell us a little bit, as we have just a few minutes left, What was Oglethorpe's life like after he returned to England, and what kinds of causes did he engage in, and how did he continue to be an influential leader?

[THURMOND]: He was progressive, if I can use that term, not just as it relates to opposing chattel slavery, but he also allowed Jewish colonists to migrate to Georgia. They had been prohibited as well. But there was an outbreak of some type of fever. And it wasn't that Oglethorpe, I think, were welcoming to Jewish colonies.

That was this very prominent Jewish doctor, on the William and Sarah that showed up in Savannah Harbor in the midst of this malaria of fever that had killed some 20 colonists and the only doctor in the [00:15:00] colony. Oglethorpe was a practical man, too. And I always left to lift up Dr. Nunez, Because he said, okay, Doc, you can come, but none of the other Jewish colonies can disembark from the ship.

But Dr. Nunez said, no, the only way you will get me or my services is if you have to allow all of us to disembark and to come to the colony of Georgia. Oglethorpe was a practical man. He allows the doctor and the other colonists, a little more, I think about 42, to come to settle. And the doctor performs what they consider to be a miracle because Oglethorpe writes the letter and says, look, everyone who did what he told them to do is alive.

Oglethorpe is so grateful. Without checking with the trustees, he allowed 14 Jewish men to purchase land in the colony and Georgia can celebrate the fact

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that we have the third oldest Jewish synagogue in the nation. [00:16:00]
Oglethorpe was visionary. But also very practical

[STONE]:: and that's much of what our story is about that we're working on on our dramatic series is about everything that led up to that fateful moment when Dr.

Nunez arrives at the shores of the Savannah River and has a confrontation with Oglethorpe. Tell us a little bit about Oglethorpe's last years about how he lived out his life and what his legacy is.

[THURMOND]: Well, initially, of course, he attempts to become reelected. He wanted to go back to the House of Commons in parliament and he lost.

He ran a second time, and he lost. He fought, we believe in the seven-year war between France and England. He lived for a time in Paris. But what he became a part of, uh, Little Rotary of England, uh, late 18th century England with, uh, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. What had not been focused on was that he became the [00:17:00] gravitational center of a group of anti-slavery British subjects.

Very early on, he became a mentor for three people in particular. One, two, Olaudah Equiano, who became the most influential black man in 18th century England. Graham Villashark, a young white attorney, self-taught, who ultimately becomes the father of the former abolitionist movement. And Hannah Moore, one of the first intellectual female writers who become a co-founder of Uh, the former abolitionist movement, Oglethorpe, becomes again, the term patron saint.

He becomes their mentor. He encourages them. He supports them. He introduces Equiano, who if Martin Luther King was the most influential black man in the 20th century in America, if Frede[STONE] Douglass was the most influential black man in the 19th century, [00:18:00] Equiano was the most influential black man in the 18th century in the Atlantic world.

Thank you. Oglethorpe becomes an advisor to him, and he introduces Equiano, the Granville shark, the person who becomes the father of the former abolitionist movement.

[STONE]:: He has a really powerful legacy, and his influence continues to this day.

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[THURMOND]: Absolutely. I believe that he is one of the most consequential and influential thought leaders, visionaries of North America.

We think of, in a narrow sense, the founding fathers of Jefferson and, of course, General Washington and Benjamin Franklin. But a founding father of North America, which would have been British colonial America, William Penn, who we know a lot about, John Smith in Virginia, who we know a lot about, James Overthorpe is second to none.

He saw a world where people of different races, religions, [00:19:00] colors, and creeds were human beings. And you know, history is replete. The first step to annihilation and even the Holocaust, you have to dehumanize people. It's the dehumanization of people. It's what Hitler attempted to do. It's what all dictators attempt to do when you dehumanize a person, then you can perpetrate all type of atrocities.

Overthought was the first humanist. To lift up all of us as being members of the human family. He was a friend, not just of the oppressed Negro, but he was a friend of oppressed people of all races, colors, and creeds.

[STONE]:: Well, [THURMOND], I think we have reached the end of our time. I want to really appreciate you taking the afternoon to speak with us.

It's been illuminating. And I think our listeners will walk away with a whole new perspective, not only about Oglethorpe, but about this era of history. That is so [00:20:00] fundamental and crucial to our history as Georgians and as Americans. So I want to thank you again for being with us today.

[THURMOND]: I'm honored and delighted to be here.

As Georgians, we are better than who we think we are.

[STONE]:: Thank you so much.

[THURMOND]: Thank you.

[STONE]:: Thank you for listening to Flames of Freedom Revealed, hosted by Richard Stone and produced and directed by Mark Simon. Our executive producer is Lance Toland. Original music by Dave Wilson at Q Tone Productions. Special thanks to Rabbi Saul Rubin, whose assistance throughout the development of this series was invaluable.

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