

# Offley, Greensbury Washington

(18 Dec. 1808–c.1895),

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minister and author, was born in the area around Centerville, Queen Anne's County, Maryland. He was one of three children born to an enslaved woman from Virginia and a free black man from Maryland whose names are unknown. Offley's mother was freed by her master's will, and that document also ordered Offley and his sister freed at age twenty-five. Apparently, a codicil to the will required that Offley's younger brother be similarly freed at twenty-five, but Offley's mistress destroyed it before probate.

This complex, but not uncommon, arrangement—a mix of free and enslaved people within a family—could well have led to significant problems. First, it was likely that Offley's mistress and her children, having already destroyed part of the will (and so enslaving his brother for life), might have attempted to sell off Offley and his sister. Second, Maryland, like several states with strict black codes, had provisions about freeing black children and about free blacks' residences. Offley's father thus attempted to buy all three children to keep them safe by owning them. Offley's master's children objected. In his 1859 narrative, Offley recounted, in language that must have reminded readers of Margaret Garner, how his mother "told them they might buy them and welcome, but you had better throw your money in the fire, for if you buy one of my children I will cut all three of their throats while they are asleep, and your money will do you no good" (4).

Offley's father successfully purchased the children. But as the Offleys had more children—eventually, a total of eight—the financial hardship grew. Almost immediately, Offley's father hired the three older children out, and from youth Offley was involved in a range of work—making brooms, baskets, and the like, and, when older, chopping wood. He worked for his father until he was twenty-one. He did not learn to read until his late teens, when an itinerant black minister stayed briefly with the family. He also learned to wrestle and box during this time, and eventually would give pointers on fighting to other young men in exchange for help with his struggle toward literacy. In his twenties, he gradually moved north, working for both railroads and hotels along the way.

Offley settled in Hartford, Connecticut, on 15 November 1835, and he notes that "good white friends" helped him with his education. On 21 February 1836 he had a conversion experience and was called to preach; by 1850 he was an established Methodist Episcopal minister in the black community. It is likely he interacted closely with James W. C. Pennington, who was also preaching in Hartford during this period, and Ann Plato, as for more than a decade, Offley lived close to the extended family of Henry and Deborah Plato. At some point he married a woman named Ann who was two years his junior, though no record of this relationship beyond census data has yet been found. She apparently died in the 1850s, as in the 1860 census he was listed with a wife named Elizabeth who was more than a decade younger. No record of children with either wife has been found. What seems to be a namesake

nephew (also George Washington Offley) was raised in Hartford, taught for a time in Reconstruction-era South Carolina, and became a minister of some prominence in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the 1880s and 1890s.

Offley's narrative was published locally by an unknown Hartford printer in 1859. A brief twenty-four-page chapbook, it emphasizes his youth in Maryland and the nature of his theology (centering on good works and focused on aiding African Americans of like mind) and contains two brief hymns. Like many slave narratives, it includes authenticating apparatus; in Offley's specific case, such was made up of a testimonial signed by several white New England ministers, including prominent local figures like Horace Bushnell. It seems intended more for a regional audience than a national one, and was clearly a production of the clergy rather than the agents of organized abolition. While it shares the harrowing story of his initial purchase by his father, its tone is generally quite conciliatory. Given this, its size, and its sometimes rough prose, it has generally been seen as a relatively minor slave narrative; still, the narrative was expanded and published in a new edition in 1860 and was reprinted in the late twentieth century.

After the publication of his narrative, Offley becomes more difficult to trace. He seems to have left the ministry after 1860, and is absent from the public record in the 1870s. It seems likely that he stayed in touch with his extended family, though, which had roots in Hartford, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Baltimore during this period. He resurfaces in 1880, still married to Elizabeth, as the owner of a farm in New Bedford. He is listed there in New Bedford directories with some regularity until 1894, although the date and circumstances of his death and burial remain unknown.

## Further Reading

Offley, Greensbury Washington. "A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary," in *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps (1971).

### See also

Garner, Margaret <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36886>

Methodist Episcopal Church <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-42430>

Pennington, James William Charles <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34639>

Plato, Ann <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-37659>

Slave Narratives <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-43390>

Slavery <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-45025>

