

1838. Thomas Van Renselaer Resists Jim Crow (Aptheker 188-189)

The struggle against segregation has been an individual as well as a collective one. The following letter, dated Boston, October 26, 1838, from Thomas Van Renselaer, a New York Negro Abolitionist, to a white friend, Joshua Leavitt of Boston, is typical of thousands of courageous personal acts of resistance to discrimination. *The Liberator*, November 30, 1838.

Dear Brother, -I stepped on board the Steamboat *J. W. Richmond*, in your ~ city, yesterday afternoon, for Providence. I had previously understood that *this* being an opposition boat, people were treated irrespective of complexion; so, full of hope of a pleasant entertainment, I went to the office and paid \$3.50 (fifty cents more than the regular fare,) for my passage and a berth, No. 15, which was assigned me in the after cabin, and obtained my ticket. I "Talked about until dark, when, feeling chilly, I repaired to the cabin in which my berth was. I had not been there long, before a man came up to me in a very abrupt manner, and said, "Whose servant are you?" I at first gave no answer; he repeated, and I replied, I am my own, Sir. "Well," said he, "you must go on deck." I asked, why so? "Because you ought to know your place." I said, this is my place. Said he, "Go on deck, I tell you." Said I, I cannot go on deck. Said he with an oath, and running upon deck, "I'll tell you." He returned in a moment with the captain, who came trembling, and said, "I want you to go on deck immediately." I asked the reason. "Not a word from you, sir." I asked, what offence have I committed? "Not a word, sir," said he, and laid hold of me with violence, and ordered two men to remove me. But when I saw him in such a rage, and fearing that he might do *himself* harm, I retired, and walked the deck till late at night, when I had another talk with the captain. I then told him he had not treated me-well, and that an explanation was due from him; but he refused to allow me to go below, or to give me a berth. I then told him I should publish the treatment I had received. He again flew into a passion, and I saw no more of him. Between 11 and 12 o'clock, one of the waiters invited me to occupy a bed which he had prepared. I accepted it, and was rendered comfortable; and feel very grateful to three of the waiters for their sympathy in thee. In trying moments, as well as to some of the passengers. One gentleman in particular, the Rev. Mr. Scudder (Methodist) gave me great consolation ~ by identifying himself with me at the time.

Now dear brother, I have made this communication of facts for the in- formation of the friends of human rights, who, I believe, have patronized *this boat* from principle, that they may act accordingly hereafter.