



UNH Historian Pens New Book On How Nation Denied Liberty To A Free Black Man

Media Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

[J. William Harris](#)
603-862-3019
Department of History

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Editors and Reporters: Review copies of *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty* can be obtained from Brenda King at Yale University Press at 203-432-0917 or brenda.king@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. – In 1775, Thomas Jeremiah was one of fewer than 500 “Free Negroes” in South Carolina and possibly the richest person of African descent in British North America. A slave owner himself, Jeremiah was falsely accused by whites — who resented his success as a Charleston harbor pilot — of sowing insurrection among slaves at the behest of the British.

In the new book *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty* (Yale University Press, 2009), J. William Harris, professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, recounts and analyzes the trial and execution of Jeremiah and illuminates the contradiction between a nation that would be born in a struggle for freedom and yet deny it — often violently — to others.

Thomas Jeremiah's story exposes in dramatic and poignant fashion the multiple ironies of the American Revolution, when Americans fought for their own liberty while enslaving others, and when the British king, rather than the American patriots, represented true justice for many slaves and free blacks.

Chief among Jeremiah's accusers was Henry Laurens, Charleston's leading patriot, a slave owner and former slave trader, who would later become the president of the Continental Congress. On the other side was Lord William Campbell, royal governor of the colony, who passionately believed that the accusation was unjust and tried to save Jeremiah's life but failed. Though a free man, Jeremiah was tried in a slave court and sentenced to death. In August 1775, he was hanged and his body burned.

The book has been highly praised by historians and scholars.

Harvard professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her book, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard based on her diary, 1785–1812*, calls *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah* “a searing portrayal of the central paradox of the American Revolution – the centrality of slavery to the struggle for political liberty. By focusing on a single event, it exposes another paradox as well – that making a story small can also make it bigger.”

“Beautifully written, this intense study of the conflict between liberty and slavery is told through the lives of colonial Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. In unraveling the mystery of a slave insurrection plot, Harris provides a wonderfully thick description of colonial life in Charles Town, South Carolina, in 1775. Harris weaves together the lives of three slaves

owners, opening up wonderful new insights about liberty in the context of the American Revolution: what liberty meant and for whom. This is history at its best, history as it should be," said Orville Vernon Burton, author of *The Age of Lincoln*.

J. William Harris is professor of history at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author of *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1500–1877*; *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in history); and *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands*.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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