

# BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

A History of Black America



SIXTH REVISED EDITION



LERONE BENNETT, JR.

PENGUIN BOOKS

BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

Lerone Bennett Jr. is a social historian and the author of nine books on the life and history of black Americans. A graduate of Morehouse College, he was visiting professor of history at Northwestern University in 1968–69 and Senior Fellow of the Institute of the Black World in 1969. He was named senior editor of *Ebony* in 1958 and executive editor in 1987. His articles have earned him an enviable reputation as one of the most eloquent, scholarly, and readable of American writers. In 1978 he received the Literature Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Mr. Bennett has served as advisor and consultant to several national organizations and commissions, including the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. His poems, short stories, and articles have been translated into French, German, Japanese, Swedish, and Arabic. Mr. Bennett is the author of *The Shaping of Black America*, also available in Penguin Books.

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OF  
BLACK  
AMERICA**

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For the Black Woman  
For my Grandmother, Mother and  
Wife  
Lucy Reed, Alma Love and Gloria S. Bennett

# Preface

To The Sixth Edition

**H**ISTORIANS and history books are historical. They are products of history. They are born at a certain time, and they bind time and express time and their times. More to the point, they participate in the “callings and responses” of succeeding generations which Maurice Merleau-Ponty considered the very essence of history.

In this limited sense, *Before the Mayflower*, which was born twenty-five years ago at a historic turning of worlds, has participated in a historical dialogue that was started by the “Black and unknown bards of slavery” and carried to new heights by George Washington Williams, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles Wesley, John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles and Vincent Harding, among others.

I said twenty-five years ago that I hoped this book would make the seminal insights of scholars available to a larger audience and restore the human and dramatic dimensions of our history. In subsequent editions, I have tried to participate in contemporary efforts to redefine the time-line of the African-American odyssey.

I am indebted to Publisher John H. Johnson and Norman L. Hunter, Basil Phillips, Carmel Tinkchell, Beverly Coppage and Pamela Cash Menzies of the Johnson Publishing Company family. I am also indebted to the tens of thousands of readers who have been generous enough to say that they have found in these pages some echo of their own history and hope.

LERONE BENNETT JR.

Chicago, 1987.

## PREFACE To The Fifth Edition

**T**HIS is the first major revision of *Before the Mayflower* since its publication twenty years ago. Instead of following the traditional method of adding a new chapter to cover developments since 1962, I have revised the entire book, taking great pains to retain the flavor and style of the original. I have also incorporated some of the insights of *Confrontation: Black and White*, which was originally published as a companion volume to *Before the Mayflower*. Since that volume, which detailed the black struggle for freedom, is now out of print, I have adapted here some of its basic concepts and analyses. I have also incorporated the latest insights of modern scholarship.

In a number of books published since 1962, I argued, along with others, for a complete rethinking of the concept of black time. I have followed my own advice here, detaching epochal black events—the Founding of Black America, for example—from the white shell and reinserting them into a black time-line extending from the African past to the transformation of Black America in the twentieth century.

In preparing the fifth revised edition, I have been assisted and supported by the Johnson Publishing Company staff. I am especially indebted to Publisher John H. Johnson, Basil Phillips, Carmel Tinkchell, Beverly J. Coppage and my wife, Gloria S. Bennett. The new book was redesigned by Norman L. Hunter,

who created the original book jacket. Pamela Cash of the Johnson Publishing Company Special Library was very helpful in checking elusive dates. I am also indebted to Sharon Scott of the Harsh Collection of the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library and the staff of the Newberry Library.

I am convinced today, more than ever, that the story outlined on the following pages is central to an understanding of American reality. Since the publication of the first edition of *Mayflower*, there has been a new appreciation of the centrality of this adventure. But despite the gains, there is still a regrettable tendency in some circles to regard black history as an intellectual ghetto. Worse yet, some people regard it as a minor-league pastime involving the recitation of dates and the names of black greats. But black history, read right, is a much more fateful encounter than that. Read right, within the context of social forces struggling for dominance, the history detailed on these pages raises total question about the destiny of America and the orientation of our lives. It is on this deep level, and within this context, that we are invited to understand an extremely perceptive remark by Ralph Ellison, who said once, in another connection, that "the end is in the beginning, and lies far ahead."

✓ LERONE BENNETT JR.

Chicago, 1982.



## PREFACE To Second Impression

**S**INCE publication of the first edition of *Before the Mayflower*, there has been a small revolution in the role of the Afro-American and in the perception of the Afro-American's role. In this, the fourth edition of the book, I have revised the terminology and added new material on the new developments. I have not found it necessary, however, to change the central concepts and conclusions of the first edition. In addition to the persons named in the preface to the first edition, I am indebted to Beverly Adams, Carmel Tinkchell, and Brenda Biram.

Today, as in 1962, there is a critical need for a deeper understanding of the role of the Afro-American in American history and culture. For it is becoming increasingly evident that Santayana was right when he said that men who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

LERONE BENNETT JR.

Chicago, 1968.

# Preface

To First Edition

**T**HIS BOOK grew out of a series of articles which were published originally in *Ebony* magazine. The book, like the series, deals with the trials and triumphs of a group of Americans whose roots in the American soil are deeper than the roots of the Puritans who arrived on the celebrated *Mayflower* a year after a "Dutch man of war" deposited twenty Negroes at Jamestown.

This is a history of "the other Americans" and how they came to North America and what happened to them when they got here. The story begins in Africa with the great empires of the Sudan and Nile Valley and ends with the Second Reconstruction which Martin Luther King, Jr., and the "sit-in" generation are fashioning in the North and South. The story deals with the rise and growth of slavery and segregation and the continuing efforts of Negro Americans to answer the question of the Jewish poet of captivity: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

This history is founded on the work of scholars and specialists and is designed for the average reader. It is not, strictly speaking, a book for scholars; but it is as scholarly as fourteen months of research could make it. Readers who would like to follow the story in greater detail are urged to read each chapter in connection with the outline of Negro history in the appendix.

Without the help and encouragement of many people, this book

would not have been possible. John H. Johnson, president of Johnson Publishing Company, conceived the idea for the series and made it possible for me to spend fourteen months researching and writing it. The editors of Johnson Publishing Company were also helpful with suggestions and criticisms. I am especially indebted to the managing editors of *Ebony*, Herbert Nipson and Era Bell Thompson, and Doris Saunders, Lucille Phinnie, Basil Phillips, Norman L. Hunter, Ariel Strong, Herbert Temple, Lacey Crawford and Robert E. Johnson. I should like to express my appreciation to the personnel of the University of Chicago Library, the Johnson Publishing Company Library, the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, and the Chicago Historical Society. My wife, Gloria, also has my thanks for her suggestions and understanding. Whatever virtues this book has are due to the help and encouragement of other people. The errors are my own.

When this material appeared in *Ebony* magazine in an abridged form, a great many readers—Negroes and whites—were surprised by the depth of involvement of Negroes in the American experience. They were surprised, for example, to discover that Negroes were at Lexington and Concord and that they stood with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans and with William Lloyd Garrison in the battle against slavery. The reader, I believe, will be astonished by the richness of the Negro's heritage. He will also perceive, I hope, that this story is relevant to the struggle of all people and that it is a moving chapter in the human drama.

LERONE BENNETT JR.

Chicago, 1962.

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*MAYFLOWER*

**A HISTORY  
OF  
BLACK  
AMERICA**

*In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings,  
in fastings; .  
By pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the  
Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned,  
By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of  
righteousness on the right hand and on the left,  
By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as  
deceivers, and yet true;  
As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live;  
as chastened, and not killed;  
As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many  
rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

*II CORINTHIANS 6:5-10*



# 1

## *The African Past*

*What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?*

COUNTEE CULLEN

**S**PEAK of Africa and golden joys.”

We know now that Shakespeare spoke truth. For an academic breakthrough, which is as challenging on its own level as the political renaissance of colored peoples, has yielded a new perspective on African and world history. Africa, long considered the “Dark Continent,” is now regarded as the place where mankind first received light. Ancient Africans, long considered “primitive,” are now revealed as creative contributors to Egyptian civilization and builders of powerful states in the Sudan.

From Olduvai Gorge in East Africa, from caves in the Sahara and excavations in the Nile Valley come bits of bone and husks of grain which speak more eloquently than words of the trials and triumphs of the African ancestors of American blacks. The evi-

dence from these and other areas can be summarized briefly under four headings:

**Olduvai Gorge:** A series of astonishing discoveries in this Tanzanian canyon suggest that the most important and fascinating developments in human history occurred in Africa. Discoveries by Dr. L. S. B. Leakey and other archeologists indicate that the human race was born in Africa. A growing body of research from this and other African sites indicates further that toolmaking began in Africa and that this seminal invention spread to Europe and Asia.

**The Nile Valley:** Important finds in the Sudan and the Nile Valley prove that people of a Negroid type were influential contributors to that cradle of civilization—ancient Egypt. Discoveries at excavations near Khartoum in the Sudan and at El Badari on the Nile indicate that Stone Age Negroes laid the foundation for much of the civilization of the Nile Valley and manufactured pottery before pottery was made in the world's earliest known city.

**Central and South America:** American and African-American scholars, working primarily in the United States and Mexico, unearth new archeological evidence, including carbon 14-dated sculpture, which suggests that African mariners explored the New World before Columbus. This evidence and corroborative data from the diaries and letters of explorers, Arabic charts and maps and the recorded tales of African griots indicate that there was extensive pre-Columbian contact between ancient Africa and the Americas.

“An overwhelming body of new evidence,” says Professor Ivan Van Sertima (*They Came Before Columbus*), “is now emerging from several disciplines, evidence that could not be verified and interpreted before, in the light of the infancy of archaeology and the great age of racial and intellectual prejudice. The most remarkable examples of this evidence are the realistic portrayures of Negro-Africans in clay, gold and stone unearthed in pre-Columbian strata in Central and South America.”

**The Sahara:** French explorer Henri Lhote discovers rock paintings which suggest to author Basil Davidson that “peoples of a Negro type were painting men and women with a beautiful and sensitive realism before 3000 B.C. and were, perhaps, the originators of naturalistic human portraiture.”

The implications of all this are extensive, as W. M. Whitelaw pointed out in a general summary of the evidence. "Later discoveries," he wrote, "all the way from Kenya to Transvaal not only of early human remains but also of advanced anthropoid types have brought the historical anthropologists to a state of confused expectancy. Considerably more evidence will have to be brought to light, however, before even the main outlines of man's early history in Africa can be drawn. It is already reasonable, however, to believe that such evidence may be forthcoming as will require a radical change of perspective on African history, if not on history itself."

It is already reasonable, in fact, to believe that the African ancestors of American blacks were among the major benefactors of the human race. Such evidence as survives clearly shows that Africans were on the scene and acting when the human drama opened.

For a long time, in fact, the only people on the scene were Africans. For some 600,000 years Africa and Africans led the world. Were these people who gave the world fire and tools and cultivated grain—were they Negroes? The ancient bones are silent. It is possible, indeed probable, that they were dark-skinned. More than that cannot be said at this time.

Civilization started in the great river valleys of Africa and Asia, in the Fertile Crescent in the Near East and along the narrow ribbon of the Nile in Africa. In the Nile Valley that beginning was an African as well as an Asian achievement. Blacks, or people who would be considered blacks today, were among the first people to use tools, paint pictures, plant seeds and worship gods.

In the beginning, then, and for a long time afterwards, black people marched in the front ranks of the emerging human procession. They founded empires and states. They extended the boundaries of the possible. They made some of the critical discoveries and contributions that led to the modern world.

Looking back on that age from our own, one is struck by what seems to be an absence of color consciousness. Back there, in the beginning, blackness did not seem to be an occasion for obloquy. In fact, the reverse seems to have been true, for whites were sometimes ridiculed for "the unnatural whiteness of their skin."

During this critical period in the evolution of man, blacks were known and honored throughout the ancient world. Ancient

Ethiopia, a vaguely defined territory somewhere to the south of Egypt, was hailed as a place fit for the vacation of the gods. Homer praised Memnon, king of Ethiopia, and black Eurybates:

*Of visage solemn, sad, but sable hue,  
Short, wooly curls, o'erfleeced his bending head....  
Eurybates, in whose large soul alone,  
Ulysses viewed an image of his own.*

Homer, Herodotus, Pliny, Diodorus and other classical writers repeatedly praised the Ethiopians. "The annals of all the great early nations of Asia Minor are full of them," Flora Louisa Lugard wrote. "The Mosaic records allude to them frequently; but while they are described as the most powerful, the most just, and the most beautiful of the human race, they are constantly spoken of as black, and there seems to be no other conclusion to be drawn, than that at that remote period of history the leading race of the Western world was a black race." The Ethiopians claimed to be the spiritual fathers of Egyptian civilization. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian who wrote in the first century B.C., said that "the Ethiopians conceived themselves to be of greater antiquity than any other nation; and it is probable that, born under the sun's path, its warmth may have ripened them earlier than other men. They supposed themselves to be the inventors of worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, of sacrifices, and every religious practice."

Whatever may have been the spiritual influence of the ancient Ethiopians, it is established beyond doubt that blacks *from somewhere* were an important element among the peoples who fathered Egyptian civilization. Badarian culture proves that blacks camped on the banks of the Nile thousands of years before the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Bodies were excavated at El Badari amid artifacts suggesting a date of about eight thousand B.C. In the intestines of these bodies were husks of barley which indicated that the dark-skinned Badarians had learned to cultivate cereals. The beautifully fashioned Badarian pottery was never surpassed, not even in Egypt's days of greatest glory.

Still more evidence comes from the testimony of bones. Scholars who examined some eight hundred skulls of the predynastic Egyptians found that at least one-third were definitely Negroid. "The more we learn of Nubia and the Sudan," Dr. David

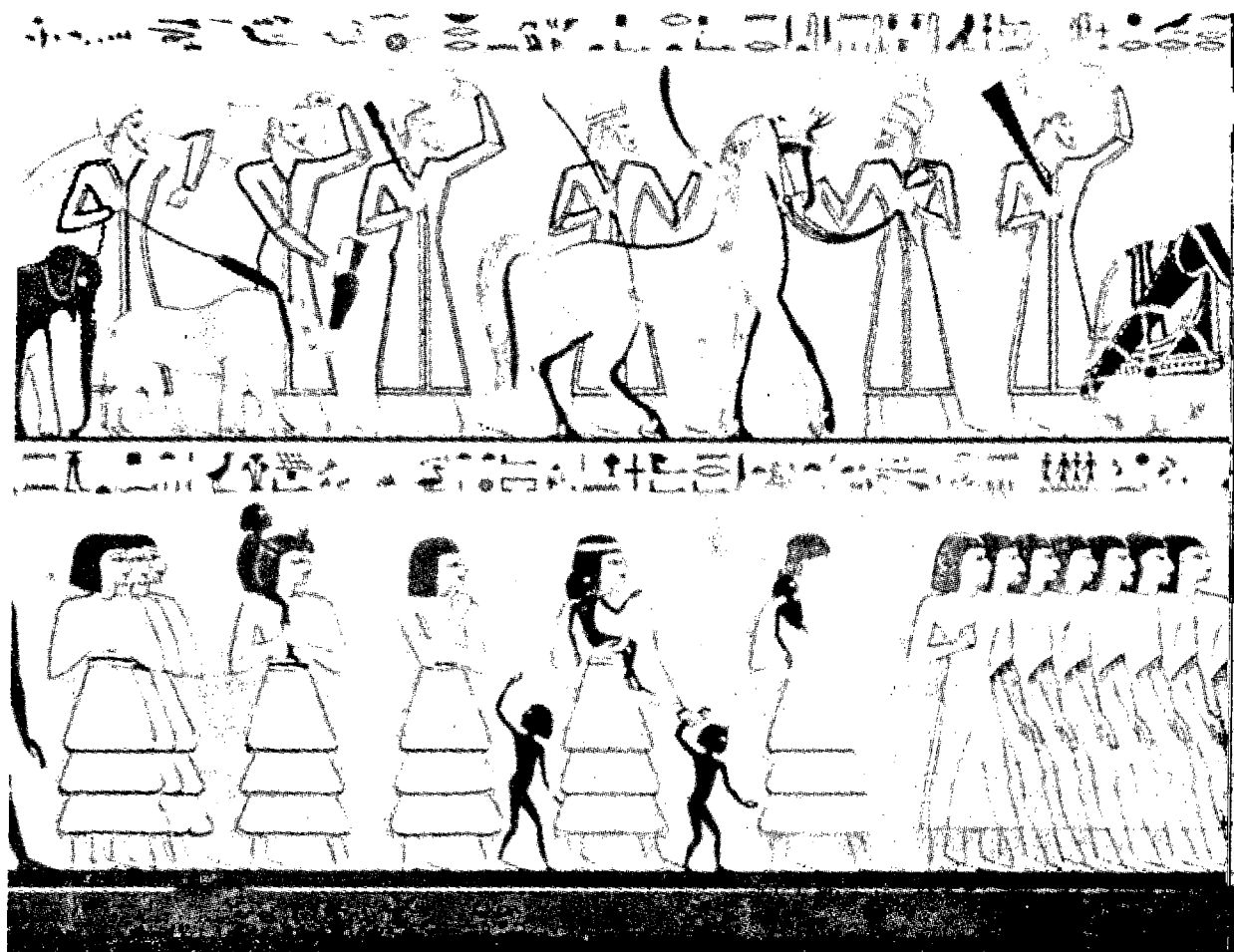
Randall-MacIver said, "the more evident does it appear that what was most characteristic in the predynastic culture of Egypt is due to intercourse with the interior of Africa and the immediate influence of that permanent Negro element which has been present in the population of Southern Egypt from the remotest times to our own day."

If black people were a major element among the peoples who fathered Egyptian civilization, who were the Egyptians? The question bristles with thorns. The only thing that can be said with assurance is that they probably were not Caucasians. The evidence suggests that they were a black-, brown-, and yellow-skinned people who sprang from a mixture of Negro, Semitic and Caucasian stocks.

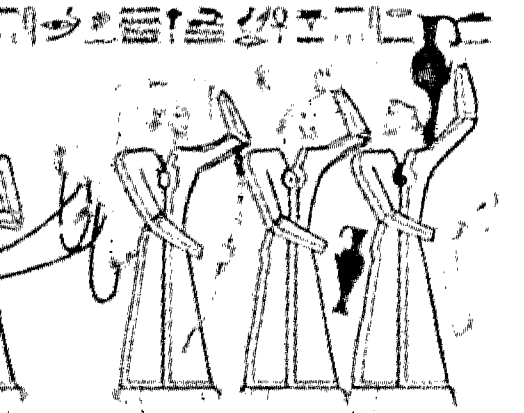
How did the Egyptians see themselves?

They painted themselves in three colors: black, reddish-brown, yellow. The color *white* was available to them, but they used it to portray blue-eyed, white-skinned foreigners. One of the clearest examples of this is the great mural of a procession from a tomb of Thebes in the time of Thotmes III. The Egyptians and Ethiopians in the procession are painted in the usual brown and black colors, but thirty-seven whites in the procession are rendered in white tones. Who were they? G. A. Hoskins said they were probably "white slaves of the king of Ethiopia sent to the Egyptian king as the most acceptable present."

Great black scholars, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson and William Leo Hansberry, have insisted that the ancient Egyptians, from Menes to Cleopatra, were a mixed race which presented the same physical types and color ranges as American blacks—a people, in short, who would have been forced in the forties to sit on the back seats of the buses in Mississippi. "If the Egyptians and the majority of the tribes of Northern Africa were not Negroes," Carter Woodson said, "then, there are no Negroes in the United States." There is supporting testimony on this point from Africanist William Leo Hansberry, who said that the evidence seems to indicate that "the Egyptians were a mixed group consisting of Negroids, non-Negroids and an Intermediate Group which represented, for the most part, mixed bloods." Summarizing the evidence of scientists who made a systematic examination of the skeletal remains of the ancient Egyptians, he said that "Negroids were particularly well represented



Mural from an Egyptian tomb illustrates the color ranges of the Ethiopians and Egyptians. Whites in the procession, G. A. Hoskins said, were probably slaves the Ethiopian king sent to the Egyptian king as a present.



Black Egyptian queen, Nefertari, “one of the most venerated figures” of Egyptian history, is pictured in this painting from an ancient tomb with her husband, Aahmes I.



in the pre-dynastic period. At one phase of the pre-dynastic period . . . the Negroid element amounted to 42 per cent. In the Old Kingdom, however, the Negroid percentage shows a substantial decline, although the mixed bloods totaled approximately 30 per cent. During the Middle Kingdom period, the Negroid element is again exceptionally strong, rising to 40 per cent in the 11th, 12th, and 13th dynasties. It again declines during the period of the 18th Dynasty of the New Empire but rises again toward the end of the period, particularly in the 20th Dynasty when Negroids and mixed bloods composed 40 per cent of the total population."

It is scarcely surprising, given the biases of Western scholarship, that this point is hotly disputed by various white scholars. But the dissenting scholars are contradicted by an eyewitness. Herodotus, the Greek historian, visited the country some five hundred years before Bethlehem. The Egyptians, he said, were "black and curly-haired."

Racial identity and racial origins apart, there is overwhelming evidence that Negroes or Negro types played a major role in the development of Egyptian civilization. Many, perhaps most, of the soldiers were black. Blacks toiled on the pyramids, offered prayers to the sun-god and served with distinction in the state bureaucracy. "Ancient Egypt knew him [the Negro]," Alexander Chamberlain said, "both bond and free, and his blood flowed in the veins of not a few of the mighty Pharaohs."

Ra Nehesi and several other Pharaohs have been identified as blacks by eminent scholars. So has Queen Nefertari, "the most venerated figure," Sir Flinders Petrie said, "of Egyptian history." Nefertari, the wife of Aahmes I, Egypt's great imperial leader, was cofounder of the famous Eighteenth Dynasty. She has been described as a "Negress [*sic*] of great beauty, strong personality, and remarkable administrative ability."

There was long and intimate contact between the dark-skinned Egyptians and the dark-skinned Ethiopians. For fifty centuries or more they fought, traded and intermarried. During the Middle Empire Ethiopia was a tribute-paying dependency of Egypt. Then, in the middle of the eighth century B.C., the Ethiopians turned the tables and conquered Egypt. Kashta, a bold Ethiopian monarch, began the conquest which was completed by his son, Piankhy. When Piankhy returned to his capital at Napata, he had subdued sixteen princes and was master of both Egypt and



Ethiopia. The legs of his enemies, he said, trembled "like those of women." Piankhy was keenly aware of the value of good public relations. The celebrated stela in which he recounted his deeds of valor is one of the gems of Egyptology. A modern scholar, Sir Alan Gardiner, said it is "one of the most illuminating documents that Egyptian history has to show, and displays a vivacity of mind, feeling, and expression such as the homeland could no longer produce."

For more than a century Ethiopian kings occupied the divine office of the Pharaohs. Shabaka, who succeeded Piankhy, attempted to restore the dwindling fortunes of Egypt. He sponsored a cultural revival, built a chapel at Karnak and restored a temple at Thebes. Diodorus Siculus said he "went beyond all his predecessors in his worship of the gods and his kindness to his subjects." Herodotus said he abolished capital punishment in Egypt.

Taharka, the greatest of the Ethiopian Pharaohs, ascended the throne about 690 B.C. at the age of forty-two. He was, by all accounts, a remarkable leader who improved the economic and cultural life of his realm. Sir E. A. Wallis Budge said Taharka (the Tirhakah of the Bible) was "a capable and energetic king, and under his able rule the country, notwithstanding his wars with the Assyrians, enjoyed a period of prosperity for about twenty-five years." This resourceful leader left inscriptions which indicate that he conquered the Hittites and the Assyrians—claims most Egyptologists discount. So complete was his sway and so absolute was his power that he dubbed himself "Emperor of the World." A famous Egyptologist called his reign that "astonishing epoch of nigger [*sic*] domination." Dr. Randall-MacIver said, "It seems amazing that an African Negro should have been able with any sort of justification to style himself Emperor of the World."

When, in 667 B.C., Taharka was defeated by the Assyrians, he retired to Napata, where Ethiopians continued to rule for several centuries. The capital was later moved farther south to Meroë, where strong-willed queens called Candaces ruled. One of these queens, a one-eyed woman "with masculine characteristics," led the Ethiopians in unsuccessful forays against the Romans.

The connection between this civilization and modern Ethiopia is far from clear. Some scholars call ancient Ethiopia "Kush" and begin the history of modern Ethiopia with the rise of the Axumite

kingdom in what is now Eritrea and northern Abyssinia. Whatever the true origins of modern Ethiopia, there is no exaggeration in saying that it is one of the oldest countries in the world. The African kingdom, which traces its lineage back to the famous visit the legendary Queen of Sheba ("black but comely") paid Solomon some one thousand years before Christ, reached the height of its power in the fifth century, when Christianity became the official religion. With the rise of Islam, the Ethiopians of Axum were isolated and slept, historian Edward Gibbon wrote, "for nearly a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten."

During the early Christian era, blacks were scattered to the four corners of the world. For many centuries black merchants traded with India, China and Europe. Other blacks were sold as slaves in Europe and Asia. By the beginning of the Islamic era, blacks—as merchants and merchandise—had integrated Europe, Asia and the Far East. By that time blacks were well known in Venice in Europe and in the deserts of Arabia. Perhaps the best known of the Arabic blacks was Antar, the impassioned lover-warrior-poet. The son of an attractive slave woman and an Arab nobleman, Antar became a famous poet and was immortalized after his death as the "Achilles of the Arabian Iliad." Fearless, impetuous, ready to fight, sing a lyric or drink wine, Antar won fame in the poetic contests which were common in pre-Islamic days. His fame spread and he was hailed as the greatest poet of his time. Like most poets, Antar had an eye for ladies and love.

*'Twas then her beauties first enslaved my heart—  
Those glittering pearls and ruby lips, whose kiss  
Was sweeter far than honey to the taste.*

Antar died about A.D. 615 and his deeds were recorded in literary form as *The Romance of Antar*. This book, Edward E. Holden wrote, "has been the delight of all Arabians for many centuries. . . . The unanimous opinion of the East has always placed *The Romance of Antar* at the summit of such literature. As one of their authors well says: '*The Thousand and One Nights* is for the amusement of women and children; *Antar* is a book for men.' "

As a religious ethic, Islam seems to have been unusually effective in cutting across racial lines. All Moslems, whatever their

color, were brothers in the faith. "If a Negro slave is appointed to rule you," Mohammed said, "hear and obey him, though his head be like a dried grape."

In this climate a man could be a slave today and a prime minister tomorrow. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that many blacks played heroic roles in the rise and spread of Islam—men like Mohammed Ahmad, the Sudanese black who claimed to be the Messiah; Abu'l Hasan Ali, the black sultan of Morocco, and Bilal, the friend of Mohammed. There were also numerous black generals, administrators and poets. When, in the eighth century, the Arabs exploded and carried Islam across North Africa and into Spain, blacks went with them. Among the black personalities at the court of Almansur in Seville, for example, was a "learned and celebrated poet, a black of the Sudan, Abu Ishak Ibrahim Al Kenemi."

In the same period three powerful states—Ghana, Mali, and Songhay—emerged in the western Sudan, a broad belt of open country, sandwiched between the Sahara in the north and the rain forests of the Guinea Coast on the south. At one time the peoples and rulers of these countries were classified out of the Negro race. It is now known that they were blacks, some of whom were converted to Islam in the eleventh century. The extent of Moslem influence is debatable, but it seems probable that the upper classes and leaders, especially in the large cities, were black Moslems.

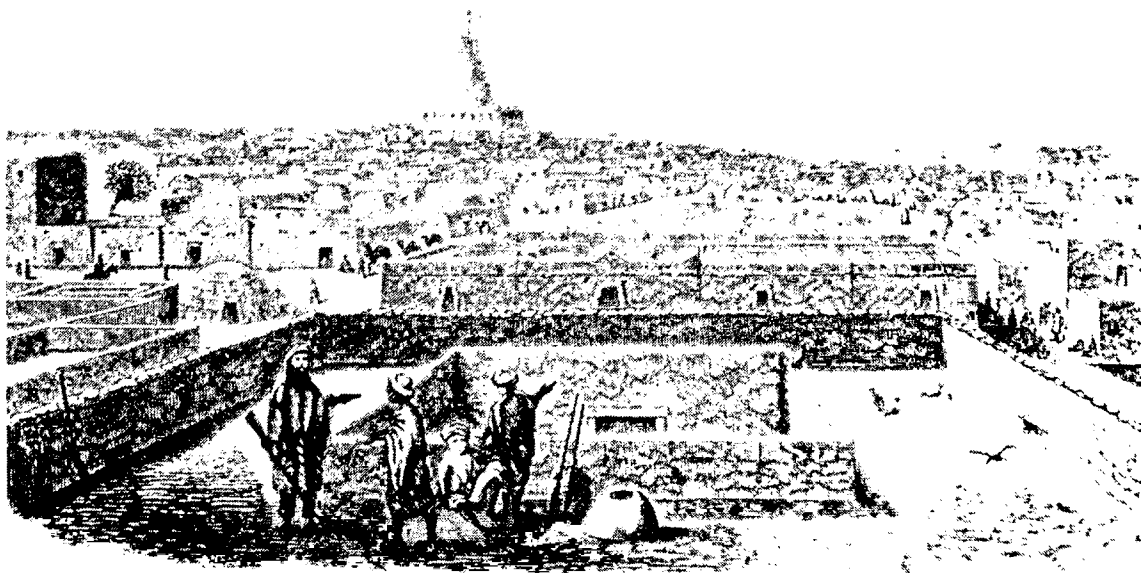
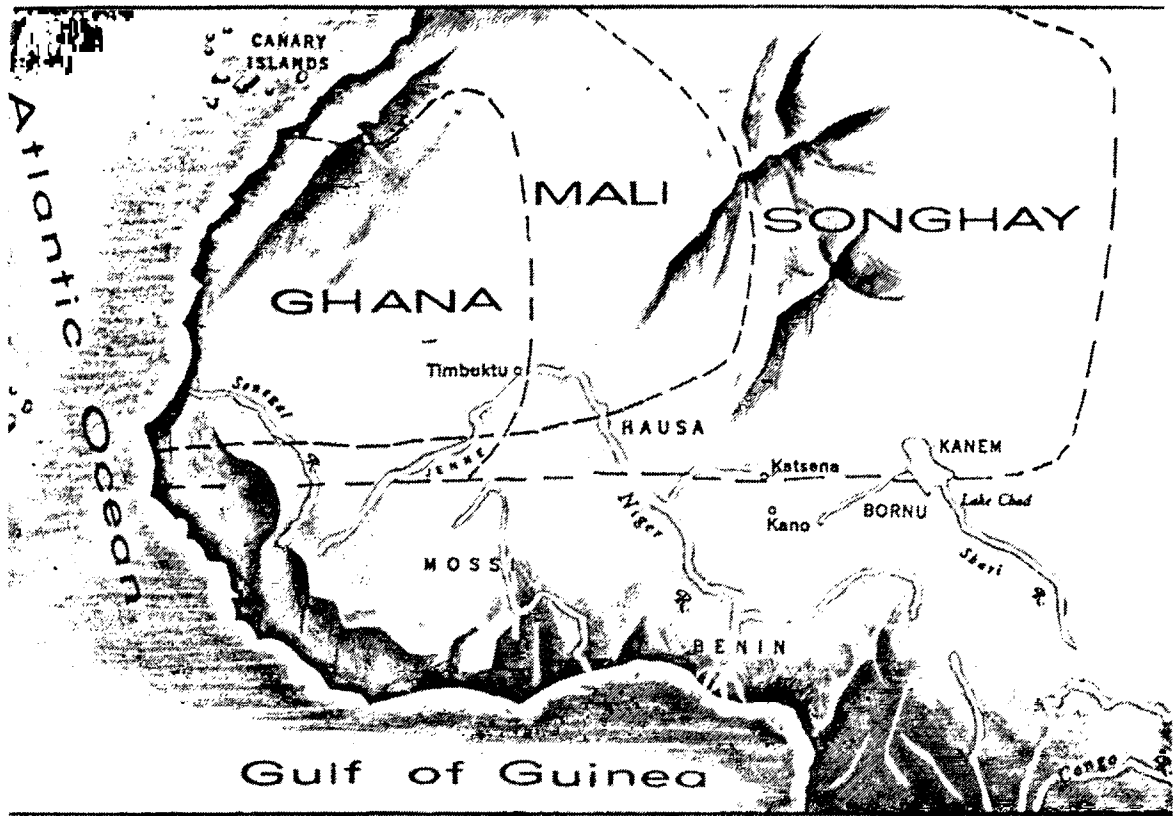
As political entities, Ghana, Mali and Songhay do not suffer in comparison with their European contemporaries. In several areas, in fact, the Sudanese empires were clearly superior. "It would be interesting to know," Basil Davidson wrote, "what the Normans might have thought of Ghana. Anglo-Saxon England could easily have seemed a poor and lowly place beside it."

The economic life of these states revolved around agriculture, manufacturing and international trade. Rulers wielded power through provincial governors and viceroys and maintained large standing armies. Chain-mailed cavalry, armed with shields, swords and lances, formed the shock troops of the armies. Ibn-Batuta, an Arab traveler who visited Mali in the fourteenth century, was impressed by the flow of life in these states. "Of all people," he said, "the blacks are those who most detest injustice. Their Sultan never forgives anyone who has been guilty of it."

Ancient Sudan empires reached the peak of their power in the Middle Ages. Ghana dominated the Sudan for almost three centuries. Mali rose in the thirteenth century. Songhay was a Sudan power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

West African warriors fought for the medieval African empire of Kanem-Bornu. Chain-mailed cavalry were shock troops of the powerful black states of the western Sudan.





Timbuktu was one of the world's greatest cities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The intellectual center of the black empire of Songhay, Timbuktu was famed for its scholars and its social life.

Proud, a little haughty perhaps, the Sudanese were a formidable people. When the monarch of one state was overthrown, the women committed suicide because "they were too proud to allow themselves to fall into the hands of white men." Ibn-Batuta was astonished by the servile behavior of the whites in Mali. The black viceroy who received the merchants of the caravan with which Batuta was traveling remained seated while the whites stood before him. He spoke to the whites through an interpreter, although he understood their language. He did this, Ibn-Batuta said, "solely to indicate his disdain for them."

Trade and commerce flourished in the great cities that sprang up in the Sudanese savannah, and the intellectual life was brisk and stimulating. Jenné and Timbuktu were known throughout the Moslem world as centers of culture and learning. Ibn-Batuta said the black women of these cities were "of surpassing beauty." They were neither downtrodden nor meek, these women. Ibn-Batuta said they were "shown more respect than the men," adding: "Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever" and the women "show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves."

The power and wealth of Ghana, Mali and Songhay stemmed from the trans-Saharan trade, which exerted a profound influence on Sudanese civilization. The basis of this trade was gold. From the north came caravans of twelve thousand or more camels, laden with wheat, sugar, fruit, salt and textiles, which were exchanged in the Sudan for gold and other products. In the power politics of that day, the country that controlled this trade controlled the Sudan.

Ghana, which was old when the Arabs first mentioned it in A.D. 800, dominated the Sudan for almost three hundred years, flourishing in the ninth and tenth centuries and reaching the peak of its power in the early part of the eleventh century. The rulers of Ghana, which was one of the main suppliers of gold for North Africa and Europe, were fabulously wealthy. Al-Bakri, an Arab geographer who wrote in 1067, said the king owned a nugget of gold so large that he could tether his horse to it.

Tenkamenin, who ruled Ghana in the middle of the eleventh century, had an army of two hundred thousand men and lived in a castle decorated with sculpture and painted windows. "When he gives audience to his people," Al-Bakri said, "to listen to their complaints . . . he sits in a pavilion around which stand his

horses caparisoned in cloth of gold; behind him stand ten pages holding shields and gold-mounted swords; and on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited into their hair. The governor of the city is seated on the ground in front of the king, and all around him are his vizirs in the same position. The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed, who never leave the king's seat, they wear collars of gold and silver."

In the eleventh century Ghana fell to a band of Moslem zealots, and the torch of Sudanese civilization passed to Mali, which began as a small Mandingo state on the left bank of the upper Niger River. Although the history of this country goes back to the seventh century, it owes its fame to two men—Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa. Keita transformed the small state into a great empire. Musa, the most celebrated ruler of the ancient Sudan, came to power in 1307 and put together one of the greatest countries of the medieval world. Musa is best known for a pilgrimage he made to Mecca in 1324. He went in regal splendor with an entourage of sixty thousand persons, including twelve thousand servants. Five hundred servants, each of whom carried a staff of pure gold weighing some six pounds, marched on before him. Eighty camels bore twenty-four thousand pounds of gold, which the black monarch distributed as alms and gifts. Musa returned to his kingdom with an architect who designed imposing buildings in Timbuktu and other cities of the Sudan.

Mali declined in importance in the fifteenth century and its place was taken by Songhay, whose greatest king was Askia Mohammed. Askia, a general who had served as prime minister, seized power in 1493, a year after the European discovery of America. He reigned for nineteen years and built the largest and most powerful of the Sudan states. His realm was larger than all Europe and included most of West Africa. "He was obeyed," a Sudanese writer said, "with as much docility on the farther limits of the empire as he was in his own palace, and there reigned everywhere great plenty and absolute peace."

A brilliant administrator and an enlightened legislator, Askia reorganized the army, improved the banking and credit systems and made Gao, Walata, Timbuktu and Jenné intellectual centers. Certain scholars, Alexander Chamberlain in particular, believe he was one of the greatest monarchs of this period. "In personal character, in administrative ability, in devotion to the welfare of

his subjects, in open mindedness towards foreign influences, and in wisdom in the adoption of non-Negro ideas and institutions," Chamberlain said, "King Askia . . . was certainly the equal of the average European monarch of the time and superior to many of them."

Timbuktu, during Askia's reign, was a city of some one hundred thousand people, filled with gold and dazzling women. One of the most fabled and exotic cities in the medieval world, the Sudanese metropolis was celebrated for its luxury and gaiety. The towering minarets of two great mosques dominated the face of the city. From the Great Mosque, flat-roofed houses (of wood and plaster) radiated in all directions. The older Sankore Mosque, to which was attached the University of Sankore, was the center of intellectual life. The mosque and the university were of cut stone and lime. Other buildings fronted the narrow streets: factories and shops where one could buy exotic goods from North Africa and faraway Europe. Leo Africanus, a Christianized Moor who visited the city in the sixteenth century, said it "is a wonder to see what plentie of Merchandize is daily brought hither and how costly and sumptuous all things be. . . . Here are many shops of . . . merchants and especially of such as weave linnen."

In the narrow streets of this Sudanese metropolis, scholars mingled with rich black merchants and young boys sat in the shade, reciting the Koran. Visiting Arab businessmen wandered the streets, looking, no doubt, for the excitement for which the city was famed. Youths from all over the Moslem world came to Timbuktu to study law and surgery at the University of Sankore; scholars came from North Africa and Europe to confer with the learned historians and writers of the black empire. Es Sadi, a Timbuktu intellectual who wrote a history of the Sudan, said his brother came from Jenné for a successful cataract operation at the hands of a distinguished surgeon. Es Sadi, incidentally, had a private library of sixteen hundred volumes.

If we can credit contemporary reports, Timbuktu, during the reign of Askia the Great, was an intellectual's paradise. A Sudanese literature developed and Es-Sadi, Ahmed Baba and other intellectuals wrote books.

"In Timbuktu," Leo Africanus said, "there are numerous judges, doctors, and clerics, all receiving good salaries from the



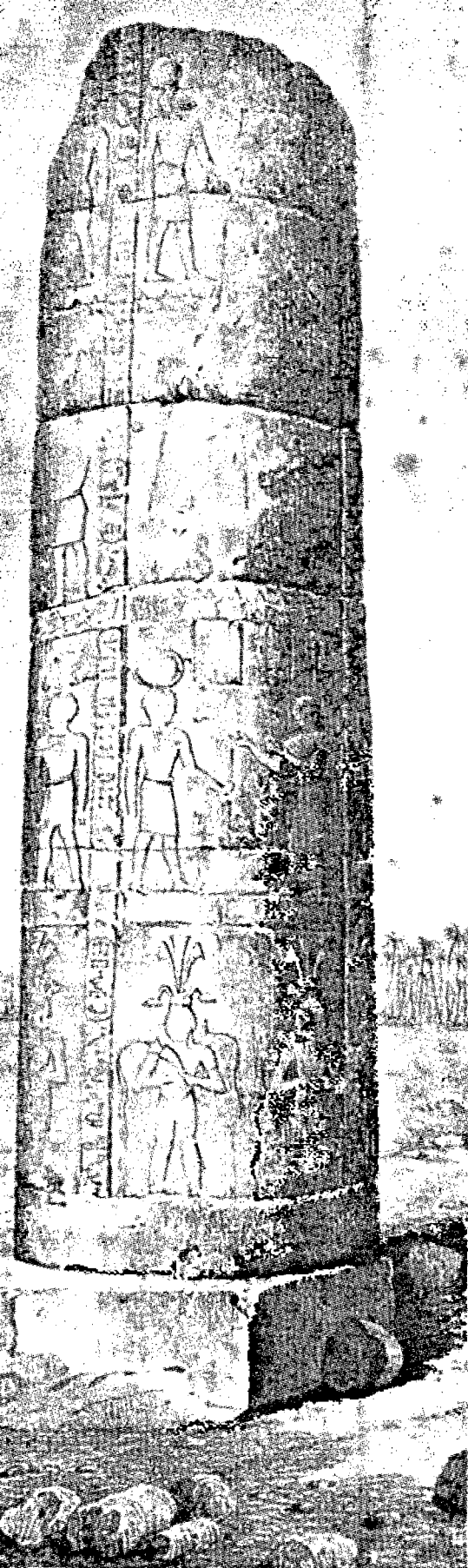
king. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a big demand for books in manuscript, imported from Barbary. More profit is made from the book trade than from any other line of business." Since man first learned to write, few cities have been able to make such a claim.

The University of Sankore and other intellectual centers in Timbuktu had large and valuable collections of manuscripts in several languages, and scholars came from faraway places to check their Greek and Latin manuscripts. The seeds scattered here put down deep roots. Hundreds of years later Heinrich Barth met an old blind man in the Sudan. "This," he reported, "was the first conversation I had with this man. . . . I could scarcely have expected to find in this out of the way place a man not only versed in all the branches of Arabic literature, but who had even read, nay, possessed a manuscript of those portions of Aristotle and Plato which had been translated into Arabic."

How did the people of Timbuktu amuse themselves? If the writers of Songhay can be believed, Timbuktu was Paris, Chicago and New York blended into an African setting. Shocked Songhay historians said most of the people amused themselves with parties, love and the pleasures of the cup. Music was the rage (orchestras with both male and female singers were preferred) and midnight revels were common. The dress of the women was extravagantly luxurious. Men and women were fond of jewels, and the women dressed their hair with bands of gold.

Dramatic displays, including dancing, fencing, gymnastics and poetic recitations, were popular. So was chess. The story is told of a Songhay general who bungled a military campaign and explained that he became so engrossed in a chess game that he paid no attention to the reports of his scouts. Askia—a liberal man who had several wives and one hundred sons, the last of whom was born when he was ninety—was disturbed by the free and easy life of Timbuktu and attempted, apparently without too much success, to curb the social excesses.

Timbuktu and the civilization of which it was a flower declined in the seventeenth century and the reign of the great West African states came to an end. Why did Sudanese civilization collapse? W. E. B. Du Bois says it fell before the triphammer blows of two of the world's great religions, Islam and Christianity. Other students cite the difficulties of defense in the open Sudanese



Sandstone column is part of the ruins of an Ethiopian temple. There are monuments in Ancient Ethiopia which rival the ancient treasures of Egypt in grandeur and beauty.



Naturalistic bronze head from Ife, West Coast art center, and abstract rendering of human face in mask (below) show the great variety and strength of African sculpture.

savannah and the corrupting influence of the slave trade. Es-Sadi, who wrote the *Tarikh al-Sudan* in the dying days of the Songhay empire, advanced another reason—social dissolution. The people, he said, had grown fat and soft on luxury and good living. “At this moment,” he said, “faith was exchanged for infidelity; there was nothing forbidden by God which was not openly done. . . . Because of these abominations, the Almighty in his vengeance drew upon the Songhai the victorious army of the Moors.”

The age of the great Sudan empires ended, but several states to the east and south, notably Mossi, Hausa, Kanem-Bornu and Ashanti, retained political identities down to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Great Zimbabwe and other stone cities in Southern Africa suggest that strong states flourished inland. Vigorous centers of culture also existed on the East Coast, where black and Arab merchants traded with India and China.

European penetration and the slave trade debased much that was vital in African culture. The popular myth depicts the conquering European carrying the blessing of civilization to naked “savages” who sat under trees, filed their teeth and waited for fruit to drop into their hands. The truth is less flattering to the European ego. On the West Coast of Africa, from whence came most of the ancestors of American blacks, there were complex institutions ranging from extended family groupings to village states and territorial empires. Most of these units had all the appurtenances of the modern state—armies, courts, and internal revenue departments. Indeed, more than one scholar has paid tribute to “the legal genius of the African.” Anthropologist Melville J. Herkovits said that “of the areas inhabited by non-literate peoples, Africa exhibits the greatest incidence of complex governmental structures. Not even the kingdoms of Peru and Mexico could mobilize resources and concentrate power more effectively than could some of these African monarchies, which are more to be compared with Europe of the Middle Ages than referred to the common conception of the ‘primitive’ state.”

Agriculture was the basis of the economic life of these states, although herding and artisanship were important. Specialization was advanced, with one nation, for example, concentrating on metallurgy and bartering with another nation which specialized in

weaving or farming. A money system based on the cowrie shell was in use before European penetration. Contemptuous of the concept of private property, West Africans believed that the land belonged to the community and could not be alienated.

Iron was known and used from the Atlantic Ocean to Ethiopia. With simple bellows and charcoal fires, the Africans smelted iron and manufactured beautiful implements. "It seems likely," Franz Boas said, "that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron. . . . It seems not unlikely that the people who made the marvelous discovery of reducing iron ores by smelting were the African Negroes. Neither ancient Europe, nor ancient western Asia, nor ancient China knew iron, and everything points to its introduction from Africa."

The core of West African society was the family which was organized in some tribes on a matrilineal basis—that is, descent was traced through the mother. Polygamy was common, although, in practice, the poor, like poor people everywhere, contented themselves with monogamy. Social life was well organized. The old, the sick, the infirm were cared for. Spinsters were rare; prostitution was unknown. Some nations, incidentally, were acquainted with the allegedly modern practice of birth control. Bantu people said it was not good for a woman to give birth to more than one child in a three-year period. Some nations vaccinated for smallpox and said there was a cause and effect relationship between the mosquito and malaria. A European traveler in Abyssinia reported that "the Natives hereabouts say that Malaria is caused by the bite of the mosquito, but, of course, we know better—it is caused by the miasmas of the swamps!"

The West Africans were a bewildering mixture of various stocks. Centuries of contact and interbreeding had already produced different types. Some of the West Africans were short and broad-nosed. Some were tall with straight hair and aquiline noses. They were of all colors: chocolate, asphalt, café au lait, persimmon, cream.

Although West Africans spoke many tongues, there was a common substratum. Only four African languages were reduced to writing before the coming of the white man: Egyptian, Ethiopian, a variety of Berber and an invention of the Vai people of Liberia. Though not reduced to writing, African languages were

far from simple. There is no better summary of the flavor of these languages than Mario Pei's analysis of Swahili, which, he said, "is a complete refutation of the rather general belief that languages of 'primitive' peoples are necessarily primitive, and consist largely of grunts, groans and mixed-up ideas. Swahili has a euphony that is comparable to Italian, with clear, distinct sounds, vowel endings, and a most pleasing arrangement of syllables that consist for the most part of consonant-plus-vowel. It is capable of such absolute precision that the Swahili version of the Pentateuch contains fewer words than the Hebrew original, without the slightest loss or distortion of meaning. Its grammatical and syntactical structure is logical, almost to the point of being philosophical."

Of whatever tongue, of whatever color, Africans were a deeply religious people. For a long time their religion was written off as a form of animism. We know now that it was a great deal more complicated than that. Like advanced peoples everywhere, the Africans wrestled with the big questions. What is man? What happens to him after death? Is life a gigantic hoax or has it purpose and meaning?

The answers Africans gave to these questions determined the form of their religion. There was, to begin with, a supreme God who created the earth. There was also a pantheon of lesser gods, identified sometimes with terrestrial objects. Intertwined with these concepts were the cults of fate and ancestor worship. Undergirding all was the basic concept of "life forces." The life force of the Creator was thought to be present in all things, animate and inanimate. This force, "a kind of individualized fragment of the Supreme Being itself," continued to exist, even after the death of the individual. It continued, the African said, in a pure and perfect state which could influence the lives of living things.

This sophisticated concept bears a striking resemblance to Henri Bergson's *élan vital* and other modern philosophies and theories. Bernard Fagg, an expert on these matters, found some parallels between African philosophy and modern subatomic physics. "African thought," he said, "is conditioned by their ontology, that is, their theory of the nature of being; for them being is a process and not a mere state, and the nature of things is thought of in terms of force or energy rather than matter; the forces of the spirit, human, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds

are all constantly influencing each other, and by a proper knowledge and use of them a man may influence his own life and that of others.”

Religion, to the African, was life. Every event was charged with religious significance, and the climax of life was death. The African's attitude toward death, anthropologists say, survived the Atlantic crossing and took root in the soil of black American life. Another religious root, spirit possession, thrives, they say, in the shouting and ecstasy complex of some black American churches.

Art, like religion, was a life expression. There were no art museums or opera houses in pre-white man Africa. Art and aesthetic expression were collective experiences in which all the people participated. Art, in short, was not for art's sake, but for life's sake.

The different faces of beauty—line, color, sound, rhythm—fascinated the African ancestors of American blacks. And their plastic art—embodied in cubistic masks, terra-cotta pieces, gold figurines, three-dimensional objects and naturalistic representations of the human body—is one of the great flights of the human spirit. Fascinated by the abstract geometry of African art, Picasso and other modernists turned their backs on the Greco-Roman and Renaissance visions and adopted the vocabulary of Benin, Ife and other West African art centers. In 1907 Picasso altered the faces of his huge canvas. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, to resemble African masks. This was the beginning of a cubism, a turning point in Western art.

Before the coming of the European, music and rhythm were everyday things in Africa. Music was everywhere and it was grounded in two techniques which survived in the New World: polyrhythmic percussive technique and the call-and-response pattern (leader and chorus alternating). The poetry of tom-toms, the symphonies of synchronized bodies: these ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of life. Men and women danced because dancing had a social and religious meaning and because dancing *was* meaning, was life itself. This attitude came to America, too. The Afro-American dances from Afro-Cuba and the Afro-American dances from Afro-Harlem are rooted in an African *mystique*. It is of more than casual significance that films made in an African village contained a perfect example of the Charleston.

There was much, to be sure, that was mean and base in African life: slavery, for example, although it was a thousand times more

moderate than American slavery and, of course, the use of humans by humans. Humans used other humans in Africa, as they did in Greece and Rome. The only thing that can be said for human exploitation in Africa is that it was as well organized as it was in "more advanced" cultures.

The individuals who emerged from this African chrysalis were courageous and creative. They were not soft; they were hard. They had fought the tsetse fly and hundreds of nameless insects, and they had survived. They had wrested from the hungry jungle gaps of land and they had found time to think beautiful thoughts and to make beautiful things. They were used to hard work and they were accustomed to an elaborate social code. If they were aristocrats or rich merchants or priests — if, in short, they belonged to the upper classes, as did some who came to America in chains, they were used to political responsibility, to giving orders and taking them, to making and altering rules, to governing. In fine, as Stanley M. Elkins said, in an otherwise questionable essay, they were "the product of . . . cultural traditions essentially heroic in nature."

Was this rich cultural heritage transplanted and preserved in the American environment?

Some scholars find little in African-American life that can be traced to the African past. Others, like Melville J. Herskovits, find Africanisms (survivals of African cultural patterns) in the family life, motor habits, religious practices and music of black Americans. Lorenzo Turner found a large number of survivals in the syntax, word-formations and intonations of black Americans. Among the words he found "in fairly general use. . . especially in the South" were goober (peanut), gumbo (okra), ninny (female breast), tote (to carry), yam (sweet potato). Turner also found "several hundred" African names among Americans on the South Side of Chicago, including the following:

*Bobo*, one who cannot talk (Vai)  
*Geeji*, a language and tribe in Liberia  
*Agona*, a country in Ghana (Twi)  
*Ola*, that which saves (Yoruba)  
*Zola*, to love (Congo)

It is obvious from this — from the evidence of the names and habits, religious practices and music of African-Americans —



that Africa's golden past is crucial to an understanding of black America. What is equally true and equally important is that Africa's past is critical to an understanding of white America. For it is impossible to understand white America, it is impossible to understand Thomas Jefferson or George Washington or the U.S. Constitution, without some understanding of Africa's gift to the New World. And what that means, on the level of history and on the level of reality, is that America, contrary to the generally accepted view, is an African as well as a European invention.

*One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?*

## 2

# *Before the Mayflower*

*Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song — soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit.*

W.E.B. DU BOIS

**S**HE CAME out of a violent storm with a story no one believed, a name no one recorded and a past no one investigated. She was manned by pirates and thieves. Her captain was a mystery man named Jope, her pilot an Englishman named Marmaduke, her cargo an assortment of Africans with sonorous Spanish names — Antoney, Isabella, Pedro.

A year before the arrival of the celebrated *Mayflower*, 113 years before the birth of George Washington, 244 years before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, this ship sailed into the harbor at Jamestown, Virginia, and dropped anchor into the muddy waters of history. It was clear to the men who received

this “Dutch man of War” that she was no ordinary vessel. What seems unusual today is that no one sensed how extraordinary she really was. For few ships, before or since, have unloaded a more momentous cargo.

From whence did this ship come?

From somewhere on the high seas where she robbed a Spanish vessel of a cargo of Africans bound for the West Indies.

Why did she stop at Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America?

No one knows for sure. The captain “ptended,” John Rolfe noted, that he was in great need of food and offered to exchange his human cargo for “victualle.” The deal was arranged. Antoney, Isabella, Pedro and seventeen other Africans stepped ashore in August, 1619. The history of Black America began.

It began, in a way, with Antoney. And it began with a love story. Antoney, who had no surname, fell in love with Isabella and married her. In 1623 or 1624 Isabella gave birth to the first black child born in English America. The child, a boy named William, was baptized in the Church of England.

There were other ships, other Williams, other Antoneys and other Isabellas—millions after millions. This is a story about those millions and the way they came to the Americas. This is a story about the merchandising and marketing of human beings. This is a story about the “greatest migration in recorded history.”

The story of Antoney and Isabella is only one act in a larger drama—the European slave trade—which began in 1444 and continued for more than four hundred years. During this period Africa lost an estimated forty million people. Some twenty million of these men and women came to the New World. Millions more died in Africa during and after their capture or on the ships and plantations.

These figures, though instructive, do not say anything meaningful about the people involved. The slave trade was not a statistic, however astronomical. The slave trade was people living, lying, stealing, murdering, dying. The slave trade was a black man who stepped out of his house for a breath of fresh air and ended up, ten months later, in Georgia with bruises on his back and a brand on his chest.

The slave trade was a black mother suffocating her newborn baby because she didn’t want him to grow up a slave.

The slave trade was a "kind" captain forcing his suicide-minded passengers to eat by breaking their teeth, though, as he said, he was "naturally compassionate."

The slave trade was a bishop sitting on an ivory chair on a wharf in the Congo and extending his fat hand in wholesale baptism of slaves who were rowed beneath him, going in chains to the slave ships.

The slave trade was a greedy king raiding his own villages to get slaves to buy brandy.

The slave trade was a pious captain holding prayer services twice a day on his slave ship and writing later the famous hymn, "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds."

The slave trade was deserted villages, bleached bones on slave trails and people with no last names. It was Caesar negro, Angelo negro and Negro Mary. Above all, it was Captain Tomba, who came to America, and Nealee, who didn't.

Nealee started out but she couldn't or wouldn't make it. She was being driven to the West African coast for sale when she became ill and refused to walk another step. Mungo Park, who was one of the last persons to see Nealee, said she was put on an ass "but the ass was so very unruly, that no sort of treatment could induce him to proceed with his load; and as Nealee made no exertion to prevent herself from falling, she was quickly thrown off, and had one of her legs much bruised. Every attempt to carry her forward being thus found ineffectual, the general cry of the coffle [slave caravan] was, *kang-tegi, kang-tegi*, 'cut her throat, cut her throat'; an operation I did not wish to see performed, and therefore marched onwards with the foremost of the coffle. I had not walked above a mile when one of Karfa's [the leader] domestic slaves came up to me, with poor Nealee's garment upon the end of his bow and exclaimed, 'Nealee *affeeleeta*.' (Nealee is lost.) I asked him whether the Slattees had given him the garment as a reward for cutting her throat; he replied that Karfa and the schoolmaster would not consent to that measure, but had left her on the road; where undoubtedly she soon perished, and was probably devoured by wild beasts."

Captain Tomba, who came to America, was first seen in a slave pen in Sierra Leone. John Atkins, a surgeon who saw him there, said he was a handsome man "who scorned looking at us, refusing to rise or stretch out his Limbs, as the Master Commanded."

A few days later Captain Tomba and a companion led a revolt on a slave ship and killed three sailors before they were subdued.

What happened to Captain Tomba?

“Why,” John Atkins wrote, “Captain Harding weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two slaves [Captain Tomba and a companion] did, as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three others, Abettors, but not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died.”

Captain Tomba living, Nealee dying, John Newton praying, the King of Barsally stealing, the fat bishop baptizing, Captain Harding torturing—these people and millions like them made the slave trade one of the cruellest chapters in the history of man.

This chapter started in the fifteenth century, but it cannot be understood if it is not placed in the flow of history from which vantage point it will appear that slavery is not a disgrace peculiar to blacks but a universal phenomenon that has been practiced in almost all countries. Slavery was old when Moses was young. In Plato’s Athens and Caesar’s Rome, humans—white, black and brown—were bought and sold. Slavery existed in the Middle Ages in Christian Europe and in Africa. In the ancient world almost anyone might become a slave. Slavery was so prevalent, in fact, that Plato said every person has slaves among his ancestors.

There was a crucial difference, however, between ancient slavery and modern slavery. Ancient slavery, which had little or nothing to do with race, was justified primarily by the rules of war. Christians and Moslems added a new dimension to this ancient institution, capturing and enslaving one another for religious reasons. The same rationale served both groups when economic interests and improved technology focused world attention on Africa.

The Moslems got there first. For several decades before the opening of the European trade, Moslem merchants dragged dark captives across the hot Sahara sands. Then, in the fifteenth century, Portugal diverted this trade to the Atlantic. The prime mover in this development was a devout and covetous prince named Henry the Navigator. Excited by stories of the great wealth of Africa and Asia, he ordered his ships to explore the

coast of Africa. There, on a fateful day in 1482, Henry's men came upon the first large group of Africans. They tiptoed through the high grass and crept to the edge of the village and then, said a contemporary, "they looked towards the settlement and saw that the Moors, with their women and children, were already coming as quickly as they could out of their dwellings, because they had caught sight of their enemies. But they, shouting out 'St. James,' 'St. George,' 'Portugal,' attacked them, killing and taking all they could."

The pious Portuguese captured seventy more Africans, including a girl they found sleeping in a deserted village, and sailed home, where they baptized the captives and enslaved them. Within ten years Portugal was importing one thousand Africans a year. A century later blacks outnumbered whites in some sections of Portugal, where there was a big demand for black domestics, stevedores and agricultural laborers, especially in the southern section. "By the middle of the sixteenth century," Mary Wilhelmina Williams commented, "the inhabitants of the Algarve were largely Ethiopians, and even as far north as Lisbon blacks outnumbered whites. There was no marked color line, and the blood of the two races mingled freely, resulting eventually in Negroid physical characteristics in the Portuguese nation."

This phase of the slave trade was relatively unimportant. There was no widespread demand for slaves in Europe, and the number of Africans captured was relatively small. As a consequence, the European monologue quickly became an African-European dialogue based on a trade in humans *and* goods and ideas.

Africa just then was in a state of highly unstable equilibrium. The continent had emerged from the Golden Age of the Great Empires with a number of critical problems, including climatic changes which pushed the Sahara south, triggering massive migrations and isolating large sections from the dominant currents of the age. No less obvious and ominous was the absence of modern firepower, a fact that would prove decisive in the coming confrontation with Europe. Despite these problems, life in some African states compared favorably with life in some European states. (Europe's eminence, one must remember, came in large part *after* the fall of Africa and as a direct result of that fall.) In fact, in some areas, Africans were a step or two ahead. The Sudanese empire, with its showplace of Timbuktu, had passed its

peak, but the ancient continent could still show Europe a thing or two. There were large empires and populous cities—some as large as all but the largest European cities—along the coasts, and Benin and other African centers were thriving inland. In the sixteenth century, when the whole of America was a howling wilderness and large sections of the European peasantry had been reduced to beggary, Benin City was a dazzling place, twenty-five miles wide, with imposing boulevards and intersecting streets, flanked by substantial houses with balustrades and verandas.

Impressed by these and other evidences of African power, the first European emissaries greeted Africans as allies and partners in trade. The letters and diaries of traders show that down to the eighteenth century they had no conception of Africans as racial pariahs. On the contrary, many of these traders said Africans were their equals and superior to many of their countrymen back home.

Africans were of substantially the same mind. They did not consider themselves inferior to Europeans. If anything, they considered themselves superior to the odd-looking men with pale skins. We are told that the king of Dahomey seldom shook hands with white men and that when he did it was a “very uncommon mark of royal condescension.” A French trader complained in 1660 that the Fanti were “so proud and haughty that a European trader there must stand bare to them.”

Standing up to one another, as equals and partners in trade and commerce, both Africans and Europeans profited. Plenipotentiaries were exchanged, and bright young men of the ruling stratum went to Lisbon and Rome to study and observe. Black and white kings exchanged letters filled with terms of royal endearment (“my fellow brother and my fellow queen”). They also exchanged gifts and mistresses of various hues and dispositions. On May 15, 1518, one hundred years before the Jamestown landing, Henry of the Congo led a mission to the Vatican, formally addressed the Pope in Latin and was appointed bishop of the Congo. In Rome, Lisbon and other European centers, Africans rose to high positions in church and state.

In the fervor of worldwide exploration and the commingling of peoples from different lands and cultures, new vistas opened up for both Africans and Europeans. It seemed for a spell that Christianity would have the same fertilizing influence in Africa in the

sixteenth century that Islam had had in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But it was not to be. While the bright young black men were feasting in the courts of Lisbon, while the eager black priests were genuflecting in the courts of the Vatican, events were happening in the outer world that would destroy the dream and change Europe and Africa forever.

The most important of these events was the European discovery of America and the opening of the New World. It is a point of paradoxical interest that descendants of the first black captives—black Christians born in Spain and Portugal—were with the first European explorers and settlers. Black explorers—servants, slaves, and free men—accompanied Spanish and Portuguese explorers in their expeditions in North and South America. They were with Pizarro in Peru, Cortes in Mexico and Menendez in Florida. Thirty blacks were with Balboa when he discovered the Pacific Ocean. Typical of the early black explorers in America was Estevanico, who opened up New Mexico and Arizona for the Spaniards. Other blacks, W. E. B. Du Bois said, “accompanied DeSoto and one of them stayed among the Indians in Alabama and became the first settler from the Old World.”

Spaniards, who took the lead in the exploration, attempted at first to enslave Indians. But they died so fast that Bishop Bartolomé Las Casas, a famous missionary, recommended in 1517 the importation of Africans, a recommendation he lived to regret. The development of large-scale sugar planting created a demand for men that casual kidnapping couldn't supply. In the wake of that development, the vision of European monarchs shifted, and the African-European dialogue became a monologue focused almost exclusively on a trade in men. Within a few years hundreds of thousands of blacks were crossing the Atlantic each year, and the soil of Africa and America was drenched with their blood. “Strange,” said Eric Williams, “that an article like sugar, so sweet and necessary to human existence, should have occasioned such crimes and bloodshed!”

An estimated million of these slaves found their way to the land that became the United States of America. But the first black immigrants (Antoney, Isabella, and the Jamestown group) were not slaves. This is a fact of critical importance in the history of



Black America. They came, these first blacks, the same way that most of the first white immigrants came—under duress and pressure. They found a system (indentured servitude) which enabled poor whites to come to America and sell their services for a stipulated number of years to planters. Under this system thousands of whites—paupers, ne'er-do-wells, religious dissenters, waifs, prisoners and prostitutes—were shipped to the colonies and sold to the highest bidder. Many were sold, as the first blacks were sold, by the captains of ships. Some were kidnapped on the streets of London and Bristol, as the first blacks were kidnapped in the villages of Africa.

In Virginia, then, as in other colonies, the first black settlers fell into a well-established socioeconomic groove which carried with it no implications of racial inferiority. That came later. But in the interim, a period of forty years or more, the first black settlers accumulated land, voted, testified in court and mingled with whites on a basis of equality. They owned other black servants, and certain blacks imported and paid for white servants whom they apparently held in servitude.

During these fateful forty years, the black population of the Virginia colony grew by natural additions and importations. In 1621 the *James* arrived from England with a number of immigrants, including a black man named Antonio. In 1623 the *Swan* arrived with still another black from England, a man named John Pedro. In 1623 or 1624, as we have seen, Isabella, the wife of Antoney, gave birth to what was probably the first black child born in America. The new American, the first of a long black line that would swell to millions, was christened William in the Church of England, and a new account was opened in the ledger book of history. At that juncture, according to the first detailed census of 1624–25, blacks constituted about 2 per cent of the total population of 1,227. The twenty-three black pioneers—eleven males, ten females, and two children—lived in six of the twenty-three settlements in Virginia.

We can only imagine the feelings of these seminal African-Americans. The record burns with their presence but is strangely silent on their reactions. The black founding fathers and mothers enter history thus: faceless men and women uprooted from Africa and flung into a maelstrom of history. Nothing in the record indicates that the cultural shock was great for either the blacks or

whites. There were skilled farmers and artisans among the first group of African-Americans, and there are indications in the record that they were responsible for various innovations later credited to English immigrants. An early example of this was reported in Virginia, where the governor ordered rice planted in 1648 on the advice of "our Negroes," who told the whites that conditions in Virginia were as favorable to the production of the crop as "in their Country."

There is furthermore the testimony of Washington Irving, who made the following observation in a contemporary satirical skit: "These Negroes, like the monks of the Dark Ages, engross all the Knowledge of the place, and being infinitely more adventurous and more knowing than their masters, carry on all the foreign trade; making frequent voyages in canoes, loaded with oysters, buttermilk and cabbages. They are great astrologers predicting the different changes of weather almost as accurately as an almanac."

A large proportion of the first generation of African-Americans entered America with Spanish names. For reasons that are not readily apparent, many black males were called Antonio, a name that quickly became Antoney or Anthony. Other popular names of the period included Michaela, Couchaxello, Mingo, Pedro, Francisco, Jibina, Maria, Wortello, Tomora, Angola, and Tony Kongo. Shortly after their arrival in America, many blacks discarded African and Spanish names and adopted English titles. Thus within the span of a generation the black soul moved from Africa to England to Spain to America — from the X of the severed African family tree to Antonio and the William X or the William ? of the first native American black, who apparently had no surname at the time of his christening.

During the next forty-odd years, hundreds of Africans made that extraordinary cultural leap. In 1625 Brase, another victim of piracy, was brought into the colony. Four years later, in 1629, there was a substantial increase in the black population when the first ship from Africa arrived at Port Comfort, bringing blacks captured from a Portuguese ship off the coast of Africa. In the 1630s and 1640s approximately 160 blacks were imported. By 1649 colonial officials were able to report that "there are in *Virginia* about fiftene thousand English, and of *Negroes* brought thither, three hundred good servants."

The “good servants” came from different backgrounds with different experiences. Quite a few, as we have noted, came from England, where blacks had lived since the middle of the sixteenth century. Many came from Spain, Portugal and the West Indies. Significantly, many were Christians, baptized either in Spain or Portugal or on the high seas. In 1624 John Phillip testified in a Jamestown court and his testimony against a white man was admitted because he had been “christened in England twelve years since. . . .”

In a limited but nonetheless significant sense, then, the Jamestown experience was an open experience which provided unusual opportunities for individual blacks. This comes out most clearly in the life and times of Anthony Johnson, who came to America in 1621 or thereabouts from England. Like many other blacks of the period, Johnson quickly worked out his term of indenture and started accumulating property. In 1651, according to official records, he imported and paid for five servants, some of whom were white, and was granted 250 acres of land on the basis of the headright system, which permitted planters to claim fifty acres of land for each individual brought to the colony.

The abstract of the deed reads as follows:

ANTHONY JOHNSON, 250 acs. Northampton Co., 24 July 1651, . . . . At great Naswattock Cr., being a neck of land bounded on the S. W. by the maine Cr. & on S.E. & N. W. by two small branches issueing out of the mayne Cr. Trans. of 5 pers: Tho. Bemrose, Peter Bughby, Antho. Cripps, Jno, Gesorrero, Richard Johnson.

In the years that followed, Johnson and his relatives established one of America’s first black communities on the banks of the Pungoteague River. In 1652 John Johnson, who was probably Anthony Johnson’s son, imported eleven persons, most of them white males and females, and received headrights for 550 acres adjacent to Anthony Johnson. Two years later Richard Johnson imported two white indentured servants and received one hundred acres. Here are the records of the deeds:

JOHN JOHNSON, 550 acs. Northampton Co., 10 May 1652 . . . . At great Naswattocks Cr., adj. 200 acs. granted to Anthony Johnson. Trans. of 11 pers: John Edward, Wm. Routh, Tho. Yowell, Fra. Maland, William Price, John

Owen, Dorothy Rily, Richard Hemstead, Law. Barnes, Row. Rith, Mary Johnson.

RICH. Jnoson (Johnson—also given as John), Negro, 100 acs. Northampton Co., 21 Nov. 1654, . . . On S. Side of Pongoteague Riv., Ely. upon Pocomock Nly. upon land of John Jnoson., Negro, Wly. upon Anto. Jnoson., Negro, & Sly. upon Nich. Waddilow. Trans. of 2 pers: Wm. Ames, Wm. Vincent.

The Johnson settlement at its height included only a handful of blacks with large holdings. Other blacks lived in integrated communities in other areas of the colony. In 1656, for instance, Benjamin Doyle received a patent for three hundred acres in Surry County. In 1668 John Harris bought fifty acres in New Kent County; and Phillip Morgan, reflecting the optimism of the age, leased two hundred acres in York County for ninety-nine years.

One can hardly doubt, in the face of this clear evidence, that the first generation of blacks had, as J. H. Russell noted, "about the same industrial or economic opportunities as the free white servant." Additional evidence of the relatively high status of the first American blacks is to be found in colonial documents which indicate that they voted and participated in public life. It was not until 1723, in fact, that blacks were denied the right to vote in Virginia. According to Albert E. McKinley, blacks voted in South Carolina until 1701, in North Carolina until 1715, and in Georgia until 1754. Not only did pioneer blacks vote, but they also held public office. There was a black surety in York County, Virginia, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, and a black beadle in Lancaster County, Virginia.

Nor was this sort of thing confined to Virginia. The first blacks in Massachusetts—they arrived in 1638 on the *Desire*, America's first slave ship—were apparently assigned the status of indentured servants. In his classic work, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, Lorenzo J. Greene said that "until almost the end of the seventeenth century the records refer to the Negroes as 'servants' not as 'slaves.' For some time no definite status could be assigned to incoming Negroes. Some were sold for a period of time only, and like the white indentured servants became free after their indenture."

The available evidence suggests that most of the first generation of African-Americans worked out their terms of servitude and were freed. A very interesting and instructive case in point is that of Richard Johnson, a black carpenter who came to Virginia in 1651 as a free man and signed a contract of indenture. Within two years Johnson was a free man. Within three years he was acquiring pounds and property and servants.

In addition to Johnson and other blacks who were freed as a matter of course, the record lists other cases in which colonial courts freed black servants. Such a case was that of Andrew Moore, who migrated to Virginia and bound himself out for a term of five years. In October, 1673, the General Court "ordered that the Said Moore bee free from his said master, and that the Said Mr. Light pay him Corne and Clothes according to the Custome of the Country and four hundred pounds tobac and Caske for his service done him Since he was free, and pay costs."

Looking back on that age from our own, one is struck by what can only be called equality of oppression. Not the least among the things that startle us in this period is that the colony's power structure made little or no distinction between black and white servants, who were assigned the same tasks and were held in equal contempt. This has caused no end of trouble for latter-day white historians, who have tried to explain away a record that is understandably astonishing in view of the later practices of some whites. It is interesting, for example, to observe that many white historians deny that white women worked in the fields. But contemporary witnesses tell us in no uncertain terms that white women not only worked in the fields but were also flogged at colonial whipping posts. There are also court records in which white women asked the courts to relieve them of this burden. Historian Philip A. Bruce conceded this point and commented with disapproval: "The class of white women who were required to work in the fields belonged to the lowest rank in point of character; not having been born in Virginia and not having thus acquired from birth a repugnance to associations with Africans upon a footing of social equality, they yielded to the temptations of the situations in which they were placed."

There is contradictory testimony which indicates that character, Bruce to the contrary notwithstanding, had little or nothing to

do with the status of white servants. "They became in the eyes of the law," J. B. McMaster said, "a slave and in both the civil and criminal codes were classed with the Negro and the Indian. They were worked hard, were dressed in the cast off clothes of their owners, and might be flogged as often as the master and mistress thought necessary." There is also the testimony of T. J. Wertebaker, who said that "the indentured servants. . . were practically slaves, being bound to the soil and forced to obey implicitly those whom they served."

Working together in the same fields, sharing the same huts, the same situation, and the same grievances, the first black and white Americans, aristocrats excepted, developed strong bonds of sympathy and mutuality. They ran away together, played together and revolted together. They mated and married, siring a sizeable mixed population. In the process the black and white servants—the majority of the colonial population—created a racial wonderland that seems somehow un-American in its lack of obsession about race and color. There was, to be sure, prejudice then, but it was largely English class prejudice which was distributed without regard to race, creed or color. There were also, needless to say, prejudiced *individuals* in the colony, but—and this is the fundamental difference between prejudice and racism—their personal quirks and obsessions were not focused and directed by the organized will of a community. The basic division at that juncture was between servants and free people, and there were whites and blacks on both sides of the line.

Of all the improbable aspects of this situation, the oddest—to modern blacks and whites—is that white people did not seem to know that they were white. It appears from surviving evidence that the first white colonists had no concept of themselves as *white* people. The legal documents identified whites as Englishmen and/or Christians. The word *white*, with its burden of arrogance and biological pride, developed late in the century, as a direct result of slavery and the organized debasement of blacks. The same point can be made from the other side of the line. For a long time in colonial America, there was no legal name to focus white anxiety. The first blacks were called Blackamoors, Moors, Negers and Negars. The word *Negro*, a Spanish and Portuguese term for black, did not come into general use in Virginia until the latter part of the century.

A similar course of development was roughly characteristic of New York, where the black settlement preceded the English and the name *New York*. There are records from 1626 identifying eleven blacks—about 5 per cent of the non-Indian population—who were servants of the Dutch West Indian Company. The eleven black pioneers were males. Responding to the pleas of these males, the Dutch imported three women, identified as “Angolans,” in 1628.

In 1644, some eighteen years after their arrival, the “Dutch Negroes,” as they were called, filed a petition for freedom, the first black legal protest in America. The petition was granted by the Council of New Netherlands, which freed the blacks because they had “served the Company seventeen or eighteen years” and had been “long since promised their freedom on the same footing as other free people in New Netherlands.” The eleven blacks cited in the petition were Paul d’Angola, Big Manuel, Little Manuel, Manuel de Gerrit de Rens, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, Gracia, Peter Santome, John Francisco, Little Anthony and John Fort Orange. All received parcels of land in what is now Greenwich Village.

What is essential to grasp about the first blacks in New York is that they stood on the same footing as white indentured servants from the very beginning. “They had almost full freedom of motion and assembly,” James Weldon Johnson wrote in *Black Manhattan*. “They were allowed to marry; wives and daughters had legal protection against the lechery of masters, and they had the right to acquire and hold property.”

What has been outlined above with reference to New York and Virginia holds good also—though with minor variations—for other colonies, including Pennsylvania, where the system of black indentured servitude was so deeply rooted that black servants outnumbered black slaves at the time of the Revolution.

There are no accurate figures on the number of blacks who came to America in this period. In 1715, according to one estimate, there were 2,000 blacks and 96,000 whites in Massachusetts, 4,000 blacks and 27,000 whites in New York, 2,500 blacks and 45,800 whites in Pennsylvania, 9,500 blacks and 40,700 whites in Maryland, 23,000 blacks and 72,000 whites in Virginia, and 10,500 blacks and 6,250 whites in South Carolina.

Who were these blacks?

The answer is simple. They were Africans. This fact, as I said in *The Shaping of Black America*, is so big and obvious that it is easily overlooked or assumed without question. And yet it is the key to an understanding of the first *and* the tenth generation of African-Americans. *They were Africans*: that's the first fact. They were former citizens of states and principalities on the West Coast of Africa.

It is scarcely possible to understand the history of African-America unless we make at the least an effort to understand that fact and the further fact that the Africans brought their mind and ethos to America with them. The important point here is that the first generation of African-Americans were carriers of an African world view. They had ideas about social organization and the nature of the forces that controlled the universe. They also had technical skills, especially in the area of agriculture, which was well developed in Africa.

Although the black immigrants came from the same historical space and shared certain cultural and philosophical presuppositions, they were far from homogenous. Some came by way of Europe or the West Indies, and others came from different sections of Africa. Not only did they come from different countries and different kinship groups but they also spoke different languages. Most apparently were ordinary citizens, but some were warriors and some were from the highest ranks of African society. This fact was noted by a number of contemporary witnesses, including Hugh Jones, who said that Africans "that have been kings and great men [in their countries] are generally lazy, haughty, and obstinate." Discounting the obvious bias in that statement, it appears from this and other testimony that not a few "great men" were among the founding fathers of Black America. There is corroborative evidence on this point from John Josselyn, an English traveler who visited Samuel Maverick of Massachusetts in 1639 and made this observation:

The second of October, about 9 of the clock in the morning, Mr. Mavericks Negro woman came to my chamber window, and in her own Countrey language and tune sang her very loud and shrill, going out to her, she used a great deal of respect towards me, and willingly would have expressed her grief in English; but I apprehended it by her countenance



and deportment, whereupon I repaired to my host, to learn of him the cause, and intreat him in her behalf, for that I understood before, that she had been a Queen in her own Countrey, and observed a very humble and dutiful garb used towards her by another Negro who was her maid. Mr. Maverick was desirous to have a breed of Negroes, and therefore seeing she would not yield by persuasions to company with a Negro young man he had in his use, he commanded him, wil'd she nill'd she, to go to bed with her, which was no sooner done, but she kicked him out again, this she took in high disdain beyond her slavery and this was the cause of her grief.

In this anonymous queen from an unnamed country, we catch a glimpse of the many people of differing ranks who were forced by history to sing their "own Countrey language and tune" in a strange land.

The dominant note in that tune from the seventeenth century to the end of slavery was resistance to white oppression. An English traveler named Edward Kimber said it was extremely difficult to break the will and spirit of new black immigrants. "To be sure," he said, "a *new Negro*, if he must be broke, either from Obstinacy, or, which I am more apt to suppose, from Greatness of Soul, will require more hard Discipline than a young Spaniel; You would really be surpriz'd at their Perseverance; let an hundred Men shew him how to hoe, or drive a Wheelbarrow, he'll still take the one by the Bottom, and the other by the Wheel; and they often die before they can be conquer'd."

It was no less difficult to destroy the cultural heritage of Africans. This was manifested most notably in the widely reported "feasts and burials" of colonial blacks. In 1680 the Virginia Assembly said that "the frequent meetings of considerable numbers of Negroe slaves under pretence of feasts and burials is judged of dangerous consequence." One of these funerals was witnessed by Henry Knight, who said it was customary in that day for black Virginians to "sing and dance and drink the dead to his new home, which some believe to be in old Guinea."

Though the evidence is not as firm as one could wish, there are indications that Africans hoped for more than a century that a miracle would enable them to return to Africa. As the years went by, with no sign of the intervention of African gods, many aban-

doned hope and began the long process of adapting themselves to a new situation.

The adaptation was made with a facility that gives point to Kenneth Stampp's observation that the first generation of blacks were as prepared for freedom as the tenth generation. In addition to the Virginia cases already cited, we might add the case of the black woman who became a member of a Dorchester, Massachusetts, church three years after her arrival on the *Desire*. By that time, 1641, there were at least forty black members of Bouweire Chapel in New Amsterdam. In the same year two Africans—Antony van Angola and Lucie d'Angola—were married in the Dutch church in New Amsterdam. These cases are instructive—as are several others—for the light they shed on the activities of the first generation of blacks, who were slowly and painfully shaping the foundations of the black family.

Not all blacks welcomed the newfangled rites. Large numbers, especially in the South, wooed and wed in feasts and weddings which synthesized African and European forms. An early instance of an improvised African-American wedding in North Carolina was reported by Thomas Brickell, who said, with some bias, that “their marriages are generally performed among themselves, there being very little ceremony used upon that Head; for the Man makes the Woman a Present, such as a Brass Ring or some other Toy, which she accepts of, becomes his wife. . . .”

Such was the system called into life by the establishment of European and African fragments on the American mainland. For at least forty years—until the 1660s—this system contained the seeds of at least four alternatives. Indentured servitude could have been continued for black and white servants or both groups could have been reduced to slavery. Other options were Indian slavery and a free labor system for blacks and whites, Indians and immigrants. Socioeconomic forces—a worldwide demand for sugar and tobacco and the development of capitalist planting techniques based on the use of gang labor—tilted the structure in the direction of black slavery.

To understand this fact in its fullness, we have to notice first that the rulers of the colonies were not overly scrupulous about the color or national origin of the work force. They tried Indian slavery, and they also tried to enslave white men and women.

When these attempts failed, the spotlight fell on Africans, who were tried and found not wanting. How explain this? The explanation is to be found in the situations that defined Africans and Europeans and Indians. Whites, to begin with, were under the protection of recognized governments: they could appeal to a monarch or to white public opinion. Whites, moreover, were white: they could escape and blend into the crowd. Indians, too, could escape: they knew the country and their brothers were only a hill or a forest away. The white rulers of the colonies also said and apparently believed that Indians tended to sicken and die under conditions of slavery.

Africans—from the standpoint of the colonial ruling class—did not have these disadvantages. They were strong: one African, the Spanish said, was worth four Indians. They were inexpensive: the same money that would buy an Irish or English servant for seven years would buy an African for life. They were visible: they could run, but they could not blend into the white crowd. Above all else, they were unprotected. And the supply, unlike the supply of Irishmen and Englishmen, seemed to be inexhaustible. The rulers of the colonies fell to thinking. Why not?

In the fateful sixties of the seventeenth century, the men who ran the colonies, egged on by the slave-trading royalists of London, made a decision that would lead, step by step, to the fateful sixties of the nineteenth century and the fateful sixties of the twentieth. Heedless of the consequences, these men decided to base the American economic system on human slavery organized around the distribution of melanin in human skin. Virginia and Maryland led the way, enacting laws in the 1660s that forbade intermarriage and made blacks slaves for life. Under the new dispensation, which was adopted with minor modifications by other colonies, children born of African women were ruled bond or free, according to the status of the mother.

Thus, white America and black America crossed a great divide. And white America, finding itself on the other side of that divide, found it necessary almost immediately to take two additional steps. The first was the creation of an ideology of racism that justified the subordination of blacks. The second, flowing with and out of the first, was the destruction of the bonds of community between black and white servants, who constituted the majority of the population.

Who was responsible for this policy?

The planters, the aristocrats, the parsons, the lawyers, the founding fathers—*the good people*: they sowed the seeds of the bitter harvest in a painful and protracted separation movement which continued for more than a century.

Astonishingly enough, the first rationalization for this policy was religion. Africans, it was said, were good material for slavery because they were “heathens.” The limitations of this ideology were obvious to almost everyone. It was not permanent: people could become Christians. Since many black immigrants were already Christians, and since many more became Christians in the colonies, planters and planter ideologists set about to find a more enduring mark, something that could not be changed. But before this step could be taken, it was necessary to clear up certain theological difficulties. Was it not a sin to baptize slaves? This question was debated with passion, and the Scriptures were searched for supporting and dissenting opinions. Finally, to the surprise of almost no one, it was decided that it was a Christian duty to bring heathens into the fold of Christian civilization so their souls could be cleansed and whitened. Thus, in the end, God and profits were reconciled, as Virginia noted in its law of 1667: “The conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom.” After that it was easy. A series of laws stripped black slaves of all rights of personality and made color a badge of servitude. The black population, which had grown slowly during the twilight interim of freedom, now lunged forward. In 1710 the number was fifty thousand. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, there were a half-million. When the Civil War opened, the twenty black seeds of Jamestown had become four million.

Where did these people come from?

How did they come?

Why did they come?

Most of the slaves came from an area bordering a 3,000-mile stretch on the West Coast of Africa. They came, chained two by two, left leg to right leg, from a thousand villages and towns. They came from many racial stocks and many tribes, from the spirited Hausas, the gentle Mandingos, the creative Yorubas, from the Ibos, Efiks and Krus, from the proud Fantins, the courageous Ashantis, the shrewd Dahomeans, the Binis and Sengalese. Some

of these slaves were captured in African wars and sold to slave merchants, who sold them to Europeans. Many were kidnapped by Europeans and Africans. Some were sold into slavery for infractions of African laws.

Certain captives made forced marches of five hundred miles to the coast, where they were examined like cattle and packed into the holds of ships. They came, on these forced marches, across rivers and over mountains, barefooted and naked to their enemies, with chains on their ankles, burdens on their heads and fear in their hearts.

Were they — these people who gave to the world the black American—were they the dregs of society? No. The strong came and the weak, too. Priests, princes, warriors, merchants and nobles came. Slave traders said that it was not at all unusual for an African to sell an African today and to be captured and sold tomorrow. The story is told of a major slave merchant who sold a parcel of slaves and unwisely accepted a social drink to seal the transaction. One drink led to another—and to America. The slave merchant woke up the next morning with a hangover and a brand on his chest. He was in the hold of a slave ship with his victims and over him stood the captain, laughing to beat the band.

This story underlines a rather obvious fact: Africans as well as Europeans were involved in the slave trade. There has been a systematic attempt, however, to overemphasize the degree of African involvement. The picture of a whole continent of Africans kidnapping and selling one another for rum, guns and gewgaws is wide of the mark. It is true that some Africans, corrupted by Europe's insatiable desire for human flesh, sold their countrymen. But many Africans, like King Almammy and Captain Tomba, loathed the whole business and forbade their subjects to take part in it. Thus, to cite only one example, Mani-Congo, the ruler of a Congo state, tried to end the trade in 1526. In a strong letter to John III of Portugal, he said "we need from [your] kingdoms no other than priests and people to teach in schools, and no other goods but wine and flour for the holy sacrament: that is why we beg of Your Highness to help and assist us in this matter, commanding the factors that they should send here neither merchants nor wares, because it is our will that in these kingdoms [of the Congo] there should not be any trade in slaves or markets for slaves." This would be a different world if Mani-Congo's plea for

“Point IV aid” had been heeded in the sixteenth century. But Europe was impervious to such pleas. She was only interested in the gold of black bodies, and she forced that obsession on Africa—to the undoing of both Europe and Africa.

European nations fought each other for the privilege of managing this trade. Portugal, which ran the first leg, was ousted by Holland which in turn surrendered supremacy on the African coast to France and England. Portugal, one trader said, “served for setting dogs to spring the game.” Once the game was sprung, all Europe rushed to the playing field. Spain, barred from Africa by a papal bull which gave her most of the New World, made money by giving other powers a contract to supply her colonies with slaves. This contract, the infamous *asiento*, was the national status symbol of the day, indicating commercial and political supremacy. In the eighteenth century, when England held the *asiento*, the slave trade was the basis of European commerce, the cause of most of her wars and the prize politicians competed for.

An intricate set of trading arrangements existed on the Guinea Coast (the West Coast of Africa) for processing Africans bought and stolen. Europeans—French, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese, Dutch, English and Prussian traders—dotted the coast with a series of forts and factories. Each fort and factory had a dungeon or “Negroe House,” where the slaves were confined until shipment. Into these factories Europeans poured a steady stream of goods—colorful cloth, trinkets, rum and “other strong water,” blankets, old sheets—which were converted into human beings. Europeans, operating as representatives of powerful companies or as private entrepreneurs, bartered these goods for men and women. A woman might change hands for a gallon of brandy and six beads. A man might bring eight guns, a wicker bottle, two cases of whiskey and twenty-eight old sheets.

Slaves were purchased from brokers at the forts and factories or in open markets. An appalling report on conditions in these open markets has come down to us. “As the slaves come down to Fida from the inland country,” trader John Barbot said, “they are put into a booth, or prison, built for that purpose, near the beach, all of them together; and when the Europeans are to receive them, they are brought out into a large plain, where the surgeons examine every part of every one of them, to the smallest member,

men and women being all stark naked. Such as are allowed good and sound are set on one side, and the others by themselves; which slaves so rejected are there called Mackrons, being above thirty-five years of age, or defective in their limbs, eyes or teeth; or grown grey, or that have the venereal disease, or any other imperfection. These being so set aside, each of the others, which have passed as good, is marked on the breast, with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English or Dutch companies. . . . In this particular, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard."

The newly purchased slaves, properly branded and chained, were then rowed out to the slave ships for the dreaded Middle Passage across the Atlantic. They were packed like books on shelves into holds, which in some instances were no higher than eighteen inches. "They had not so much room," one captain said, "as a man in his coffin, either in length of breadth. It was impossible for them to turn or shift with any degree of ease." Here, for the six to ten weeks of the voyage, the slaves lived like animals. Under the best conditions, the trip was intolerable. When epidemics of dysentery or smallpox swept the ships, the trip was beyond endurance.

"On many of these ships," a contemporary said, "the sense of misery and suffocation was so terrible in the 'tween-decks—where the height sometimes was only eighteen inches, so that the unfortunate slaves could not turn round, were wedged immovably, in fact, and chained to the deck by the neck and legs—that the slaves not infrequently would go mad before dying or suffocating. In their frenzy some killed others in the hope of procuring more room to breathe. Men strangled those next to them, and women drove nails into each other's brains." It was common, John Newton said, to find a dead slave and a living slave chained together. So many dead people were thrown overboard on slavers that it was said that sharks picked up ships off the coast of Africa and followed them to America.

Not all blacks came this way. There was a trickle of free immigrants from the West Indies, and some blacks got on boats in Africa and paid their way to America. In 1772, for instance, the governor of Georgia issued a certificate to Fenda Lawrence, "a free black woman and heretofore a considerable trader in the river Gambia on the coast of Africa [who] hath voluntarily come to

be and remain for some time in this province." The certificate gave Miss Lawrence permission to "pass and repass unmolested within the said province on her lawful and necessary occasions." Fenda Lawrence, of course, was an exception. Most blacks came in chains, followed by wise and greedy sharks.

The survivors of this gruelling ordeal were sold either on the ships or in slave markets in American ports. In New England, where there was a large "retail" demand, slaves were sold in taverns, stores and warehouses. They were also "shown," as the ads put it, in the homes of merchants. It was common for merchants to sell blacks and whites, liquor and clothing. A typical advertisement of the times indicates the general tendency: "Several Irish Maid Servants time/most of them for Five Years one/Irish Man Servant—one who is a good/Barber and Wiggmaker/also Four or Five Likely Negro Boys."

The price of men, like the price of butter, fluctuated. In 1754 George Washington bought a male slave for \$260. But when he went to the market ten years later, he had to pay \$285. Slaves were sold for small downpayments and "on reasonable terms." An advertisement of 1726 noted that "the Buyer shall have 3, 6, 9 or 12 months Credit." There was also a mail-order business. One New Englander made the following entry in his diary: "I wrote Mr. Salmon of Barbadoes to send me a negro."

The human factories in Africa struggled to keep up with the demand. In the eighteenth century between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand slaves crossed the Atlantic each year. The greatest number, by far, went to the West Indies and Brazil. At least two million were shipped to the West Indies. João Pandiá Calogeras, the Brazilian historian, said at least eighteen million were shipped to Brazil. Arthur Ramos, another Brazilian, thinks this figure is too high. Five million, he says, is a more accurate figure.

Large blocks of slaves were dropped off in Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and in Central and South America. As early as 1553 there were twenty thousand blacks in Mexico. Some two hundred thousand slaves were imported before slavery was abolished in Mexico in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Hundreds of thousands of slaves were scattered over the areas of present-day Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela. In 1810 Venezuela had some 500,000 blacks in a total



population of 900,000. In 1847 there were 496,000 blacks and only 418,000 whites in Cuba. In the same year there were 4,400,000 blacks in Brazil's population of 7,360,000. More than 1,000,000 of the Brazilian blacks were free.

Because of widespread amalgamation and unreliable census data, it is difficult to assess the impact of these millions on South American life. But in some South American countries people with "Negro blood" still comprise a considerable proportion of the population. What Gilberto Freyre, the Brazilian sociologist and philosopher, said of Brazil is true for large areas of the New World: "Every Brazilian, even if he is light skinned and has fair hair, bears in his soul . . . the shadow or the mark of the native or the Negro. . . . The influence of the African is direct or vague and remote. In our way of expressing tenderness, in our excessive mimicry, in our Catholicism which is a delight of the senses, in our way of walking and talking, in the songs which cradled our childhood, in short in all the sincere expressions of our life, the Negro influence is patent."

For the human beings involved, the slave trade was a stupendous roulette wheel. The boats fanned out from Africa and scattered human freight over the Western Hemisphere. Around and around the wheel went, stopping here and there, sealing, wherever it stopped, the fate of mothers and fathers and their children to the nth generation.

It made a great deal of difference to the slaves where the dice of fate fell—whether they landed, for example, in a country where *the* word was the Spanish *yo* or the French *je* or the English *I*. Slavery, to be sure, was a form of hell wherever it existed. But there were gradations of hell, Dantesque circles, as it were, within circles. By all accounts, the British-Protestant colonies were the deepest pit. The French and Spanish could be cruel, and often were. But they did not seem to be driven by the same demons that pursued the Puritans. For this reason, among others, African religious practices and other elements of African culture were not as vigorously opposed in Roman Catholic colonies as they were in the Protestant colonies. The Protestant colonies, with an instinct for the jugular vein, rode herd on tom-toms and joyful noises unto the Lord. The difference this made in social cohesion is roughly the difference between the successful Haitian

Revolution and the abortive Nat Turner insurrection. The final meeting of the Haitian Revolution was held at a voodoo ceremony and the signal went out by tom-toms. Another difference, minor perhaps, but important to the people involved, was the texture of the different societies. The Catholic colonies were gay and colorful; the Protestant colonies, by comparison, were a dull shade of gray.

One of the dominant characteristics of the Roman Catholic colonies was the relative absence of color prejudice. One result was that the life of a slave in these colonies was less hopeless and unhappy than the life of a slave in, say, South Carolina. There were other differences—differences of style and structure—to add to this underlying difference of racial orientation. In Brazil, for example, there was a state officer, a protector of slaves, who looked after the welfare of the disadvantaged.

Manumission was easier in Brazil and Spanish America, and a manumitted slave inherited the rights and privileges of citizens. There were several ways in which a slave could win freedom in these colonies. If he earned his purchase price, he could walk up to his master and hand him the money—and the master had to accept it. Another means of salvation was childbearing. If slave parents had ten children in Hispanic America, the whole family was freed.

The difference between Hispanic America and Protestant America reduces itself, as so many racial problems do, to the problem of sex. The Spanish and Portuguese were willing to marry blacks. In America, white men drew the line—at marriage, that is.

Surface differences apart, slavery was a dirty business in both Hispanic and Protestant America. In both areas slaves were given a new conception of themselves—according to the different lights of their captors. This process, whether it took place in liberal Brazil or harsh South Carolina, was a painful, mind-reversing operation in which two or three out of every ten died. In one form or another, every slave from Africa went through this “breaking-in” period. During this period, which varied from one to three years, the slave was taught pidgin English or French or Spanish. He got a new name and began to look at himself and others in a different manner. Yahweh took the place of Olorum; Legba became St. Peter; the Mass or hymnal replaced African

rituals\* The strain was too much for tens of thousands, who died of old and new diseases and the shock of psychic mutilation. But millions of others, testifying to physical and spiritual strength that transcended the heroic, survived. And, surviving, they insured the survival—and prosperity—of America, which fashioned out of their misery the takeoff capital that made American capitalism possible. Many of the first great American fortunes, in fact, were founded on the slave trade and its allied industries. By the American Revolution, as Dr. Lorenzo J. Greene has shown, the slave trade “formed the very basis of the economic life of New England; about it revolved, and on it depended, most of her other industries.”

The same situation obtained in England, France, Holland, Spain and Portugal. In these countries, as in New England, the slave trade provided direct returns to financiers and investors and stimulated the growth of ancillary industries, such as ship-building and distilleries.

“This contribution of the Negro,” Eric Williams wrote, “has failed to receive adequate recognition. . . . England and France, Holland, Spain and Denmark, not to mention the United States, Brazil and other parts of South America are all indebted to Negro labor.”

Africans helped build Liverpool, Nantes and Newport. They helped finance the Industrial Revolution. They helped clear the forest in America. They made these enormous contributions, but the price—to them and to American and European whites—was frightfully high, and it was not paid without protest. Protests began in Africa, where mutinies on ships were common, and continued in America, where revolts were common. “The Negroes,” Captain Thomas Phillips said, “are so willful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats,

\*Melville J. Herskovits and other students have analyzed the process by which African slaves blended African and Western religious figures. In some cases Western saints and rituals were identified with African gods and rituals. Legba, the African trickster-god, was sometimes identified with St. Peter. Damballah, the snake god, was sometimes identified with St. Patrick. In some cases an African deity was given the name of a Roman Catholic saint as well as an African name.

which pursued them; they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we can have of hell, tho' in reality they live much better there than in their own country; but home is home, etc."

Home being home, etc., many slaves revolted, brained the captain and crew and escaped to the shore. Rebellions on ships were so common that a new form of insurance, insurrection insurance, was introduced.

Many slaves refused to eat when well and refused to take medicine when ill. One man, for instance, attempted to cut his throat. After the wound was sewed up, he ripped out the sutures with his fingernails. He was patched up again but refused to eat and died ten days later of starvation.

This resistance—desperate, doomed, definitive—continued throughout the slaving period. A long series of conspiracies and revolts culminated in the great Haitian Revolution, which played an important part in the abolition of the trade. Pushed by fear of the unmanageable slaves and pulled by humanitarian motives stemming from the American and French revolutions, politicians abolished the trade in the first decades of the nineteenth century. It continued surreptitiously, however, until the abolition of slavery in the United States.

The slave trade left a bloodstained legacy. During the four centuries the trade was pursued, it wrecked the social and economic life of Africa, set nation against nation and village against village. The trade was no less disastrous in Europe and America where it left a legacy of ill will and guilt and a potentially explosive racial problem.

"Raphael painted," W. E. B. Du Bois said, "Luther preached, Corneille wrote, and Milton sang; and through it all, for four hundred years, the dark captives wound to the sea amid the bleaching bones of the dead; for four hundred years the sharks followed the scurrying ships; for four hundred years America was strewn with the living and dying millions of a transplanted race; for four hundred years Ethiopia stretched forth her hands unto God."

# 3

## *The Founding of Black America*

*The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country Humbly sheweth that your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the [Universe] hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfeited by any Compact or agreement whatever. . . . They cannot but express their Astonishment that It has [Never Been Considered] that Every Principle from which Amarica has Acted in the Cours of their unhappy Dificulties with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favours of your petitioners.*

MASSACHUSETTS SLAVE PETITION, 1777

**T**HE DAY was Thursday, April 12, 1787.

On that day—one month before the first session of the U.S. Constitutional Convention and two years before the election of George Washington—eight men sat down in a room in Philadelphia and created a black social compact. The compact, called the Free African Society, was a

prophetic step that marked a turning in the road that is critical to the history of Black America.

“How great a step this was,” W. E. B. Du Bois wrote later, “we of to-day scarcely realize; we must remind ourselves that it was the first wavering step of a people toward organized social life.”

The founding of this seminal organization was only one wave in a tide of institution-building that rolled over the North in the 1780s and 1790s. At the crest of that tide similar societies were formed in Boston, New York and Newport, Rhode Island. The flowing waves of these efforts were followed by an independent church movement, an independent lodge movement and the founding of black schools and cultural organizations.

The organizing energies of this effort flowed in concurrent waves, propelled by two powerful currents—one negative, the other positive. The positive current was a new sense of identity and peoplehood that rejected black subordination and exclusion. The negative current, flowing with and out of the white founding, was a campaign to exclude black Americans from the national social contract.

Outraged by this campaign and spurred on by a new image of black being, the founding fathers of Black America organized a movement of self-creation and self-definition that continued for more than forty years. There were no precedents and no models for what they were trying to do, and the pressure from all sides was almost overwhelming. Despite or perhaps because of these pressures, the movement continued; and by the turn of the century a new black polity was rooting in and expanding in the midst of the emerging white polity.

The founding of the black polity, which was a new thing, never before seen in the world, grew out of and reflected the ambiguities of the white founding. More than that, it was a direct result of the failures of the white founding fathers. To grasp its true significance, we must draw back for a moment and view it against the background of the American Revolution, which simultaneously and paradoxically produced a new nation and black and white fragments wedded to each other and to conflict by the terms of their common birth—terms that involved a contradiction between affirmation (equality) and reality (inequality). It was in the struggle surrounding the Revolution that the founders of Black America defined themselves and re-positioned themselves.

It was the failure of that Revolution—it was the realization that the makers of the Revolution didn't believe what they said—that forced Black America to create itself. In assessing that momentous event, it is important to keep in mind that the black creation accompanied the white creation but was not contained by it or defined by it. Like the countermelody in a great symphony, the black founding effort moved in the same time frame as the white melody, which it oftentimes contradicted and always challenged. This effort unfolded in roughly four stages.

The first stage began with the first act of the Revolution. When the white colonists, with incredible audacity, on July 4, 1776, issued a Declaration of Independence, blandly observing that all men were entitled to liberty, the slaves poured out their feelings in vehement protestation. Seemingly oblivious to the fact that the Declaration condemned them first of all and most of all, the colonists—slaveowner Thomas Jefferson foremost among them—scattered four revolutionary seeds to the four corners of the earth, saying:

1. That all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with natural and inalienable rights no man or government can bestow or take away.

2. That to secure these rights men create civil communities and civil authorities, who derive their just power from the consent of the governed.

3. That members of the community are colleagues and not subjects and that legitimate government consists in the dominion of equal laws applied equally—in the dominion, in short, of people over themselves and not in the dominion of communities over communities or groups over groups.

4. That when governments are destructive of these ends as evidenced by bad faith (“a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing invariably the same object”) it is the duty of citizens to alter or abolish these governments.

The crystallization of these ideas in the Declaration of Independence enclosed the white colonists in a net of their own making and made black freedom an inevitable corollary of white freedom. This became clear almost immediately to colonists like Thomas Paine and James Otis, who denounced both English tyranny and slaveowner tyranny. Paine said slavery was no less immoral than “murder, robbery, lewdness and barbarity” and

urged Americans to “discontinue and renounce it, with grief and abhorrence.” Rhetoric apart, this was substantially the same position of Abigail Adams, who told her husband, John, that “it always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.”

So it appeared also to blacks, who sprang into action, organizing the first phase of the black struggle for freedom. This phase began in the pre-Revolutionary War period and was pressed by slaves who brilliantly exploited the contradictions between colonial practice and colonial pretensions, calling for a declaration of independence *in* America. In the course of this struggle, which raged in Northern cities and on Southern plantations, the black soul expanded and made its first major probes into white territory. During this period of struggle and hope, blacks developed a concept of themselves as deprived citizens and dishonored native sons. Proceeding from this new self-concept, they invented techniques for demanding their rights within the bounds of the state, using the state, in fact, as a point of leverage. Their first technique, one that would reach full flower 188 years later, was legal contention. As early as 1766, Boston blacks filed a test case against slavery. The legal movement spread later to Connecticut and other colonies. Under the leadership of men whose names were not recorded, blacks collected money, hired lawyers and filed suits, asking for freedom and damages for unlawful detention in America.

Black patriots also experimented with mass pressure, holding meetings, circulating petitions and bombarding legislatures with pleas. Ingenious blacks found other ways to turn the revolutionary turmoil to their advantage. Certain blacks appropriated American slogans and assumed leadership roles in the agitation that forced an open break with England. Black patriots, for instance, were prominent in the tumultuous Stamp Act riots. One encounter—in 1765—was noted by author John Miller who said “the tension continued to increase, until, on the night of August 28, boys and Negroes began to build bonfires in King Street and blow the dreaded whistle and horn that sent the Boston mob swarming out of taverns, houses and garrets. A large crowd immediately gathered around the bonfires, bawling for ‘Liberty and Property.’ ”



When, in 1768, British troops were dispatched to Boston to awe the population, they were repulsed by black and white patriots. Shortly after their arrival in September, 1768, the red-coated British troops fought a pitched battle with a largely black group on the Commons. The *Boston Journal of the Times* reported the incident, saying that the soldiers were “severely whipped,” and adding: “To behold Britons scourged by Negro drummers was a new and very disagreeable spectacle.”

The struggle between the British troops and black and white patriots continued almost uninterruptedly for the next year and reached a peak in Boston in the winter of 1770. During this struggle there were provocations on both sides and innumerable tavern fights and street brawls. One such incident involved three soldiers who got into a scrape with the ropemakers on Friday, March 2, 1770. The soldiers were driven off and returned with reinforcements, including a tall black man who apparently sided with the Redcoats. This infuriated a white Bostonian, who shouted: “You black rascal, what have you to do with white people’s quarrels?” The black man replied, “I suppose I may look on.” He looked on—and threw a few punches. Despite his help, the soldiers were forced to give ground. Battered and bruised, they stalked away, shouting curses and threats.

In the hours that followed, rumors and predictions of disaster swept the town. By Sunday night, March 4, Boston was boiling.

Monday morning dawned cold and grey. There was a film of ice on the ground. Toward evening the sky cleared and a young moon bobbed up over Beacon Hill. Lights and eerie shadows played over the streets, which were filled now with boys and men spoiling for a fight.

A little after eight, soldiers, armed with cudgels and tongs, emerged from Murray’s Barracks near the center of town. To the surprise of almost no one, a crowd—composed largely, a hostile witness said, “of saucy boys, Negroes and mulattoes, Irish Teagues and outlandish Jack Tars”—gathered and traded insults with the soldiers. In the center of this crowd stood an imposing man who was no stranger to “white people’s quarrels.” His name was Crispus Attucks, and he was a Massachusetts native who had escaped from slavery and sailed the seas. Tall, brawny, with a look that “was enough to terrify any person,” Attucks was well

known around the docks in lower Boston. Needless to say, he was not a proper Bostonian, a fact that has pained innumerable historians. He was instead a proper rebel, a drifter, a man who loved freedom and knew what it was worth. He was about forty-seven on this memorable night, and he had that undefinable quality called presence. When he spoke, men listened. Where he commanded, men acted.

By a paradoxical act of poetic justice, it was this American—an oppressed American, born in slavery with, it is said, African and Indian genes—who carried the American standard in the prologue that laid the foundation of American freedom. It was Attucks, according to eyewitnesses, who shaped and dominated the action on the night of the event known to history as the Boston Massacre. When the Bostonians faltered, it was Attucks, according to almost all contemporary reports, who rallied them and urged them to stand their ground. The people, responding to his leadership, stood firm; so did the soldiers. The two sides exchanged insults, and a fight flared. Attucks, who seems to have been everywhere on this night, led a group of citizens who drove the soldiers back to the gate of the barracks. The soldiers rallied and drove the Boston crowd back. In the middle of this row, someone ran to the Old Brick Meeting House and rang the fire bell, filling the streets with frightened and excited people.

At this precise moment an incident occurred that probably changed the course of events. A barber's apprentice ran through the crowd holding his head and screaming, "Murder! Murder!" He told the people that the sentry in front of the customhouse had struck him across the head with a musket. The report angered the crowd, which moved now, in three groups, to the customhouse. The largest group, holding clubs over their heads, huzzaing and whistling, followed the lead of Crispus Attucks. John Adams, who later served as defense counsel for the British soldiers, told the court that a witness "saw the mulatto [Attucks] seven or eight minutes before the firing, at the head of twenty or thirty sailors in Cornhill, and he had a large cord-wood stick." Adams added:

"So that this Attucks, by this testimony of Bailey compared with that of Andrew and some others, appears to have undertaken to be the hero of the night; and to lead the army with banners, to form them in the first place in Dock Square, and march them up King Street with their clubs."

Regardless of what conservatives said about Attucks, it is a fact that the crowd followed him up King Street and gathered before the sentry in the square facing the customhouse. The barber's apprentice came up and said, "This is the soldier who knocked me down."

Someone said, "Kill him! Knock his head off!"

Another voice said, "Burn the sentry box. Tear it up."

Backing off, the frightened sentry climbed the steps of the customhouse and called for help. Down King (now State) Street came seven soldiers, clearing the way before them with bayonet thrusts. The soldiers made a half-circle around the sentry box and were joined by Captain Thomas Preston.

"Don't be afraid," Attucks and his group cried. "They dare not fire."

The people took up the cry.

"Fire! Fire and be damned!"

Attucks and the men following him gave three cheers and moved to the front of the crowd. A stick sailed over their heads and struck Pvt. Hugh Montgomery who fell back, lifted his musket and fired. The bullet hit Attucks, who pitched forward in the gutter. Samuel Gray made a step toward Attucks and another soldier fired, mortally wounding Gray. When the smoke cleared, several persons lay bleeding in the snow.

The die was cast.

"From that moment," Daniel Webster said later, "we may date the severance of the British Empire."

"On that night," John Adams said, "the foundation of American independence was laid."

One hundred and eighteen years later, in 1888, a handsome monument was erected to the five victims. Poet John Boyle O'Reilly contributed a spirited poem to the occasion:

*And honor to Crispus Attucks, who was leader and voice  
that day:*

*The first to defy, and the first to die, with Maverick, Carr  
and Gray.*

*Call it riot or revolution, or mob or crowd as you may,  
Such deaths have been seeds of nations, such lives shall be  
honored for ay.*

Author Samuel A. Green saw the hand of fate in this. "Attucks

Black patriots were conspicuous in the fighting at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Two blacks, Peter Salem and Salem Poor, were outstanding soldiers in the battle. Poor was later commended for his valor.

The Boston Massacre was one of the events which led to Revolutionary War. Several blacks were in the group which fought British soldiers on the night of March 5, 1770. Crispus Attucks (below, right) was the first martyr of the Revolution.





little thought," he wrote, "that in future generations a monument of granite and bronze on a public site would be erected in honor of himself and his comrades for the part they took in the State Street fight; and that his own name, cut in stone, would lead the list of those who fell on that eventful evening." Green added:

" 'Thus the whirligig of Time brings in his revenges,' and verifies the Gospel saying: 'But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.' "

Having played a major role in precipitating the conflict, black patriots pushed to the front lines of the armed struggle, creating the second great wedge of the black offensive. In the forefront of this offensive were men with different perceptions and motivations. Some volunteered for service because they believed the Declaration meant what it said. Others, more cynical perhaps, certainly more realistic, entered American lines with the limited hope that the conflict would change their status and the status of their brothers and sisters. Individual motives apart, the immediate result of the second phase of the struggle was an intensification of the contradictions in the American effort and an enormous extension of the white debt to Black America.

This phase began with the shot heard around the world. When Paul Revere galloped through the Massachusetts countryside, he alerted black and white patriots. Black Minutemen, most notably Lemuel Haynes, Peter Salem and Pomp Blackman, were at Lexington and the bridge at Concord. Lemuel Haynes was also at Ticonderoga when Ethan Allen invoked Jehovah and the Continental Congress. So were Primas Black and Epheram Blackman, two members of the famous Green Mountain Boys.

When British troops stormed up Breed's Hill in the battle mistakenly called Bunker Hill, they were repulsed by black and white patriots. One of the heroes of that hot June afternoon was Peter Salem, who shot Major Pitcairn when he popped up and announced, a trifle prematurely, "The days is ours." Among the black soldiers who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill were Pomp Fisk, Cuff Hayes, Caesar Dickerson, Caesar Weatherbee and Salem Poor. The two Salems—Peter Salem and Salem Poor—were among the great heroes of the war. Poor was later commended by fourteen officers who said he "behaved like an experienced officer, as well as an excellent soldier. To set forth

particulars of his conduct would be tedious. . . . In the person of this said Negro centres a brave and gallant soldier.”

The Battle of Bunker Hill was fought in June. In July George Washington took command of the American troops, and an order went out from his headquarters forbidding the enlistment of black patriots. Back of this order were two moving causes, one growing out of the air men breathed, the other flowing with the paradox that defined the white American position. The first, of course, was the racism that made high-ranking American officers doubt the fighting ability of slaves. The second, which contradicted the first, was a deep-seated fear of black involvement. One dimension of this all-pervading fear was the idea that it was dangerous to use black troops. If America used blacks, some officers reasoned, so would England.

The argument over this issue continued throughout the fall of 1775. The question was debated in Congress and in coffeehouses and manors. In October General Washington convened a high-level conference on the subject. It was decided finally to bar all blacks, slave and free. Washington issued an order to that effect on November 12, 1775.

By that time one important fact had changed the situation. Seven days before the Washington order, Lord Dunmore, the deposed royal governor of Virginia, had issued a proclamation offering freedom to all slaves who were willing and able to bear arms for England. The slave response was swift and instructive. To the consternation of American patriots, thousands of slaves, including some bondsmen of General Washington, left the plantations to fight for their freedom. What this meant militarily was spelled out at an encounter at Kemp's Landing in Virginia, where a band of former slaves proved their mettle by defeating a group of white Virginians. When the whites broke ranks and retreated into the swamps, the former slaves gave chase. There then occurred one of those little vignettes that illuminate a whole era. One Colonel Hutchings, a proper Virginian, was cornered by a black man he recognized as one of his escaped slaves. The indignant colonel fired at the former slave, but the bullet missed. The black rebel closed in and whacked his former master across the face with a saber. Then, in the greatest humiliation of all, Colonel Hutchings was led into the British lines by his own former slave.

Alarmed by the impact of the Dunmore proclamation, Virgin-

ians attempted to pacify their slaves. One newspaper ran a long editorial under the heading: "CAUTION TO NEGROES." Another newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, said: "Be not then, ye Negroes, tempted by this proclamation to ruin yourselves. . . . Whether we suffer or not, if you desert us, you most certainly will."

It quickly became apparent that this rhetoric was worse than useless, and General Washington reversed himself and permitted the enlistment of free blacks who had fought in the early battles. Congress approved this order but again refused to countenance the enlistment of slaves. Circumstances, however, made this a moot point. For one thing, it was very difficult to coax white men into the Continental Line. Although there were some one million men of fighting age in the colonies, the Continental Line never exceeded fifty thousand soldiers. Bounties of land and money were offered to volunteers. Some states even offered bounties of slaves. Nothing, however, flushed the colonial backsliders. "Such a dearth of public spirit," Washington said, "and want of virtue, such stock-jobbing and fertility in all the low arts to obtain advantage of one kind or another . . . I never saw before, and I pray God I may never be a witness to again. Such a dirty mercenary Spirit pervades the whole that I should not be at all surprised at any disaster that may happen." Washington went into the ordeal of Valley Forge in December, 1777, with some nine thousand men. By March of 1778 more than three thousand American soldiers had deserted.

After Valley Forge every able-bodied man, black or white, slave or free, was welcome in the Continental Army. Washington sent an officer from Valley Forge in 1778 to ask the Rhode Island Assembly to authorize the enlistment of slaves. In February the Assembly took this precedent-shattering step. Two months later Massachusetts followed suit. By the end of the war some five thousand blacks, slaves and free men, had shouldered arms in defense of American liberty. There were black soldiers from all of the original thirteen states, including South Carolina and Georgia. Most of these soldiers served in integrated units, although there were some all-black units. A black soldier named Colonel Middleton commanded a company of black volunteers from Massachusetts.

Several witnesses remarked on the integrated character of the



American army. In the first months of the war, British writers taunted Americans with this jingle:

*The rebel clowns, oh! what a sight  
Too awkward was their figure  
'Twas yonder stood a pious wight  
And here and there a nigger.*

A Southern soldier serving in the army around Boston wrote in a letter of September, 1775: "Such Sermons, such Negroes, such Colonels, such Boys and such Great Great Grandfathers." Two years later a Hessian officer noted that "the Negro can take the field instead of the master; and therefore, no regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance, and among them there are able bodied, strong and brave fellows." Black soldiers also served as drummers and fifers in several Revolutionary War units, although this fact is ignored in the widely disseminated pictures of the Spirit of '76.

Black soldiers fought in practically all of the big battles of the war. They were at Monmouth, Red Bank, Saratoga, Savannah, Princeton and Yorktown. Two blacks, Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell, made the famous Delaware Crossing. Another black participated in the capture of General Prescott in Rhode Island.

By almost all accounts, black soldiers were among the most valiant defenders of the Revolution. One of the most memorable tableaux of the war came from the bloody battlefield at Eutaw, South Carolina, where a black soldier and a British soldier were found dead, each impaled on the bayonet of the other. At the Battle of Rhode Island, a regiment of black soldiers repulsed the vaunted Hessians three times.

"Had they been unfaithful," one soldier said, "or even given away before the enemy all would have been lost."

The story was very much the same at Fort Griswold in Connecticut. When the British officer, Maj. William Montgomery, was lifted over the walls, Jordan Freeman ran him through with a pike. When Col. William Ledyard was killed with his own sword, Lambert Latham immediately avenged his death by slaying the British officer. The Redcoats pounced on Latham, who fell dead, pierced by thirty-three bayonet wounds.

Black patriots also distinguished themselves in the American navy. Caesar Terront piloted the Virginia vessel, the *Patriot*,

and was cited for his gallantry in action. Captain Mark Starlin, the first black naval captain in Virginia's history, made daring night raids on British vessels in Hampton Roads. After the war Starlin was reclaimed by his master and died in slavery.

American forces also used black spies and undercover agents. A slave named Pompey was largely responsible for Anthony Wayne's capture of the Stony Point, New York, fort in 1779. Feigning ignorance, he obtained the British password and helped a detachment of Americans overpower the British lookout. Pompey was one individualist; a very different one was James Armistead, who helped trap Gen. Charles Cornwallis. Gen. Marcus de Lafayette told Armistead to infiltrate Cornwallis's camp and learn his strength and battle plans. Armistead was so successful that Gen. Cornwallis asked him to spy on Lafayette. The black spy shuttled between the British and American camps, carrying false information to the Cornwallis camp and bona fide information to Lafayette.

Every schoolboy knows that Lafayette and Kosciusko answered America's call for help. Not so well known is the fact that blacks from Haiti came to America to fight. The Haitians, called the Fontages Legion, were in the front ranks at the siege of Savannah and helped prevent a rout of the American forces.

While thousands of Haitian and American blacks were pressing the American cause, other blacks, no less courageous, were pursuing the same objective—black freedom—in the ranks of the British army. Lord Dunmore and other British commanders issued open-ended invitations, and thousands of American slaves, including certain slaves of the white founding fathers, abandoned the plantations and picked up guns and picks in defense of the British cause. Some of these soldiers participated in major battles, but most were confined to labor details and many, if we can credit contemporary reports, were abused and betrayed by their British colleagues. Even with these drawbacks, the British army offered many blacks, especially Southern slaves, opportunities denied them by American patriots. It is well worth noting that some twenty thousand blacks, four times as many as served in the American army, embarked with the British troops when they left American ports in 1782 and 1783. The descendants of some of these soldiers later played key roles in the founding of the African country of Sierra Leone.

There was still another front in this war, and it was perhaps the largest front of all for black Americans. Fighting on this front, which constituted the fourth phase of the black war, tens of thousands of slaves maneuvered between the contending forces in generally successful attempts to achieve their own freedom. By the end of the war, more than one hundred thousand slaves, according to some authorities, had freed themselves by escaping to Canada, Spanish Florida and the Indian camps.

Not all fugitive slaves left the country. Sizeable numbers hid in the swamps and staged guerilla raids on slavemasters. In 1781 a Virginia slaveholder told a correspondent that "we have had most alarming times this summer, all along the shore, from a set of Barges manned mostly by our own Negroes who have run off—These fellows are really dangerous to an individual singled out for their vengeance whose Property lay exposed.—They burnt several houses." As late as 1786 a group of former slaves who called themselves the King of England's Soldiers were fighting guerilla actions against slaveowners along the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina.

To all this lastly must be added the thousands who were manumitted by slaveholders infected by the germinal ideas of the Declaration. In one characteristic transaction, Philip Graham of Maryland freed his slaves and said the holding of his "fellow men in bondage and slavery is repugnant to the golden law of God and the unalienable right of mankind as well as to every principle of the late glorious revolution which has taken place in America." Similar words came from Richard Randolph, brother of John Randolph, who wrote the following letter to his guardian: "With regard to the division of the estate, I have only to say that I want not a single Negro for any other purpose than his immediate liberation. I consider every individual thus unshackled as the source of future generations, not to say nations, of freedmen; and I shudder when I think that so insignificant an animal as I am is invested with this monstrous, this horrid power." Randolph, of course, was an exception, but his act and the words undergirding his act pointed to one of the powerful currents of the time.

Slavery in the North died as a direct result of these currents. The Northern emancipation process, prodded and shaped by black and white patriots, began in 1777, at the height of the revolutionary struggle, when Vermont, responding to the Rights

of Man ideology, became the first American state to abolish slavery. Moved by like sentiments, and pressure from black and white rebels, Northern states, one after another, followed Vermont's lead. In some of these states, notably New York and Pennsylvania, legislative emancipation was a gradual process that extended over several years. The preamble of the Pennsylvania act of 1780 accurately reflected the spirit of the age, saying it was the duty of Pennsylvanians to give proof of their gratitude for deliverance from the oppression of Great Britain "by extending freedom to those of a different color by the work of the same Almighty hand."

With the founding of the American commonwealth and the emancipation of Northern slaves, Black America entered that phase of its history that I have called elsewhere the Black Pioneer period. There was no consensus at that point on the place of blacks in a commonwealth founded on the inalienable rights of all men. It was apparent to most people that the Declaration had created a new situation, but few believed that the new social compact included blacks or Indians or even white women. For all that, there was a provocative fluidity to the first years of the American venture. There was, to be sure, an undercurrent of racism, but people seemed to be uncertain about its meaning and use in a new climate governed by the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

During this interesting interim period, blacks like Josiah Bishop of Virginia and Lemuel Haynes of New England pastored white churches, and the Baptist and Methodist denominations strongly condemned slavery. In the same period Phillis Wheatley became an internationally known poet, and Benjamin Banneker became a celebrated mathematician. Banneker and Wheatley, in different ways and in different places, dramatized the possibilities and limitations of the age. In an age in which few women—or men for that matter—read books, Phillis Wheatley wrote one. Her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was the first volume by a black woman and the second book by an American woman.\*

\*Jupiter Hammon, a New York slave, was probably the first black author. His poem, *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries*, was printed as a broadside in 1760.

The pioneer American poet did not write as a *black* American; she wrote as an eighteenth-century Bostonian, a *proper* eighteenth-century Bostonian. When Washington was appointed commander in chief of the American army, she celebrated the event in heroic couplets. Washington was delighted and acknowledged receipt of the poems in a February 28, 1776, letter addressed to "Miss Phillis":

I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyric, the style and manner exhibited a striking proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem, had I not been apprehensive that, while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity.

According to Benson Lossing, the poet visited Washington at Cambridge and was entertained by the general and his staff.

Above everything else, the Boston poet sang songs of thanksgiving. She was grateful for the gift of Christianity, grateful even that a slave ship brought her to it:

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.*

A delicate wisp of a woman, black, slight of build, with great glimmering eyes, Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa in an unknown place. She came to America in 1761, remembering nothing save that her mother poured out water each morning "before the sun at its rising." She was seven or eight when the slave ship deposited her in Boston. John Wheatley, a rich merchant and tailor, saw her shivering on a Boston slave block, stark naked except for a dirty piece of carpet around her loins. Wheatley bought the young girl and took her home to his wife, Susannah. Within sixteen months the slave girl was reading and writing fluent English. She read every book she could lay hands on: the Bible, Milton and Alexander Pope's translation of Homer. Pope, the neoclassic Englishman, was her special favorite. Timidly at first and then with increasing confidence, she put down words in

With Washington when he crossed the Delaware were at least two blacks, Prince Whipple and Oliver Cromwell. Whipple was a bodyguard to Washington's aide, General William Whipple of New Hampshire.

Richard Allen, Phillis Wheatley, and Prince Hall were outstanding blacks in the Black Pioneer period. Allen organized the AME Church. Wheatley became an internationally known poet. Hall (right) organized the first black Masonic lodge.





the Pope manner. Within six years after her arrival in America, she was writing poetry. Her first poem, written at the age of fourteen, was a blank verse eulogy of Harvard University. In 1773 she visited England and was hailed as a prodigy. An English publisher brought out her slim volume.

Her poems do not excite modern critics. The verdict is practically unanimous: too much Pope and not enough Wheatley. But her ease with words, her genius for sound and color and rhythm: these still excite awe and wonder.

Phillis Wheatley lived in the State Street house with the white Wheatleys and moved in a white world, apparently as an equal. When her patron, Susannah Wheatley, died, the poet came face to face with racial reality. She married John Peters, a handsome grocer who "wore a wig, carried a cane, and quite acted out *'the gentleman.'*" The marriage didn't work. Proud and, some say, irresponsible, Peters alienated his wife's white friends. The couple drifted from place to place, carrying with them the first child and then the second child. Poverty and disease dogged them; the first child died and then the second. After the birth of a third child, the poet was reduced to earning her bread in a mean boarding house. She had never been physically strong and the exertion and the cold and the wretchedness were too much for her. On a cold day in December, 1784, mother and child died within a few hours of each other.

Phillis Wheatley said nothing of her personal griefs in her poems that survive; nor did she say much about the trials and tribulations of blacks. But on at least one occasion she abandoned Pope and Homer and said words from a woman's heart.

The poem was to the Earl of Dartmouth:

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*



Benjamin Banneker, like Phillis Wheatley, was a child of an age of birth pains. He was born in Maryland, the grandson of an Englishwoman and an African native. His grandmother, Molly Welsh, came to America as an indentured servant, worked her time out and bought a farm and two slaves. She later freed the slaves and married one of them. Banneker's mother, Mary, was one of four children born to this union and she, too, married an African native.

Banneker attended a local school with black and white children. Like Phillis Wheatley, he hungered and thirsted after books. His forte, however, was mathematics and astronomy. He became so proficient in these subjects that he was named to the commission which made the original survey of Washington, D.C. The *Georgetown Weekly Ledger* of March 12, 1791, noted the arrival of the commission. Banneker, the paper said, was "an Ethiopian whose abilities as surveyor and astronomer already prove that Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson's concluding that that race of men were void of mental endowment was without foundation." Beginning in 1792, Banneker issued an annual almanac which has been compared with Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. He also continued the study of astronomy, mathematics and other scientific subjects.

Banneker lived on a farm about ten miles outside Baltimore. A confirmed bachelor, he studied all night, slept in the morning and worked in the afternoon. He washed his own clothes, cooked his own meals and cultivated gardens around his log cabin. He had an early fondness for "strong drink" but later became a teetotaler. His habits of study were odd, to say the least. Local annalists said he wrapped himself in a great cloak at night and lay under a pear tree and meditated on the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. According to these reports, he remained there throughout the night and went to bed at dawn.

A contemporary left a portrait of the stargazer. "His head was covered with a thick suit of white hair, which gave him a very dignified and venerable appearance. . . . His dress was uniformly of superfine broadcloth, made in the old style of a plain coat, with straight collar and long waistcoat, and a broad-brimmed hat. His color was not jet-black, but decidedly Negro. In size and personal appearance, the statue of Franklin at the Library of Philadelphia, as seen from the street, is a perfect likeness. Go to his house when you would, either by day or night, there was

constantly standing in the middle of the floor a large table covered with books and papers. As he was an eminent mathematician, he was constantly in correspondence with other mathematicians in this country, with whom there was an interchange of questions of difficult solution.”

Banneker, unlike Wheatley, lashed out at the injustices of the age. In a famous letter of 1791 he told Thomas Jefferson that words were one thing and slavery was another: “Suffer me to recall to your mind that time, in which the arms of the British crown were exerted, with every powerful effort, in order to reduce you to a state of servitude; look back, I entreat you . . . You were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings, to which you were entitled by nature; but, sir, how pitiable is it to reflect, that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges which he hath conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others.”

Banneker, like Wheatley, was a metaphor of the limitations and possibilities of the burgeoning American Dream. To be sure, as Banneker’s letter indicates, things were far from rosy in this period. But some blacks, a very few blacks, had room to dream and dare and hope. Then the roof caved in. When did this happen? No one can say. It happened at different times in different ways at different places. In Boston and New York City free blacks were insulted and assaulted on the streets. In the South slaveowners elaborated new laws and rules which were designed to deny blacks every right of personality.

There were many reasons for this. One of the triggering mechanisms was a machine, the cotton gin, which cooled the ardor of patriots and made slave-grown cotton a national mania. A second factor was the wave of reaction that rolled over America after Shays’s Rebellion and the French and Haitian revolutions. A further contributing cause was the sharp rise in the number of free blacks and the failure of various plans to get rid of them.

The Haitian Revolution, the invention of the cotton gin, slave conspiracies in America, the increase in the number of free blacks, and a rising tide of mercantilist greed—this combination of facts and circumstances created the conservative reaction which forced blacks North and South to look around them and ask the question of the Hebrew poet of captivity: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

How indeed? And which Lord?

These questions gave rise to thought and to Black America or, to be more precise, African-America, for all of the first black institutions bore the interesting prefix—African. Rebuffed, insulted, incessantly villified, postwar blacks turned inward and formed their own social institutions and, in the process, created themselves.

This act of self-generation created a community out of a collectivity of isolated individuals. When the process started, in the late 1780s, there were 757,000 black individuals in America—697,000 slaves and 59,000 free blacks. Almost all of the slaves—92 per cent—lived in the South. The free population, in sharp contrast, was concentrated in the Northeast and revolved around two competing centers of black power and creativity—New York and Philadelphia. Although free blacks in these Northern centers gave institutional form to Black America, they worked from a matrix created by the mass of maintaining slaves. More to the point, most of the free black leaders were former slaves.

In this period, as in the nineteenth century, most free blacks were confined by racism to low-paying jobs; and most of them lived, for the same reason, in cellars and shanties on narrow streets. But even at that early date there were black artisans and merchants who lived in comfortable surroundings. It is to be observed, too, that certain of these merchants and artisans operated in the mainstream of money. One could see examples of this all over the North in the Black Pioneer period. Specifically, there was the case of Emanuel and Mary Bernoon who opened the first oyster and ale house in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1736 and reportedly had one of the largest businesses in that city. Bernoon, according to Dr. Lorenzo J. Greene, was the model for the band of black caterers who dominated the catering industry in several cities for more than a century. But Bernoon is only one case in point. In New York City, in the same period, Samuel Fraunces

operated Fraunces's Tavern, one of the major social centers of the East. It was in his restaurant in 1768 that the New York Chamber of Commerce was organized. Significantly and ironically, George Washington said farewell to his officers at the end of the Revolutionary War in rooms provided by this pioneer black businessman. Fraunces and Bernoon were only the most dramatic examples of the emerging artisan-merchant class. Throughout these early years black artisans and merchants held commanding positions in Eastern cities. Between 1790 and 1820, according to Du Bois (*The Philadelphia Negro*), "a very large portion, and perhaps most" of the artisans of Philadelphia were black.

In that day, as in this one, there were systematic attempts to undermine black artisans and merchants. This disturbed a number of witnesses, including a French traveler named Brissot de Warville. "Those Negroes who keep shops," he said, "live moderately, and never augment their business beyond a certain point. The reason is obvious; the whites . . . like not to give them credit to enable them to undertake any extensive commerce nor even to give them the means of a common education by receiving them into their counting houses."

Despite these pressures, certain blacks managed to reach the top ranks in their fields. One such entrepreneur was James Forten, who invented and patented a device for handling sails and became one of the major sailmakers in Philadelphia. Another major entrepreneur was Paul Cuffe, the ship captain and ship builder. In 1797 Cuffe built a wharf and warehouse on the Westport River in Massachusetts. By 1806 he owned one ship, two brigs and several smaller vessels. For many years he commanded black crews, making voyages to Europe, Russia, Africa and the West Indies.

Concurrently with the elaboration of businessmen like Paul Cuffe there was a parallel development in the cultural field. Slowly before the war but with remarkable acceleration thereafter, black intellectuals emerged from the masses; and by 1780 there were at least four recognizable types in the black community. The first type, symbolized most notably by Jupiter Hammon, defected and went over to the enemy, astounding and delighting them by producing intellectual products that objectively buttressed their world view. The second type—Phillis Wheatley was

an example—offered no direct challenge to the system but subtly challenged its premises by the authority of their work which was, like all works of art, an appeal to freedom. The third category found its voice in the anonymous *Othello*,\* who directly and militantly challenged the intellectual and cultural premises of the white dispensation. Less militant but no less direct was the fourth category of intellectuals, composed of men like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who spoke in muted tones but created big sticks of organization.

From these different strata, from the artisans and merchants and intellectuals, and from the great mass of maintaining laborers and slaves, came the founding fathers and mothers of African-America.

This group included Richard Allen and Absalom Jones and thousands of laborers and former slaves who have disappeared from a record that still vibrates with their presence.

Of these men and women—that is to say, of the known men and women—at least twenty-one should be starred for the record: Richard Allen, cofounder of the Free African Society, pioneer bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and first president of a national black convention; Absalom Jones, cofounder of the Free African Society, protest leader, and founder of one of the first black churches in the North; Prince Hall, founder of the first black Masonic lodge and protest leader; George Liele, founder-pastor of a pioneer black Baptist church; Andrew Bryan, founder-pastor of a pioneer black Baptist church; Phillis Wheatley, poet; James Forten, industrialist and protest leader; Benjamin Banneker, astronomer, mathematician, protest leader; Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, leader in the Westward movement and founder of Chicago; Peter Williams Sr., cofounder of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; James Varick, first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Paul Cuffe, ship captain and African colonizationist; William Whipper, protest leader and magazine editor; Austin Steward, merchant and protest leader; Abraham Shadd, protest leader;

\*In 1788, an anonymous writer who called himself “Othello” published a slashing antislavery essay which denounced white Americans for betraying the principles of the Revolution. “So flagitious a violation,” he wrote, “can never escape the notice of a just Creator, whose vengeance may be now on the wing, to disseminate and hurl the arrows of destruction.”

Dr. James Derham, pioneer black physician; Samuel E. Cornish, Presbyterian minister and cofounder of the black press; John B. Russwurm, cofounder of the black press; Daniel Coker, cofounder of the AME church; David Ruggles, protest leader, and founder of the first black magazine; and Nathaniel Paul, pioneer black Baptist minister.

It was these men and women, working with thousands of unsung laborers and protestants, who laid the cornerstones and created the first tiers of the emerging structure of Black America.

The first step in that process, as we have seen, was the founding of the Free African Society by eight black pioneers: Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Samuel Boston, Joseph Johnson, Cato Freeman, Caesar Cranchell, James Potter, and William White. The organization founded by these men was a church, a mutual aid society and an embryonic political cell. It also contained the germinal concept of the black insurance company.

The same archetypal figures and the same issues dominated the racial dialogue in other cities; and within a short time similar organizations were established in other Northern centers with large black populations. The leaders of these societies quickly established a correspondence network that linked—and identified and shaped—Black America for the first time. The creation of this network was a formative experience for pioneer black leaders. Through the medium of these organizations, blacks exchanged information, ideas and programs. More importantly, they began to see their lives in a time-line extending from Africa to the Day of Judgement they believed would vindicate them.\*

The second step on the road to Black America—and the second tier of the structure of Black America—was the independent black church movement, which started in the late 1770s with the founding of the first African Baptist churches in South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia by pioneer black ministers like Andrew Bryan and George Liele. This movement continued unabatedly throughout the war and reached a peak in postwar Philadelphia with the first public demonstration against Jim Crow. The demonstration occurred at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church at Fourth and Vine in the year of the founding of the Free African

\**The Shaping of Black America*

Society. When, in November of that year, a group of black worshippers, composed largely of members of the Free African Society, were pulled from their knees during prayer, they stood up, without a word, and filed out of the church in a body. Looking back on that pivotal moment many years later, Richard Allen said:

“A number of us usually attended St. George’s church in Fourth street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on, and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. . . . We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. . . . Meeting had begun and they were nearly done singing and just as we got to the seats, the leader said, ‘Let us pray.’ We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees . . . having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, ‘You must get up—you must not kneel here.’ Mr. Jones replied, ‘Wait until the prayer is over.’ [The trustee] said, ‘No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away.’ Mr. Jones said, ‘Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more.’ With that [the trustee] beckoned to one of the other trustees . . . to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church.”

By withdrawing from the white Methodist church, the band of protestants affirmed the new forces moving within them. But the withdrawal raised large questions of identity, which were discussed at several heated meetings of the Free African Society. Certain members of the society suggested affiliation with the Quakers, while others held out for an entente with the Episcopalians or Methodists. Behind this debate was another question: What relation, if any, should blacks have with white institutions?

After a protracted and somewhat acrimonious debate, the Free African Society split into two groups. The larger group followed Absalom Jones, an affable, easy-going former slave, into the Episcopal church. In 1794 the African Church of St. Thomas was

erected in Philadelphia and eleven words were engraved in the vestibule: "The People Who Walked in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light."

But had they—really?

Richard Allen didn't think so. The new black communicants were denied full status in the Episcopal church and were barred from annual conferences and governing boards. This, to Allen, was rank discrimination. He demanded full rights in a white church, if possible, and in a black church, if necessary. In his mind, in an unmanifested seed state, was an image of *Negritude*, of Negro being and becoming.

Who was Allen?

He was a former slave who started his career with an act of extraordinary symbolic significance: the conversion of his master. Shrewd and hardworking, Allen accumulated enough money to buy his freedom and migrated to Philadelphia. After the split in the Free African Society, he formed an independent black Methodist church. In 1816 he became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first national organization created by blacks. During the whole of this period, according to contemporary witnesses, his house was never shut "against the friendless, homeless, penniless fugitive from the house of bondage." So persuasive was Allen's image, so dynamic was his example, that author Vernon Loggin nominated him for the title of "Father of the Negro." A second and independent nomination came from historian John W. Cromwell, who said Allen had "greater influence upon the colored people of the North than any other man of his times."

Men and women made in Allen's image dominated the second phase of the Black Pioneer period, creating a tier of independent black churches that spanned the North. In 1821 leading black Methodists, James Varick in particular, organized another national organization, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. By 1830 there were black churches of almost every conceivable description, including an Ethiopian Church of Jesus Christ in Savannah, Georgia, and a black Dutch Reformed Church in New York City.

On the foundation of these churches rose a third tier of social and fraternal organizations. The leading spirit in this movement



was Prince Hall, a leather-dresser and Revolutionary War veteran who organized the first black Masonic lodge. Like Richard Allen, like Absalom Jones, like all leaders of the period, Prince Hall tried first to enter white American institutions. Rebuffed on this front, he turned to England and was granted a charter by the Grand Lodge of England. On May 6, 1787, African Lodge No. 459 was formally organized in Boston with Hall as Master. In 1797 Hall helped organize lodges in Philadelphia and Providence, Rhode Island, thereby becoming a pioneer in the development of black interstate organizations.

While Hall and other leaders were pressing forward on this level, they were at the same time creating the fourth tier of the Black American structure, the perennial movement for equal rights. From the beginning that movement was based on internal development and external protest. In succeeding years different protest leaders would emphasize different dimensions of this concept. Booker T. Washington, for example, would make an artificial distinction between external protest and internal development. But in the beginning black leaders articulated a total concept, involving a double and reciprocal struggle *for* black development and *against* white restrictions on that development.

True to their rhetoric, these leaders founded black schools and organized the social capital of the community. A major leader in this effort, as in so many others, was Richard Allen, who opened a day school for children and a night school for adults in Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia. In Boston, in the same decade, Prince Hall opened a school for black children in his home. This movement was supported by Quakers like Anthony Benezet, who organized a black school in Philadelphia, and the New York Manumission Society, which organized the famous Free African Schools of New York City. According to some authorities, the opening of the first African Free School in November, 1787, marked the beginning of free secular education in New York.

All the while, on another level of existence, black leaders were pressing an increasingly sophisticated campaign against discrimination and segregation. In a 1794 pamphlet Richard Allen and Absalom Jones attacked slavery and its Northern twin, bigotry. Six years later Jones and other Philadelphians sent an antislavery petition to Congress. Allied with Jones and Allen in

the Philadelphia protest movement was industrialist James Forten, who attracted national attention with a series of letters that demolished the arguments of whites who wanted to limit the number of free blacks entering Pennsylvania.

Along with equal rights, blacks pressed the equal education movement. On October 17, 1787, Prince Hall and other Boston blacks filed one of the first public petitions in this field, telling the Massachusetts legislature that “we. . . must fear for our rising offspring to see them in ignorance in a land of gospel light, when there is provision made for them as well as others and [they] can’t enjoy them, and [no other reason] can be given [than that] they are black. . . .” In a different but allied development, Paul Cuffe raised the issue of black suffrage. When, in 1780, he was barred from the ballot box in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, he refused to pay taxes and filed a defiant petition of protest. After a long controversy, it was decided that taxation without representation was tyranny in America. The case was widely regarded as establishing a precedent for black suffrage.

Buttressed by the four tiers of these ascending levels of expressiveness, the horizons of black pioneers expanded in widening circles that, in some cases, overlapped the efforts of white pioneers. Not only in the South but also in the North black pioneers contributed to the common effort, building schools and roads and extending the social capital of America. In one characteristic transaction, Paul Cuffe donated a school to his town and built a meeting house for the Quakers.

There were also black pioneers who extended the boundaries of America, founding new communities and towns. The most celebrated of these pioneers was Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, who founded Chicago, Illinois. There is abundant evidence—a deed in the Wayne County courthouse, the contemporary reports of British officers and the journals and records of travelers and traders—that DuSable settled in the area in the 1770s and created the foundations of Chicago, building the first home there and opening the first business.

The contributions of DuSable and other black founding fathers had no appreciable effect on the level of racism in America. There are even indications that DuSable the founder was isolated and pushed to the sidelines of Chicago life in the 1790s when large numbers of white Americans settled in the area, bringing

with them traditional American perceptions. If, as seems probable, DuSable was indeed the victim of his own creation, he shares that mournful distinction with thousands of other black pioneers who found themselves under increasing attack in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

What did it mean to be black in the America of that period?

Prince Hall, the activist and Revolutionary War veteran who organized the first black Masonic lodge, provided one answer in his charge to Boston's African Lodge.

"Patience, I say; for were we not possessed of a great measure of it, we could not bear up under the daily insults we meet with in the streets of Boston, much more on public days of recreation. How, at such times, are we shamefully abused, and that to such a degree, that we may truly be said to carry our lives in our hands, and the arrows of death are flying about our heads."

A similar answer came from Colonel Middleton, another Revolutionary War veteran. During a Boston riot, a group of whites attacked blacks in front of his home. The old soldier stuck a musket out of his door and threatened to kill any white man who approached. One of his neighbors, a white man, asked the whites to leave. Then he approached Colonel Middleton and begged him to put away his gun. Colonel Middleton stood silent for a moment. Then he turned and tottered off, dropping his gun and weeping as he went.

Colonel Middleton's America, Prince Hall's America and Thomas Jefferson's America tottered into the nineteenth century, divided and afraid.