

In His Own Words: Houston Hartsfield Holloway's Slavery, Emancipation, And Ministry In Georgia

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Review

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Holloway, Houston H. and Paterson, David E.. *In His Own Words: Houston Hartsfield Holloway\'s Slavery, Emancipation, and Ministry in Georgia.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780881465457

The Life and Times of Houston Holloway Recovered

This work adds another important volume to the corpus of historical literature that offer first-hand accounts of African Americans both during and after slavery in the American South. With the meticulous research and editorial care of David E. Paterson, a civilian U.S. Navy employee—turned public historian, it pulls together an almost full autobiography of Houston Hartsfield Holloway, a former slave of Meriwether County, Georgia. Provided in the span of seven chapters is a rare glimpse into the life, activities and recollections of a man whose evolution moved him from pre-Civil War skilled blacksmith to post-War AME Church (African Methodist Episcopal) preacher. Holloway was born on a plantation in Upson County, Georgia in 1844, became a free man at the close of the Civil War in 1865, began preaching in 1866, and died in 1917 at the age of 73.

The narratives and autobiographies of former enslaved African Americans cover a broad spectrum. They range from those that are excellent and deemed invaluable, to those that are of marginal value, and to others that are entirely fanciful and devoid of all discerning historical merit. As a slave source, *In His Own Words*, falls somewhere in the middle of autobiographies that provide details on the life and times of former enslaved African Americans. Four of seven chapters are devoted entirely to Holloway’s life as a slave and treat many of the basic topics, including family and childhood, work, religion, recreation, and the deportment of slaveholders and slaves during the closing years of the Civil War. A slightly uncommon and very brief chapter is one titled, “Conjure Men and Marriage.” The details here are not novel, of course, and focus largely on the beliefs held by enslaved men, such as Holloway, who believed that

conjurers had the power to change and influence their romantic lives. This chapter, unfortunately, like a few others in the original manuscript, was never completed by Holloway himself. In fact, what editor Paterson makes clear is that even the document itself was never completed by Holloway and was not initially prepared for publication. Instead, it was one of those rare items found at the Library of Congress where it had been “donated” by “Holloway’s descendants” in 1978. In this regard, consequently, the present book should perhaps be examined alongside the late historian John W. Blassingame’s 1977 edited collection of *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. All of these sources, for example, throw light on the varied experiences of enslaved African Americans, and allow others, in the specific words of Blassingame, “to determine the reliability of each, and to analyze the complex black response to bondage.” (p. xi)

Surprisingly, what readers will find in almost unprecedented and unique fashion in the current book is a double package—literally two books in one. For example, the editor has not only made public a rare manuscript that had languished unread for almost a century, but through his own extensive research and exhaustive editing actually written another book. The latter consist of his copious notes found on essentially every page of *In His Own Words*, the abundant supplementary information in the form of appendixes, photos, and the carefully prepared genealogical illustrations on Holloway and his family. In fact, what was literally an almost incoherent and disjointed manuscript is now available in book form for readers to examine and determine for themselves if Holloway’s story rings true, or if it indeed warrants the attention that Holloway himself believed set him apart from his fellows, both before and after the death of slavery in Georgia.

While hardly the stuff of legend, the information presented on Holloway’s life as a preacher, both by himself and the editor, may be most valuable to those interested in the religious life of African Americans in post Civil-War Georgia. Chapter 6, “Preaching and Working,” lays bare Holloway’s interaction with black and white Methodists in and around the counties of Meriwether, Campbell, Coweta, Pike, Upson, Monroe, Fayette, and Putnam for a period of seventeen years. Two maps are included that show both the geographical boundaries of “Holloway’s Neighborhoods” from 1844 to 1870, and his “Ministry” between 1866 and 1883. From church association minutes and the memoirs and writings of other church leaders, the editor has clarified names that appear garbled in Holloway’s own manuscript, and also added others that reveal the connecting

web of churches and leaders that comprised the world in which this former slave and post-Civil War preacher moved and worked. In sum, according to editor Paterson, "Holloway's Autobiography is a rare look at nineteenth-century African Methodism in Georgia." (p.2).

Overall, editor and author, David E. Paterson, deserve high praise and applauds for making available the story of yet another African American who made the transition "from slavery to freedom."

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