

REVEALED: Michael Thurmond Part I

[Stone] Welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed, brought to you by Lance Tolan 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.

In today's episode of Flames of Freedom Revealed, we start with part one of a two-part conversation with Michael Thurmond, the Chief Executive Officer of DeKalb County, Georgia. He is 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 director of Georgia's Division of Family and Children's Services, Georgia labor Commissioner, and Superintendent of DeKalb Schools. In 1997, he became a distinguished lecturer at the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

Well, Michael, thank you for taking the time to be with us, uh, this afternoon to talk about a character that we're very interested in. And I know that you've had a strong interest in James Oglethorpe. And you've written just a wonderful new book called James Oglethorpe, Father of Georgia, a Founder's Journey from Slave Trader to Abolitionist.

So we're really looking forward to mining your knowledge and all the things that you've learned about James Oglethorpe. Tell us why you have this abiding interest in Oglethorpe. What attracted you to start exploring this man's life? Well, first, Rick, thank you so much for the kind invitation to come and to participate in this very insightful and enlightening podcast that you host.

[Thurmond] It's a true honor. My original interest in Oglethorpe dates back to middle school. If you educated in the schools of Georgia, we all know James Oglethorpe as the father of Georgia. But in the early 1990s, former Governor Zell Miller appointed me to serve as director of the Department of Family and Children's Services, which is a large agency that provides support and assistance to impoverished and disadvantaged Georgians. That coincided with the welfare reform era, and I decided that a great patron saint or figure that we could emulate and celebrate as we help impoverished Georgians move from welfare to work would be James Oglethorpe, who founded Georgia initially to provide a second chance for debtor prisoners, but later expanded it to include persecuted Christians, uh, persecuted individuals because of their religion, as well as poor, unemployed British subjects. Because of my work with welfare reform, I was invited to participate in a pilgrimage to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Oglethorpe's birth in October of 1996.

And during that pilgrimage on the last day, which was October 7th, we visited the village of Cranham, which is located about 19 miles northeast of London. We were there to lay a

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wreath on his tomb. He's buried beneath the floor. During the ceremony, I began to notice a white marble plaque that had been erected, uh, later discovered by his wife prior to her death, near his tomb, and listed on the white marble plaque was a long list of platitudes and accomplishments of James Overtorpe's life, his education, the founding of Georgia, his military career, the fact that he had served for many years in Parliament. One eight word affirmation sent us passage caught my attention.

Carved in the marble was one statement that read, he was the friend of the oppressed Negro. And throughout my years as a student in the public schools, as well as an adult, and even when we celebrated him as our role model to help unemployed, poor Georgians. I was unaware or had never been exposed to any information that suggested that James Overtorpe, the father of Georgia, had been a friend of the oppressed Negro.

That was my triggering moment that set in motion a 27-year journey that resulted in the publication of this book. Fabulous. It's so interesting how a little scene like that can set off a lifetime of exploration. So I'm so glad you've taken that journey. Let's set the stage a little and try to go back in time to the 1600s and try to understand what was the milieu and what were the values then and freedom, not slavery, was actually a peculiar institution until the 1700s, slavery, debt, bondage, serfdom, those were considered to be sort of a natural state for millions of impoverished laborers, not just in England, but on every continent.

People toiled in really miserable, difficult conditions. What was the history of the slave trade and describe for us the evolving practices of the slave trade and how it escalated under the British? You set the stage perfectly. No, but you laid it out. And I love the quote that freedom, not slavery was a peculiar institution.

Well, the British, as you just stated, beginning in the 16th century, really helped to pioneer what became the transatlantic slave trade with the support of Queen Elizabeth. And the British quickly overtook Spain and Portugal and some of the other European countries and initially transported African captives to South America, but quickly, because of the colonies that existed in the Indies, the West Indies, as well as the growing number of colonies in what is now, what we know as North America, there was a severe labor shortage. The colonists who came beginning in 1609 with the establishment of the Virginia Colony initially attempted to enslave Native Indians. That did not work well for various reasons. One, the Native Indians found it extremely difficult tolerating the harsh working conditions. They were susceptible to old world diseases like smallpox, and they were very familiar with the North American terrain, so it was very difficult to enslave them because they were more familiar with the, uh, terrain and the forests and often the swamps.

Then the British colonists were secondly, wealthy British colonists attempted to utilize what became known as indentured servants, poor white British subjects, those may be outcasts, former prisoners committed themselves to bond indebtedness and indentured servitude. Well, they would work from four to seven years.

It was widespread, but not very popular with British subjects. And more importantly, indentured servants were reluctant to work in the semi-tropical conditions that existed in South Carolina and later Georgia. So the next option that ultimately became the dominant form of labor in the British colonists was the enslavement of Africans, and that became the

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backbone of a rapidly expanding economy in North America and a brutal but highly, highly profitable trade. That opened up the door for British slave traders and other Europeans to plow the Atlantic Ocean on the triangular trade from England to Africa to North America, the West Indies, and back to England again.

[Stone] So what's interesting is James Oglethorpe and his intersection with this story, because Oglethorpe, he was a governor of the Royal African Company that was the epicenter of the slave trade. How is it that he went from that role and then at some point, we'll get into as a part of his story in a moment, but what brought him into that role as someone who was an advocate of slavery?

[Thurmond] Oftentimes, it's been said, truth is stranger than fiction, it was such a serendipitous turn of events that triggered Oglethorpe, and you correctly state, he was the deputy governor of the Royal African Company, who dominated the West African slave trade, chartered by the King of England. King George and others and supported by a series of British elite and royal family members.

But Oglethorpe, while serving as deputy governor, what happened was a letter fell into his possession, and it was a letter that had been written by an enslaved young black man who was enslaved in the colony of Maryland on a tobacco plantation. Ayuba Suleimon Diallo, who had been captured around February 1730.

Diallo came from an elite family in what is now modern-day Senegal, and he had the advantage of advanced education. So, he somehow convinced his enslaver in Maryland to allow him to write a letter to his father in Senegal, or at least address to his father, acquainting the father with where he was, his location, and possibly, at least under some historic analysis, seeking rescue.

The letter traveled 4,000 miles across the Atlantic, through the hand of several men who were engaged in the transatlantic slave trade and ultimately placed in James Oglethorpe's possession. Of course, Oglethorpe, who was an expert in ancient African civilizations, could not read Arabic. The letter was written in Arabic.

He sent it to Oxford University, had it translated, and he was so affected by the contents of the letter, he arranged with Diallo's enslaver to arrange for him to be transported across the Atlantic to England, and upon his safe arrival, Oglethorpe promised to purchase the young man from his North American enslaver.

So Diallo is now in England. He becomes what's described as a roaring lion of British society. ends up being entertained by the king and queen of England. Ultimately, it's free, manumitted, and returns to West Africa, laden with gold and treasures.

[Stone] So Diallo's story, uh, in reading your book is a fascinating one, because he was actually participating himself in the slave trade, correct? And at some point got him that sort of swept up and basically kidnapped and found himself to suddenly be enslaved.

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[Thurmond] That's the great irony of Diallo's story. He was on an errand for his father who was seeking to trade two enslaved Africans that they had enslaved for commodities from the British. But, as fate would have it, Diallo ends up in the hold of a slave ship and transported to Maryland.

Back to your earlier comment, it speaks to the omnipresence of slavery. Uh, slavery existed in every colony. Of course, African slavery was somewhat different, was significantly different than what became British chattel slavery and what became later American chattel slavery, but it was accepted on every continent that people could be bought and sold as property.

[Stone] So is it true that Oglethorpe's . . . their lives never quite crossed because by the time Diallo ended up in England, had Oglethorpe already left for Georgia?

[Thurmond] Yes. Oglethorpe was busy establishing the Georgia colony. When Diallo arrives in England, he stays there 12 years. Oglethorpe returns. There is a time overlap.

I've just not been able to document their meeting. There is potential that they met. Some historians have alluded to it, but I was unable to document a meeting between Diallo and his benefactor, James Oglethorpe. So after James Oglethorpe reads the letter, he sells his stock in the Royal African Company, the slave trading firm.

He resigns his position. And several, all official ties, right before he leaves to come to America to found Georgia, the Georgia colony, which was the only British American colony of the so called 13 British colonies. Georgia was the only British colony to prohibit slavery prior to the American Revolution.

Not Massachusetts, not New York, not New Jersey, not Pennsylvania, but Georgia, the only British colony to prohibit slavery, uh, prior to the beginning of the American Revolution. So we know from the historical record that Oglethorpe in the founding of the papers that were to inform the shape of the colony and the request to the king, had they had made a decision that there would be no slaves before even starting the colony.

[Stone] So was this partly informed by his change of heart and change of mind and his experience in reading Diallo's letter—that it suddenly awoke him to this practice was immoral and that something needed to change. What can we say about that early shift and how he maybe influenced the thinking?

[Thurmond] Prior to reading Diallo's letter, Oglethorpe clearly had an affinity for and believed in the right of men and women to work and earn compensation for their labor.

The fact that he advocated against debtor prisoners. He felt it was unfair that just because a person was unemployed or poor, that they should be locked or jailed in prison. One of his good friends died in one of the British state of prisons. So he had always been an advocate for working, what we would call working class people.

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What Diallo's letter demonstrated to him was that number one, the ability to read and write is a trait of civilization. Being monotheistic is a trait of civilized behavior. Having family is a trait of civilized behavior. What I believe And what I've advocated in my book, that more than being fueled by compassion for Diallo, what Oglethorpe saw in Diallo were traits of humanity.

Because think back, Black people, Africans, dark-skinned Africans, were all considered at that point in time to be subhuman. Not human, not a member of the human family or the human race. A written document was evidence that this black man, this enslaved black man, was in fact human. And that became the triggering monument that triggered Oglethorpe's journey from being opposed to extracting labor without fair wages to recognizing that this idea should expand beyond race and color.

[Stone] That was the significance of the letter. Let's step back a little and understand maybe Oglethorpe, the person. His family has an interesting history. They were what was known as Jacobites. They were supporters of James who aspired to be King, but, uh, lost out politically. And I guess ended up in France and yet Oglethorpe actually had older brothers and probably would have never inherited his father's wealth, but both of his brothers died precipitously and very young.

And he sort of forged his own direction politically, but he was also known for someone who had a very strong character and I think, I think a strong temper. He was someone . . . he actually murdered a man at one point in a bar brawl.

[Thurmond] Correct. Yeah, well, he would argue it wasn't murder, but self-defense, right?

You know, that's what he would argue. And ultimately, that's apparently what the local authorities concluded. Uh, he was incarcerated for five months and the local paper, uh, reported that it was a drunken Oglethorpe who got into an argument with another patron over a piece of silver. And of course, Oglethorpe won that particular duel, but you're absolutely right.

He was hot-tempered, and self-assured. but a person of tremendous courage. And that's one of the things that I try to emphasize in the book. And one of the mistakes I think we've made in history is that we deify our heroes. Uh, we sanitize them, we deify them. And like George Washington, they never tell a lie throughout their entire life.

Right. And that's what we teach. We know that not to be true, of course. The fact that we say that George Washington never told a lie is a lie. So, but that doesn't negate or lessen his significance or his contribution. So James Overthorpe, part of this arc that I tried to develop is that he is not a perfect man.

He starts out as deputy governor of a slave [00:18:00] trading firm. I think that's so important, particularly in contemporary times. And I try to focus on his evolution. The fact that he was a war hero, but he was also hanging out at a night house of evil repute and gets into a fight and kills a man. That's so enlightening to me about how great people are not perfect people.

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But that doesn't negate their greatness. I think that we could all take a lesson from that in our contemporary political times, correct? Yeah, there's so many examples of that. In the, in the early 1720s, Oglethorpe meets a man named Reverend Bray, who is committed to spreading the gospel, but especially spreading the gospel to enslaved blacks.

[Stone] I'm wondering if you could maybe shed a little light on that meeting with Reverend Bray, who really informed, I think, Oglethorpe's thinking to some degree, that also had a lot to do with the thinking that went into the formation of the colony and the establishment of the colony. What can you tell us about this man?

[Thurmond] Well, thank you for that particular question because traditional Georgia history pushes Dr. Bray to the side. We don't hear a lot about Dr. Bray and his relationship with James Oglethorpe and how his evangelical impulses may have influenced not just Oglethorpe, but also the founding of Georgia. Well, Dr. Thomas Bray had a calling to evangelize. Initially, children of Native Indians and enslaved Blacks. He eventually founded an evangelical society, the Associates of Dr. Bray, who primarily focused on educating and Christianizing enslaved Blacks. It was a revolutionary idea for early 18th century because if Black people were subhuman from a religious perspective, and especially in Christianity, they then lacked.

Redeemable souls, because black people were considered beasts of burden, cattle, horses. . . who goes out to baptize a horse? They don't do it. So Bray, even though he did not, or had little or no inclination that I could find to abolish slavery, or that he was even anti-slavery, he did believe that black people, enslaved black people, possessed redeemable souls.

Even more radically, he felt that the redeemed souls of black and white people would have equal access to the kingdom of God. That if you are redeemed, Uh, if you joined the church and lived in a way that would allow you to have access to immortality through everlasting life, he believed that blacks and whites would be received equally before the throne of grace.

That was a revolutionary idea in its time, I would think. It was absolutely a revolutionary idea. And Oglethorpe, prior to his death, he and Bray meet and he gives Oglethorpe permission to become chair of the Bray Associates. And Oglethorpe adopts many of the ideas around education and Christianization of enslaved blacks.

[Stone] There are a couple prophecies, one known as the Exodus and Jubilee prophecies, and they convey powerful and inspiring messages of hope and human agency and providential favor for slaves in that era. Can you tell us a little bit about those prophecies and how those were understood at that time, both by enslaved Blacks and also by their enslavers?

[Thurmond] The Old Testament for enslaved Blacks was the ray of hope. And not just enslaved Blacks, but even to this day, Black people, there's a tremendous amount of identity, affinity, and understanding of who we are based on particularly Exodus and Jubilee prophecies. Enslaved blacks recognized and believed, even though the great majority were illiterate, that God had actually intervened in the affairs of mankind to help and inspire Moses to challenge Pharaoh and to lead the Hebrew children out of Egyptian bondage to Mount Nebo that overlooked the Promised Land.

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Enslaved blacks saw that, as you stated, and understood the power of that prophecy, but also a providential favor and well as human agency. Second only to the Exodus prophecy was the Jubilee prophecy, whereby it was Jewish custom in the Old 50 years, which is why the Jubilee anniversary is the 50th year now, that any people enslaved by the Hebrew people would be set free.

That lands would be left fallow, and that would be precipitated by the blowing of a horn to signal the day of Jubilee. This was not only taught, it was sacred for enslaved blacks. Obviously, that type of worship had to be engaged upon in a secret manner, away from the eyes and ears of Christian slaveholders.

And, of course, Christian slave owners, if Blacks were caught worshiping or repeating of any nature, whether it was Exodus or Jubilee prophecy, would be subject to severe punishment. So there's been a longstanding connection between, I think, Jewish people and Black people that persists and exists even to this day.

And most of it originates with an understanding and a belief. Uh, prophecy that is told particularly in the Old Testament. So this is an interesting conundrum at that time because evangelicals were attempting to Christianize the slaves and in the process they were indoctrinating them with the very philosophy that would free them or inspire them to seek freedom.

And so it set up a remarkable tension, it seems. At that era about the role of Christianity and both its complicity in slavery, and it's setting the foundations for the anti-slavery and the abolition movement. Can you talk a little bit about a thicket of issues around Christianity? In the evangelical movement to convert blacks to Christianity, yet at the same time, keep them mostly walled off from a lot of the revolutionary thinking in the Old Testament.

Yeah, well, so initially, of course, among some Christian slave owners and slave traders, they use the idea that the slave trade. As brutal as it was, was a way to fulfill God's mission on earth, which is to expose heathen quote unquote Africans to the Christian religion, irrespective of the brutality and the inhumanity that black people would benefit from being Christianized, even though that they would be enslaved.

And that was part of the justification for the transatlantic slave trade. On a practical basis, in the early 18th century, Church of England doctrine is not like my church. I'm a Baptist. So, you can be out partying, you can go out on Saturday night and party and actually join the church Sunday morning, you know, and you will be received and celebrated.

But in the early 18th century, you had to learn the catechisms and other church doctrine prior to being, joining the church and being baptized. But in order to learn certain Christian catechisms, you first had to know how to read and write. So, one of the more. Surprising parts of my research is that the missionaries, the Bray Associates, in particular, established schools for enslaved children so that they can learn how to read and write so that they could learn the scriptures and the catechisms and the other doctrines of the church.

But many slave holders saw that that might create a problem long term. I love this quote in my book. One slave holder says, one black man taught to read one book. will on his own read

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another book. And that is why they should remain uneducated. And in some extent, they should remain un-Christianized. So that tension was always there.

We're pro-slavery slaveholders, as well as anti-slavery evangelicals who wanted to expose all people, native Indians and black people, and of course, British to Christian doctrine. And they, for whatever reason, believed that somehow Christianity could coexist with this institution of chattel slavery.

[Stone] Let's pause our discussion here. Join us for part two of the interview, where we'll explore the foundation of the Georgia colony and Oglethorpe's increasing resistance to the institution of slavery.

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