

“Top Secret” Envelope Contents

Historian Peter Hinks

Taken from his book, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance*, published in 1997.

A great body of lore has embellished the death of David Walker. Some have claimed he was stalked by bounty hunters from Georgia after outraged planters had placed a price on his head. Perhaps their victim, he was supposed to have been found slumped over and dead in a doorway on Boston’s North Slope. There seems to be a consensus that he met some violent and untimely death.

No one, however, has checked their claims against municipal death records. The Boston Index of Deaths lists Walker as dying on August 6, 1830, of consumption at age thirty-three. The date and cause are repeated in the *Boston Daily Courier*. Nowhere is foul play suggested. He died a week after his daughter, at a time when pulmonary afflictions were numerous in the city. At least seven people had died of lung complications in the last week, lending credibility to that cause. If Walker’s death had been suspicious, a coroner’s report might have ensued, yet there is none in the Boston City records. Certainly there were numerous Southerners who wanted Walker dead, and neither the possibility of murder nor the possibility that he was stalked can be discounted. Yet available sources shed no light on the shadowing of Walker, while they strongly support a natural death from a common and virulent urban disease of the nineteenth century.

Historian Sean Wilentz

Taken from his introduction to *David Walker’s Appeal*, reprinted in 1995.

Walker’s efforts ended in a final mystery. In June 1830, he put a third edition of the *Appeal* through the press, defying the mounting outcries from Southerners and Northerners alike. The mayor of Savannah had written to Boston’s Mayor Harrison Gray Otis, demanding that Walker be stopped; Otis, a crusty old Federalist, had replied that, although he abhorred the pamphlet, he was powerless to act, since no Massachusetts law had been broken. Soon after, Southern legislatures had begun passing new laws banning works like Walker’s; and rumors had begun to circulate that Southerners had put a price of \$3,000 for Walker’s head, a price that would rise to \$10,000 if Walker was delivered to the South alive. Walker’s friends pleaded with him to flee to Canada, but he refused. Then, on August 3, 1830, Walker suddenly died at his home. (His daughter had also died, days earlier, of lung fever). No convincing evidence has ever come to light to show that Walker’s death was unnatural. But many observers could not help concluding that he had been murdered.

“Top Secret” Envelope Contents

Historian Sterling Stuckey

Taken from his book *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, published in 1987

Urged by friends to flee to Canada, Walker refused. A company of Georgia men, offering one thousand dollars for him dead and ten times as much for him alive, took an oath to fast until Walker was captured or murdered. “It was the opinion of many,” an observer wrote following Walker’s death in 1830, “that he was hurried out of life by means of poison, but whether this was the case or not, the writer is not prepared to affirm.” Walker noted before his death, “If any wish to plunge me into the wretched incapacity of a slave, or murder me for the truth, know ye, that I am in the hand of god, and at your disposal.” Though he counted his life precious, he was ready to offer it, for what was the purpose of living, he wrote, “when in fact I am dead.”