

Walker, David ^[1]

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by John C. Inscoe, 1994

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28 Sept. 1785–28 June 1830

[David Walker](#) ^[4], black author of an incendiary antislavery pamphlet, was born in [Wilmington](#) ^[5] to a free mother and a slave father who died before his birth. Despite his free status inherited from his mother, he grew up stifled by life in a slave society and developed a strong hatred of the institution. He left the South, stating that "If I remain in this bloody land, I will not live long. . . . I cannot remain where I must hear slaves' chains continually and where I must encounter the insults of their hypocritical enslavers." He traveled extensively around the country and by 1827 had settled in Boston, where he established a profitable secondhand clothing business. Active in helping the poor and needy, including runaway slaves, he earned a reputation within Boston's black community for his generosity and benevolence. In 1828 he married a woman known only as Emily, most likely a fugitive slave herself.

In September 1829 Walker first published his famous seventy-six-page pamphlet entitled *[Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America](#)* ^[6]. In this emotional but carefully reasoned invective, he urged slaves to rise up against their masters and free themselves, regardless of the great risk involved. "Had you rather not be killed," he asked, "than to be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little babies?" He warned white Americans to repent, for their day of judgment was at hand. They should not be deceived by the "outwardly servile character of the Negro," he wrote, for there was "a primitive force in the black slave that, once aroused, will make him a magnificent fighter." He condemned the colonization movement as a solution, claiming that America belonged more to blacks than to whites because "we have enriched it with our blood and tears." Two revised editions, each increasingly militant and inflammatory in tone, were published early in 1830.

The circulation of the *[Appeal](#)* ^[6] in the South by the summer of 1830 caused great alarm, particularly in Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina. It made its first appearance in Walker's home state in [Wilmington](#) ^[5], where copies were smuggled on ships from Boston or New York and were distributed by a slave thought to have been an agent of Walker's. Excitement among whites soon spread to [Fayetteville](#) ^[7], New Bern, Elizabeth City, and other towns in the state, particularly where news of the pamphlet was accompanied by rumors of slave insurrection plots scheduled to take place at Christmas. Many communities petitioned Governor [John Owen](#) ^[8] for protection as their slaves became "almost uncontrollable." The governor sent a copy of the *[Appeal](#)* ^[6] to the legislature when it met in November 1830 and urged that it consider measures to avert the dangerous consequences that were predicted. Meeting in secret session, the [legislature](#) ^[9] enacted the most repressive measures ever passed in North Carolina to control slaves and free blacks. Harsh penalties were to be levied on anyone for teaching slaves to read or write and for circulating seditious publications. [Manumission](#) ^[10] laws were made more prohibitive, and the movements of both slaves and free blacks were severely restricted. (The fact that Walker was a free black aroused particular suspicion of those of similar status in the state.) Finally, a quarantine law called for any black entering the state by ship to be confined, and any contact between resident blacks and incoming ships was prohibited.

The impact of Walker's *[Appeal](#)* ^[6] in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South has been overshadowed by the even more alarming [Nat Turner Rebellion](#) ^[11] just across the North Carolina border in Southampton County, Va., in August 1831. The two events together led to a major turning point in antebellum race relations throughout the South. Because of the violent and extreme measures it advocated, the *[Appeal](#)* ^[6] failed to win the support of most Abolitionists or free blacks. But in 1848 it found a new and wider audience when it was reprinted, along with a [biographical sketch of Walker](#) ^[12], by [Henry Highland Garnet](#) ^[13], a prominent black minister, newspaper editor, and Abolitionist in New York City.

Walker died in Boston three months after the publication of his pamphlet's third edition. The cause of his death remains a mystery, though it was widely believed that he was poisoned, possibly as a result of large rewards offered by Southern slaveholders for his death. His only child, Edward G. Walker, was born after his death and in 1866 became the first black elected to the Massachusetts state legislature.

References:

Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry: David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829–30* (1965)

Benjamin Brawley, *Early Negro American Writers* (1935); *DAB*, vol. 19 (1936)

Clement Eaton, "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 2 (August 1936)

John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860* (1943)

Derris Lea Raper, "The Effects of David Walker's Appeal and Nat Turner's Insurrection on North Carolina" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1969)

Additional Resources:

The Project Gutenberg: Reprinted *Appeals* with biographical sketch by Garnet:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16516/16516-h/16516-h.htm> [12]

DocSouth, David walker: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/summary.html> [4]

PBS, David Walker Bio: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2930.html> [14]

National Park Service, Boston African American National Historic Site:
<https://www.nps.gov/boaf/historyculture/walkstew.htm> [15]

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Origin - location:

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