

Black History's Antebellum Origins

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BEFORE THE Civil War those who championed freedom for the slaves and a better lot for the free Negroes were constantly beset by the charge that blacks as a race had an unworthy past, whether in Africa or the United States. The claims that blacks were entitled to freedom and equality could be legitimately refuted, ran this line of thought, because their historical record—their achievements and contributions to civilization—had been so negligible, so abysmally low. ‘The African race is notoriously idle and improvident,’ wrote James H. Hammond in 1845, and not characterized by ‘reason and order.’¹ Believing that blacks were inferior, Hammond held that other than as slaves they had never amounted to anything and never would. A towering figure in his native South Carolina, and not without influence throughout the South, Hammond voiced a sentiment that was more than sectional. Many whites elsewhere shared the belief that blacks, past as well as present, had a genetic predisposition to low aim and lesser achievement, destined indefinitely to lag below the historical horizon.

The theory of an ignoble Afro-American past was a challenge antebellum black leaders and spokesmen could not ignore. They could hardly be expected to concede that the black past was a chamber of horrors, and that the least said about it the better. Their response took two predictable and related forms—a denial of the indictment and the bringing forth of data to refute it.

¹ Hammond to Thomas Clarkson, Jan. 28, 1845, in *Governor Hammond's Letters on Southern Slavery: Addressed to Thomas Clarkson* (Charleston, 1845), p. 21.

In assailing the charge that the Afro-American past was inglorious when it was not insignificant, that it was shrouded in mystery when it was not covered with shame, blacks asserted that what passed for and was accepted as the history of their group was a misrepresentation, a distortion. 'The disposition to disparage everything related to Africa, or of African origin, is one of the most stereotyped instincts of American slavery,' wrote William Whipper, a shaper of thought in antebellum black circles for a quarter of a century.² In a similar vein Russell Parrot of Philadelphia asserted that 'the people of colour have ever been the victims of misrepresentation,' adding that they were held to be 'but a remove from the brute, with all the bad propensities of man, without one of his good qualities.'³

It was bad enough, charged black intellectuals, for white recorders to misinterpret the historical sources they had ostensibly examined. But this failure of deduction was compounded by a deficiency even more grievous—bias by omission. Blacks charged that when white researchers came across references to black achievers they were seized as if by a selective inattention, an urge to pass on to other things. An editorial in *Freedom's Journal*, the first black weekly, accused whites of confining their attention to those blacks who were slaves, 'omitting through ignorance or illiberality what ancient sages have written and handed down' about dark-skinned peoples of earlier times.⁴ In a similar vein, Samuel Ringgold Ward, a Presbyterian minister, asserted that to whites 'our history is that of the chain, the coffle gang, the slave ship, the middle passage, the plantation-hell!' This belief might be excusable, added Ward, on the part of those who knew nothing of the Negro except as they saw him in slavery or in menial occupations. 'But scholars deserve no such extenuation.'⁵

² Whipper to Julia Griffiths, Feb. 3, 1859. *Douglass' Monthly* (Rochester, N.Y.), March 1859.

³ *Freedom's Journal* (New York), July 27, 1827.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* (London, 1855), pp. 185–86.

Some blacks felt that their group alone had been singled out for exclusion by historians, a belief lacking in point of fact but understandable in the color-conscious context of the times. In a Fourth of July address at Framingham, Massachusetts, on the eve of the Civil War, H. Ford Douglass of Illinois, a former runaway slave from Virginia, spoke of this black code of interdiction: 'All other races are permitted to travel over the wide field of history and pluck the flowers that blossom there, to glean up heroes, philosophers, sages and poets, and put them into a galaxy of brilliant genius and claim all credit to themselves; but if a black man attempts to do so, he is met at the threshold by the objection, "You have no ancestry behind you."' ⁶

Blacks held that this lack of knowledge of their past—these 'missing pages' in their history—hindered them in their fight for full citizenship. Meeting in Rochester, New York, in 1853, a convention of black leaders drafted 'An Address of the Colored National Convention to the People of the United States,' which held that 'modern American historians' had forgotten to record the services and sacrifices of their black compatriots, 'a knowledge of which is essential to an intelligent judgment of the merits of our people.'⁷ Seeking equal voting rights in 1860, the New York City and County Suffrage Committee of Colored Citizens sent out a statewide appeal: 'Our countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our characters, ignorant of our capacity, and oblivious of our history.'⁸

Blacks contended with especial fervor that the role of their group in America's wars had been ignored or slighted. 'History has thrown the colored man out,' said William Wells Brown in an address at the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1860 in New York. 'You look in vain to Bancroft and

⁶ Douglass, *Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York), July 14, 1860.

⁷ *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention held in Rochester, July 6, 7, 8, 1853* (Rochester, 1853), p. 13.

⁸ *The Liberator* (Boston), Nov. 2, 1860.

other historians for justice to the colored.' The role of blacks in America's wars was there for the telling, continued Brown, but 'the historian passes it by.'⁹ Addressing the same society at an earlier convention, Henry Highland Garnet, another former slave and later United States minister to Liberia, asserted that 'scarcely an inch on the pages of history' had been allotted to the blacks who fell in the Revolutionary War.¹⁰

The journalist-reformer Thomas Van Rensselaer held that in giving an account of the role of blacks in that war it was necessary to depend upon 'traditional rather than written history.' He proceeded to expound on the defects in the latter: 'It seems to have been then, as now, the settled policy of the white man to have permitted the colored man to an equal participation with himself in the dangers to which they are exposed in securing Republican institutions, but when secured, he is content to enjoy them alone, hence the absence (almost) in American history of any mention of the noble achievements of colored men.'¹¹ In delivering the eulogy at the death of the wealthy sailmaker James Forten, who had served as a powder-boy in the Revolutionary War, William L. Douglass, the rector of St. Thomas's Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, faced this dilemma of word-of-mouth history versus the written version. 'We have heard,' ran his remarks, 'something relating to his connection with the trials of the American Revolution but as the facts have not come to us in a regular way, we must be permitted to pass over it.'¹²

The tendency by white writers to ignore the black role in American life was viewed as a dereliction of duty by James McCune Smith, a physician who had found it necessary to go to Scotland to obtain his professional training. In a long letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, a man re-

⁹ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 26, 1860.

¹⁰ *The Emancipator* (New York), May 15, 1840.

¹¹ *The Colored American* (New York), Feb. 27, 1841.

¹² *Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 5, 1842.

garded by blacks as being not unsympathetic, Smith called attention to the long-range academic implications of neglected black history. 'The loss of the Alexandrian Library and its wealth of ancient lore is a deep grief to scholars,' wrote Smith, 'but I am convinced that there will be a profounder grief among thinkers a century hence that there is not now placed on record a succinct account of the true relation which blacks now bear to this Republic.'¹³ Sounding a similar warning, a correspondent to a black weekly urged its readers to become collectors and preservationists. We should, he advised, 'take measures to effect a speedy collection of those valuable evidences of the genius and integrity of our gifted brethren.' Such an enterprise was due to them, to ourselves, and to posterity, he added.¹⁴

The neglect of their history was a challenge to blacks to bestir themselves. Writing in 1833, the black lecturer Maria W. Stewart of Boston cogently expressed this summons to action: 'When I cast my eyes on the long list of illustrious names that are enrolled in the bright annals of fame among whites, I turn my eyes within, and ask my thoughts, "Where are the names of our illustrious ones?"'¹⁵ Two years earlier, in an address at the African Masonic Hall, Mrs. Stewart had urged black women to become history-makers: 'O, ye daughters of Africa! What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation?'¹⁶

Experience had taught blacks that, despite the valued assistance of white friends, there were some things they must do for themselves, however ill-prepared they might be and however imperfect the end result. They realized that in throwing light

¹³ Smith to Greeley, Sept. 1, 1851, in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester), Sept. 25, 1851.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Sept. 23, 1853.

¹⁵ Maria W. Stewart, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* (Boston, 1831), in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston, 1971), p. 482.

¹⁶ This address appears in *Productions of Maria W. Stewart* (Boston, 1835), in Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park, Pa., 1976), p. 195.

on the black past they would have to take the lead. 'If we do not vindicate ourselves, who will do it for us?'¹⁷ asked Samuel Ringgold Ward in referring to the Afro-American past.

In the effort to disinter their history, black leaders were motivated primarily by racial considerations. Obviously they hoped to reach some whites, particularly those who were influential, whether in church or state, the courts or the counting-houses. But it was even more imperative to reach their fellow-blacks, ignorance of the black past not being confined to whites. Uncounted numbers of blacks knew little or nothing about the Afro-American past. Worse still, many of them repudiated blackness as a typology, historical or otherwise. It was common knowledge, wrote William J. Wilson in a letter to a Negro weekly, 'that a black girl would as soon fondle a black imp as a black doll.' Once, wrote Wilson, when he 'suddenly introduced' such a doll to a group of twenty colored girls they greeted it with such a scampering and screaming as could only be imagined.¹⁸

Racial pride was thus a central motif in antebellum black history. Like other Americans of their day, blacks were engaged in the quest for self-identity. Because blacks bore heavy burdens, however, black self-identity more readily flowed into group identity, with history a connecting link, in effect becoming history-as-identity. Sometimes, as was to be expected, this sense of racial pride became exuberant, even to the point of role-reversal. Meeting in Cleveland in 1854, the National Emigration Convention of Colored People passed a resolution to the effect 'that we shall ever cherish our identity of origin and race, as preferable in our estimation, to any other people.'¹⁹ Six years later, a member of that convention, abolitionist orator H. Ford Douglass, asserted at a predominantly white gath-

¹⁷ Ward, *Autobiography*, p. 186.

¹⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Mar. 11, 1853.

¹⁹ *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on 24th, 25th and 26th of August, 1854* (Pittsburgh, 1854), p. 27.

ering that he was 'proud of the Negro race, and I thank God today that there does not course in my veins a single drop of Saxon blood.'²⁰

Antebellum blacks had little interest in recovering the past for its own sake. History to them was no idle pastime—it was a means to an end. *The Rights of All*, an early weekly published in New York, urged its readers to acquire 'some knowledge of the history of nations,' as a preparation for the responsibilities of full citizenship.²¹ Amos Gerry Beman, a Congregational minister, instructed the readers of another black journal that the purpose of history was 'to show what principles ought to prevail and what ones will ruin any individual, people or nation.'²²

As construed by antebellum blacks, history's main function was to furnish them with a more positive self-perception. They felt that they needed a more heroic image of themselves so that they might respond in like fashion. 'What Cyprian, Augustine, Tertullian and others in the Church were, colored men may be again,' editorialized *The Colored American* in its plea for role-model history.²³ It is to be noted that in proof of the Negro ancestry of such figures of the past, antebellum blacks often relied upon physical characteristics. Euclid, according to Samuel Ringgold Ward, 'had a black complexion, woolly hair, thick lips and elliptical ankle-bones.'²⁴

In moving to counter unfavorable assessments of their role in history, blacks were not unmindful of the small company of white writers who came to their defense. Of these the most widely quoted by blacks and their friends was Henri Grégoire, a French cleric, author of *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes; Followed with*

²⁰ *The Liberator*, July 3, 1860.

²¹ *The Rights of All* (New York), May 29, 1820.

²² *The Colored American*, Mar. 6, 1841.

²³ *Ibid.*, May 6, 1837.

²⁴ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Jan. 27, 1854.

an Account of the Life and Works of Fifteen Negroes and Mulattoes, Distinguished in Science, Literature and the Arts (to give it the title of the translated version, published in 1810).²⁵ 'I have taken upon myself,' wrote the bishop, 'the task of proving that negroes are capable of virtues and talents; and this I have established by reasoning, and still more by facts.'²⁶ Grégoire's countryman and contemporary Brissot de Warville had come to a similar conclusion. In his *New Travels in the United States Performed in 1788* (London, 1792), Brissot challenged the theory that blacks were inferior to whites in mental capacity.²⁷

Similarly, if at a later date, Wilson Armistead, president of the Leeds Anti-Slavery Society, produced a lengthy volume, *A Tribute for the Negro*. Published in Manchester in 1848, it was dedicated 'to James W. C. Pennington, Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell and Many Other Notable Examples of the Elevated Humanity of the Negro.' *The North Star*, edited by Douglass, felt that Armistead's work fell somewhat short 'in arrangement and literary ability,' but deemed it quite important 'as the repository of a luminous and brilliant array of testimony, in favor of our class to be regarded as equal members of the great human family, with the rest of mankind.'²⁸

The tone and temper of the history propounded by blacks took its cue from its premises. To white disparagement, blacks countered with racial glorification and pride, with objectivity a lesser consideration. Holding that truth was where you found it, blacks did not hesitate to use sources that might have been considered speculative by others. The charge that their reading of the past was more hearsay history than anything else would

²⁵ Passages from Grégoire may, for example, be found in *Freedom's Journal*, Nov. 24, 1828, and *The Northern Star and Freeman's Advocate* (Albany, N.Y.), Mar. 3, 1842. William Whipper, in a eulogy on William Wilberforce on Dec. 6, 1838, called attention to Grégoire's treatise. For this eulogy see Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Voice of Black America, 1757-1900* (New York, 1972), pp. 72-78.

²⁶ Grégoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*, p. 248.

²⁷ Brissot, *New Travels*, p. 285.

²⁸ *North Star* (Rochester), Apr. 9, 1849.

have left them unmoved. To them, the task of combatting deep-seated errors and grievous omissions as to the black role in history would seem to justify the use of part-truths pending the arrival of the whole truth, especially since the latter was notorious for taking its own good time.

If the writers of antebellum black history sought to influence all who would lend an ear, they wrote primarily for the general reader. The title of the pioneer work in the field, *A Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People*, by James W. C. Pennington, published in 1841 at Hartford, Connecticut, and running to ninety-six pages, indicated its introductory bent. It would 'be found useful to families, juvenile readers, and lecturers in history,' said *The Colored American*.²⁹ Although recommending the book ('every colored family ought to have it'), the black weekly criticized Pennington for not giving more attention to the history content even if this had forced him to curtail the sections on prejudice—'the historical part being but little understood, while all are more or less familiar with the nature and character of prejudice.'³⁰

Pennington's volume was followed three years later by another 'claim-the-world' type of history, *Light and Truth; Collected from the Bible and Ancient and Modern History, Containing the Universal History of the Colored and Indian Race, from the Creation of the World to the Present Time*, by Robert B. Lewis of Hallowell, Maine. Published in Boston in 1844 by a 'Committee of Colored Gentlemen' who had paid the printing bill and to whom Lewis had transferred the title,³¹ it was a massive work, four times the length of Pennington's. It was, however, much like the latter in tone and approach. A review in an abolitionist weekly (and hence an organ inclined to be sympathetic) described *Light and Truth* as 'a curious collection of historical facts, connected, in some way or other, with those portions of

²⁹ *The Colored American*, Jan. 9, 1841.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1841.

³¹ For a copy of this transfer of title see *The Liberator*, Mar. 22, 1844.

mankind not commonly called "white." Its arrangement is not very methodical, and its aim not very definite, and as there are no references, the authenticity of some of the statements is likely to be questioned.³²

Both authors, Pennington and Lewis, viewed history as falling into two categories, sacred and profane. The latter was regarded as far the lesser and was, wrote clergyman Pennington, to be valued 'in proportion as it has the coincidence of sacred history.'³³ Indeed, antebellum black history was not without its messianic overtones, reflecting the church-oriented background of the group. 'Beloved brethren—here let me tell you, and believe it, that the Lord our God, as true as he sits on his throne in heaven, and as true as our Saviour died to redeem the world, will give you a Hannibal,' wrote David Walker in his fiery pamphlet *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*.³⁴

During the last decade of the antebellum period, the viewpoint that history was illustrative and confirmative of Divine revelation was not as frequently voiced in black circles. The later commentators were also likely to document their sources, and to have read more widely than their predecessors. There was less likelihood that they would require the apologetic explanation voiced by *Freedom's Journal* about a columnist who was doing a series of articles on ancient Africa: 'The readers of "African Genealogy," doubtless, will excuse all inaccuracies when told that the writer of it is quite a youth.'³⁵

Whether young or old, whether their knowledge of the past was superficial or solid, the advocates of black history focussed on certain common themes. Alike they called attention to the role of blacks in the ancient world, with due mention of Africa's influence on Greece and Rome. In the Western Hemisphere

³² *The Emancipator and Free American* (New York), Feb. 29, 1844.

³³ Pennington, *A Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People* (Hartford, 1841), p. 19.

³⁴ *Walker's Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1830), p. 20.

³⁵ *Freedom's Journal*, Aug. 31, 1827.

they dwelt upon the history of Haiti after she had won her independence. Moving on to the United States these evokers of the past were especially pleased to recount the role of their forebears in the nation's wars. To these ancestral arms-bearers for America they added the company of blacks who at one time or another had come to public notice as rebels and radicals or as achievers in the arts or the professions. These basic themes in antebellum Afro-American history may be briefly noted in turn.

Those who addressed themselves to blacks of ancient times tended to couch their observations in somewhat general terms, without specific reference to time or place. The delegates to the Colored Convention of 1834, meeting in New York, formulated a 'Declaration of Sentiment' proclaiming that 'the coloured population of the United States' lay claim 'to be the offspring of a parentage, that once, for their excellence of attainment in the arts, literature and science, stood before the world unrivalled.'³⁶ Similarly without furnishing a bill of particulars, H. Ford Douglass assured a Fourth of July audience that 'the remains of ancient grandeur which have been exhumed from the accumulated dust of forty centuries were wrought by the ingenuity and skill of the Negro race ere the Saxon was known in history.'³⁷ At a meeting of Boston Negroes at Joy Street Church late in 1860, author-abolitionist William Wells Brown spoke in a similar broad vein, reflecting on the Negro of 'three thousand years ago, when in the period of their greatness and glory, they held the foremost ranks in the march of civilization; when they constituted, in fact, the whole civilized world of their time.'³⁸

History-minded blacks who made no reference to any spe-

³⁶ *Minutes of the Fourth Annual Convention of the Free People of Colour in the United States* (New York, 1834), p. 27.

³⁷ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 14, 1860.

³⁸ *The Liberator*, Oct. 26, 1860.

cific locales as to the theatre of ancient black genius felt that such a place identification was hardly necessary. Where could it have been other than Africa? Where else could these things have come to pass except in the historic land of the blacks?

'Everything that relates to Africa shall find a ready admission into our columns,' editorialized *Freedom's Journal* on the first page of the first issue.³⁹ As held by antebellum blacks, this interest in Africa was variously motivated. Africa offered a refuge from American oppression; it held possibilities for trade and commerce, and it was a fertile field for evangelization—'I long to preach to the poor African the way of salvation,' said one of the pioneer black colonizing missionaries, Lott Cary, in his farewell sermon in the First Baptist Church in Richmond in 1825.⁴⁰

It is to be noted that the suspicion blacks had about the motives of the American Colonization Society in deporting blacks led to some expressions of coolness toward identifying with Africa. 'We do not trace our ancestors to Africa alone,' ran a resolution of an anti-colonization meeting in New York. 'We trace it to Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotchmen, to Frenchmen; to the German; to the Asiatic as well as the African.'⁴¹ At an anti-colonization meeting, Charles Lenox Remond, the most prominent black abolitionist lecturer before Frederick Douglass, stated that 'if we should note and count this audience we should be obliged to come to the conclusion that the fatherland of the coloured people was almost anywhere else than Africa (great laughter).'⁴² A similar point of diverse racial origins was raised by James McCune Smith in response to Horace Greeley who had, in the columns of the *New York Tribune*, urged blacks to 'consecrate their lives to the work of regener-

³⁹ *Freedom's Journal*, Mar. 16, 1827.

⁴⁰ *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (Baltimore), Nov. 12, 1825.

⁴¹ *The Liberator*, Apr. 4, 1851.

⁴² *Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 3, 1849.

ating and civilizing the land of their forefathers.' Smith asked for clarification: 'Did you mean foremothers?'⁴³

Deportation schemes espoused by white organizations such as the American Colonization Society would expectedly lead some blacks to reaffirm their Americanization and to raise questions about Liberia and West Coast Africa in general as suitable places to which to migrate. Such reservations, however, did not deter the majority of articulate blacks from identifying with an Africa of antiquity. For if there were some doubts about modern Africa, not so with ancient Africa. Antebellum blacks could, by identifying themselves with the latter, bestow upon themselves an ancestry of freedom, not one of slavery and stigma. As sons and daughters of early precolonial Africa they were heirs of her ancient glory, however unapostolic the succession.

The Africa heralded by antebellum blacks was not West Coast Africa, the seat of the transoceanic slave trade and hence the ancestral homelands of the vast majority of Afro-Americans. They knew little about that region, and not they alone. The discovery of historical West Africa would have to await new techniques and new sources, including archeological findings, linguistic studies, oral evidence, and the writings of North African and Arab historians and travellers. As a consequence it was natural for antebellum blacks to focus on East Africa with its more accessible records. Hence they invoked Egypt and Ethiopia, the former especially. 'Our traducers,' wrote Prince Saunders in 1818, 'pretend to have forgotten what the Egyptians and the Ethiopians, our ancestors, were.'⁴⁴

Saunders and many other literate blacks held that Negro Americans were genetically related to ancient Ethiopians and Egyptians, and they attacked those who would deny such a relationship, including Samuel G. Morton, a highly regarded naturalist who specialized in the comparative study of human

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Sept. 11, 1851.

⁴⁴ Saunders, *Haytian Papers* (Boston, 1818), p. 153.

skulls. In his influential *Crania Americana*, published in 1839, Morton asserted that beyond all question 'the Caucasian and Negro races were as perfectly distinct in that country [Egypt] upwards of three thousand years ago as they are now.'⁴⁵ Morton's views were challenged by Frederick Douglass in a lengthy, thoughtful address at Western Reserve College in Hudson, Ohio, in 1854, *The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered*. Stating that *Crania Americana* revealed Morton's low opinion of blacks, Douglass undertook to refute each of his reasons for holding that Egyptians bore no ethnic ties to Negroes. James McCune Smith, like Morton a physician, found the address by Douglass to be 'full of new and fresh thoughts on the dawning science of race-history.'⁴⁶

Those who disparaged the idea of any linkage between the Negro race and the early Egyptians were ridiculed by H. Ford Douglass. 'I know that ethnological writers tell us that we do not look like the Egyptian,' said the young orator. 'They dig up an Egyptian mummy that has been dead and buried three thousand years, over whose grave the storms of thirty or forty centuries have swept, and because it does not look just like a Mississippi Negro of today, set it down that there is a difference of species between them.'⁴⁷ Henry Highland Garnet noted that despite the historical proof to the contrary 'there are those who affirm that the ancient Egyptians were not of pure African stock.'⁴⁸

Holding that the term 'African' encompassed Egypt, history-minded antebellum blacks found a source of pride in their Old World ancestry. The 'glorious' past of Africa became a recurrent theme in black expression, sacred and secular. When

⁴⁵ Morton, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia and London, 1839), p. 88.

⁴⁶ Douglass, *The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester, 1854), pp.17-22. Smith's appraisal is in his 'Introduction' to Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), p. xxviii.

⁴⁷ *The Liberator*, July 13, 1860.

⁴⁸ Garnet, *The Past and the Present Condition and Destiny of the Colored Race* (Troy, N.Y.), p. 3.

David Nickens announced that 'Africa was the garden and nursery where learning budded and education sprang,' his paean was hardly a revelation to the audience assembled at the Chillicothe, Ohio, AME Church on July 5, 1832. 'All the now civilized world,' added the clergyman, 'is indebted to sable Africa for the arts of civilization.'⁴⁹

The glorifiers of ancient Africa were not likely to forget to call attention to her significant influence on the civilizations that would develop in the Mediterranean basin, from whence it would spread into northern Europe, eventually making its way across the Atlantic. Afro-American speakers and writers confidently asserted that Ethiopia and Egypt were the sources of Greek thought and culture. It was to Africa, 'the cradle of Art and Science,' said clergyman Sampson White, that 'the wise men of Greece had gone in search of wisdom.'⁵⁰ In turn the Greeks would transmit this rich legacy to the Romans who would carry it far and wide, eventually to the shores of the British Isles. 'The Romans, Saxons and Normans who swallowed up the Britons and gave them a name and a language, received their civilization from Egypt and Ethiopia,' explained William Wells Brown to a Boston audience.⁵¹

If antebellum blacks found it satisfying to dwell upon ancient Africa and its civilizing influence they had to give some thought to the question: Why had the light faded? Why did the Africa of their day compare so unfavorably with the Africa of the pharaohs? Blacks who were church-minded had a ready answer. James W. C. Pennington found that the theology of the early Africans was their downfall, asserting that 'when a man has adopted the idea of more gods than one, he has unhinged his mind from anything like the truth.'⁵² Fellow-clergyman Samuel Ringgold Ward took note of 'the wickedness of the ancient

⁴⁹ *The Liberator*, Aug. 11, 1832.

⁵⁰ *Weekly Anglo-African*, Mar. 31, 1860.

⁵¹ *The Liberator*, Oct. 26, 1860.

⁵² Pennington, *Text Book*, p. 33.

Negroes,' who committed the same sins as other people and hence were treated accordingly by an impartial Jehovah.⁵³ The Almighty, observed Maria W. Stewart, 'gave our glory unto others' because of 'our gross sins and abominations.' Not to close on a note of despair, Mrs. Stewart reminded her readers of the prophecy in the Book of Psalms so often quoted in black circles, clerical and lay, 'Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God.'⁵⁴

Africa's own shortcomings were not, however, the only reasons for her decline. Austin Stewart, a runaway slave turned grocer, placed the blame on 'Christian Englishmen.' They had brought to ruin a once 'powerful nation' by invading her coasts with rum, inciting her chiefs to intertribal warfare, and 'by purchasing with gaudy, but worthless trinkets, her conquered captives.'⁵⁵ Thomas L. Jennings of New York viewed Columbus as the chief culprit in the chain of events that had transformed Africa from 'a land flowing with riches' into an 'unhappy country' whose sons and daughters had been dispersed throughout the globe. 'I would that Columbus had never been born,' wrote Jennings, 'or that he had been buried at the bottom of the sea, ere he contemplated or discovered this Western Hemisphere, the theatre of all our misfortunès.'⁵⁶

There was one spot in the Western Hemisphere, however, that history-minded blacks could hail, the island of Haiti, which had freed itself from French rule in 1804. To prove the mettle of the Negro people, said David Walker, there was no need to 'refer to antiquity' since one had only to turn to Haiti, 'the glory of blacks and the terror of tyrants.'⁵⁷

Ignoring differences in language and religion, Negro Americans saw Haiti as a proving ground for black abilities. The

⁵³ Ward, *Autobiography*, p. 188.

⁵⁴ Maria W. Stewart in Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing*, pp. 130-31.

⁵⁵ Austin Stewart, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, 1857), p. 197.

⁵⁶ *Freedom's Journal*, Apr. 1, 1828.

⁵⁷ *Walker's Appeal*, p. 21.

history of the bloody struggles for Haitian independence 'in which the blacks whipped the French and English,' said lawyer-physician John S. Rock, in a Crispus Attucks Day celebration at Faneuil Hall in Boston, 'will be a lasting refutation of the malicious aspersions of our enemies.'⁵⁸ At a celebration of Haitian independence held by Baltimore blacks in 1825 the orator of the day, William Watkins, Jr., showered praises on the island republic as 'an irrefutable argument that the descendants of Africa were never designed by their Creator to sustain an inferiority, or even a mediocrity in the chain of beings.'⁵⁹ Similarly glowing was the appraisal of *The Rights of All*, whose editor viewed Haiti's progress 'in commercial relations, in respectability, and in every interest, as being not only equal to, but unparalleled by, that of any other modern nation.'⁶⁰

Taking a bachelor's degree from Bowdoin College on September 26, 1825, John B. Russwurm devoted his short commencement address to Haiti, crediting her with having 'effected wonders' since becoming independent and predicting for her 'a career of glory and happiness.'⁶¹ J. Dennis Harris, whose emigrationist activities left him little time to practice his trade of shoemaking, characterized Haiti as 'a land of historical facts, and the field of unparalleled glory,' her past unsullied by anything 'low or cowardly.'⁶² Maria W. Stewart was unhappy over the reluctance of the United States to extend diplomatic recognition to the black republic. 'You have,' ran her accusation, 'acknowledged all the nations of the earth, except Haiti.'⁶³

In praise of Haiti no voice was as insistent as that of James Theodore Holly, rector of St. Luke's Church in New Haven,

⁵⁸ *The Liberator*, Mar. 12, 1858.

⁵⁹ *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Aug. 15, 1825.

⁶⁰ *The Rights of All*, Oct. 9, 1829.

⁶¹ Foner, ed., *The Voice of Black America*, p. 43.

⁶² Harris, *A Summer on the Borders of the Caribbean Sea* (1860), in Howard H. Bell, ed., *Black Separatism and the Caribbean*, 1860 (Ann Arbor, 1970), p. 117.

⁶³ Maria W. Stewart in Loewenberg and Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, p. 191.

Connecticut. Staunchly supporting the emigrationist efforts that took shape in the 1850s, coincident with the growing sectional crisis over slavery, Holly proclaimed Haiti as a refuge from oppression and, with even greater fervor, a land of promise in its own right. Following a visit to the island in 1855, Holly prepared a lecture which he delivered upon occasion in 1856 and which was published in 1857 as a forty-six-page pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro Race for Self-Government, and Civilized Progress, as Demonstrated by Historical Events of the Haytian Revolution; and the Subsequent Acts of That People Since Their National Independence*. Holly began his long discourse by announcing that he would challenge the assumption that the Negro was lacking in those qualities upon which 'the great mass of Caucasians' based their claims of superiority. Holly then proceeded with his defense, basing it on 'the undoubted facts of history.' He concluded by ruling on the merits of his case. He had 'summoned the sable heroes and statesmen of that independent island of the Caribbean,' tried them by the high standard of modern civilization, fearlessly compared them 'with the most illustrious men of the most enlightened nations,' and in this examination they had not fallen 'one whit behind their contemporaries.'⁶⁴

To antebellum blacks no name in Haitian history could rank with that of slave-born Toussaint L'Ouverture, the dominant figure in freeing the island from foreign rule. Black periodicals dwelt upon his character and exploits, *Freedom's Journal*, for example, publishing a three-part article on his career in its issues of May 4, 11, and 18, 1827, and the *Anglo-African Magazine* carrying a eulogistic sketch in its March 1859 number. Speakers at black gatherings extolled his virtues. At a meeting in Clinton Hall, New York, in 1841 for the benefit of the Colored Orphan Asylum, James McCune Smith lectured on Tous-

⁶⁴ James Theodore Holly, *A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro Race* (New Haven, 1857), pp. 4, 5, 44.

saint's life and character.⁶⁵ At a fund-raising affair on behalf of the New York Literary Association, a group of young blacks bent on self-improvement, the white speaker, C. W. Elliott, eulogized the Haitian liberator, to the demonstrated approval of the 'tolerably numerous audience.'⁶⁶

When the young schoolteacher Charlotte Forten heard Wendell Phillips deliver his famed oration on Toussaint, she was transported. 'My enthusiastic enjoyment knew no bounds,' she wrote in her diary, appending quotations from the speech.⁶⁷ Black newspapers carried William Wordsworth's moving sonnet 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture,' and a few black parents gave his name to their offspring. One of the children of the Martin R. Delanys was named after the Haitian hero,⁶⁸ and at the first concert of the Juvenile Afric-American Philharmonic of Detroit in September 1859, the youngster who 'presided at the melodeon' was billed as Toussaint L'Ouverture Lambert.⁶⁹

As satisfying as it was to reflect upon Haiti's history and her heroes, black Americans experienced a much deeper sense of identification with the black history-makers within their own shores. However much they might hail the achievements of blacks of other countries and of earlier times, they found their most acceptable historic role models in the United States, the land of their more recent forefathers. This sense of having roots in America was expressed in a resolution that a convention of blacks in Albany addressed to the people of New York: 'We can trace our ancestry back to those who first pierced the almost impenetrable forest. When the vast and trackless wilderness spread itself before the earliest settlers, our fathers

⁶⁵ *The Emancipator*, Feb. 18, 1841.

⁶⁶ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Mar. 2, 1855.

⁶⁷ Entry dated Dec. 16, 1857, in Ray Allen Billington, ed., *Journal of Charlotte Forten* (New York, 1953), p. 112.

⁶⁸ For the racially historic Christian names of Delany's other children see Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robinson Delany, 1812-1885* (New York, 1971), p. 86.

⁶⁹ *Weekly Anglo-African*, Oct. 7, 1859.

were among those who, with sinewy frame and muscular arm, went forth to humble the wilderness in its native pride.⁷⁰

Black Americans let it be known that their progenitors had played an important part in levelling the forests, tilling the land, and cultivating the great agricultural staples—tobacco, sugar, rice, and cotton.⁷¹ But it was not on these more orderly phases of the past that blacks placed their major emphasis. They took their greatest pride in the role of their ancestors in the nation's wars. The Peace and Benevolent Society of African-Americans, meeting in August 1831 in New Haven, would have the record reveal that their fathers had 'fought, bled and died' in defense of the nation.⁷² The blood of blacks 'has been freely poured out on every battlefield, from the earliest to the latest conflict, in behalf of American liberty and independence,' ran a memorial sent by Boston blacks to the state legislature denouncing the Dred Scott decision.⁷³

Especially inviting to blacks was a contemplation of the Revolutionary War. This conflict not only had its complement of blacks who had made the supreme sacrifice, but it also had been fought in the name of freedom and equality. Evoking this war and its black arms-bearers was an effective way, thought many black leaders, of reminding their white countrymen of the nation's unkept commitments. Believing that whites were betraying their history by their incomplete and partial reading of it, blacks were prepared to offer instruction.

The tutors included groups and individuals. A meeting of the 'Colored Citizens of Cleveland' sent word that during the storms of the Revolutionary War black men, in proportion to their numbers, contributed as much as white men in redeeming

⁷⁰ *The Emancipator*, Dec. 10, 1840.

⁷¹ William P. Powell to editor of *Anti-Slavery Standard*, in *Standard*, Aug. 22, 1851.

⁷² *The Liberator*, Aug. 13, 1831.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1858.

the country from despotism.⁷⁴ In a memorial drafted in 1855 blacks in Philadelphia informed the state legislature that 'the bones of our fathers have whitened every field of the revolution—the blood trickling from their feet crimsoned the snows of Jersey.'⁷⁵

Lamenting the fact that 'scarcely an inch of the page of history has been appropriated' to the memory of the black arms-bearers of the Revolutionary War, Henry Highland Garnet sought to redress the balance in an address before the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. Truth, he predicted, would eventually give these forgotten men 'a fair share of the fame that was reaped upon the field of Lexington and Concord.' Truth would affirm that blacks 'participated in the immortal hour that adorned the brow of the illustrious Washington.'⁷⁶ Twenty years later William Wells Brown deemed it necessary to go over the same ground. The Negro's blood, he orated, had mingled with the soil 'of every battlefield made glorious by revolutionary reminiscence, and their bones have enriched the most productive lands of the country.'⁷⁷

Evocations of the black role in the Revolution were often couched in a tone of accusation, of contrasting the sacrifices of the black patriots with the discriminations visited upon their descendants. 'Our fathers fought, bled and died for the Liberties of this country, that we might enjoy equal rights with other Americans,' ran a resolution adopted at a meeting of blacks in Buffalo in 1841.⁷⁸ Runaway slave Lewis Clarke said that his father, a Revolutionary War soldier, fought under the illusion 'that *he* was to have a share in the freedom as well as the white

⁷⁴ *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Salem, Ohio), July 14, 1849.

⁷⁵ *A Memorial to the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. By the Colored Citizens of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1854), p. 18.

⁷⁶ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, June 11, 1840.

⁷⁷ *The Liberator*, Oct. 26, 1860.

⁷⁸ *The Colored American*, Jan. 9, 1841.

folks.⁷⁹ In a Fourth of July speech in 1830 Peter Williams, rector of St. Phillip's Church in New York, permitted himself a rare burst of bitterness in referring to blacks in the Revolution: 'We are natives of this country; we ask only to be treated as well as foreigners. Not a few of our fathers suffered and bled to purchase its independence; we ask only to be treated as well as those who fought against it.'⁸⁰

To their recall of the Revolution some blacks inserted a family touch. On trial in 1859 for having assisted a runaway slave, Charles H. Langston, in an impassioned address before a crowded Cleveland courtroom, alluded to his father's services as a Revolutionary soldier in Lafayette's command, adding 'that he fought for my freedom as much as his own.'⁸¹ On the grounds that his grandmother, Elizabeth Barjona, was 'a heroine of the Revolution,' having served as 'a cook to the Continental Congress,' William P. Powell petitioned the New York legislature to appropriate funds to help him and his wife and seven children to migrate to England.⁸²

If an individual black honored a family forebear of the Revolution the single figure most revered by blacks collectively was mulatto Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave. Attucks had not been a participant in the war. He was, however, one of the five who fell at the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, and hence became a martyr figure. Of the score or more of Revolutionary blacks whose exploits would be recited by succeeding generations of blacks, his was the foremost by far.

'Who was the first martyr in your revolutionary war?' asked Robert Purvis at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Purvis answered his own rhetorical question: 'Crispus Attucks a Negro. It was a black man's blood that was the first

⁷⁹ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, Oct. 20, 1842.

⁸⁰ Williams in Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing*, p. 297.

⁸¹ *Weekly Anglo-African*, July 23, 1859.

⁸² *Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 17, 1851.

to flow in behalf of American Independence.⁸³ In a petition seeking the ballot for blacks in Ohio, John Mercer Langston informed the state legislature that the first Revolutionary martyr, one who 'died on the plains of Boston,' was a Negro.⁸⁴ In somewhat sweeping terms Martin R. Delany described Attucks as 'the first who headed, the first who commanded, the first who charged, who struck the first blow, and the first whose blood was spilt on the altar of American Liberty.'⁸⁵

At a convention of New England blacks meeting at Boston's Tremont Temple, 'a stone's throw from the spot where fell the colored man, Crispus Attucks,' the delegates vowed to do their part 'in obtaining for ourself and our posterity the full measure of blessings and rights which his love of liberty and martyr death should long since have secured.'⁸⁶ In jail at Charlestown, Virginia, awaiting execution for complicity in the John Brown raid at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, John A. Copeland took comfort in Attucks. During America's fight for freedom 'the blood of black men flowed as freely as that of white men,' wrote young Copeland. 'Yes, the *very first* blood that was spilt was that of a Negro . . . the blood of that heroic man (though black he was), Cyrus Attuck [*sic*].' Copeland added that some of the last blood shed in the Revolution was also that of blacks, a fact that history, 'although prejudiced, is compelled to attest.'⁸⁷

The task of forcing history to do right by Revolutionary War blacks was undertaken by William C. Nell of Boston, a copyist and accountant with some experience in journalism. Nell's efforts to bridge the gap in historical knowledge had been spurred by an article written by the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, a friend and co-worker in the abolitionist crusade. 'Of the services and sufferings of the colored soldiers of the

⁸³ *The Liberator*, May 18, 1860.

⁸⁴ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 16, 1854.

⁸⁵ Delany, *The Condition . . . of the Colored People*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ *Weekly Anglo-African*, Aug. 6, 1859.

⁸⁷ Copeland to his brother, Dec. 10, 1859, in Robert S. Fletcher, 'John Brown and Oberlin,' *The Oberlin Alumni Magazine* (Feb. 1932), p. 137.

Revolution, no attempt has, to our knowledge, been made to preserve a record,' wrote Whittier in 1847. 'They have had no historian.'⁸⁸

Aspiring to fill this role, Nell in 1851 brought out a twenty-three-page pamphlet, *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812*. In subsequent reprintings Nell expanded this work, culminating in 1855 with a 396-page volume, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons: To Which Is Added a Brief Survey of the Condition and Prospects of Colored Americans*. This latter work was the high-water mark in antebellum black historical literature.

Although anecdotal in tone and thin and sketchy in content, Nell's data were generally reliable (although he did make the mistake, repeated later by others, of attributing a Negro identity to Deborah Gannett, who had served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War by passing herself off as a man). The bulk of Nell's information was documented, some of it derived from personal interviews and visits to cemeteries. At abolitionist meetings he placed on exhibit some of the objects and materials he had collected, including honorable discharge papers to black soldiers, and army flags and banners of companies in which blacks had served.

Although Nell was disappointed in the number of blacks who bought his book, he could find no fault with the expressions of praise by those who did. 'A copy ought to be in the hands of every colored man,' editorialized Frederick Douglass.⁸⁹ Meeting in Columbus in January 1853 the Ohio State Convention of Colored Freemen recommended the work to the people of the state, white and black.⁹⁰ Echoing cries of commendation came from Nell's white co-workers in the abolition-

⁸⁸ Whittier, 'The Black Men of the Revolution and the War of 1812,' *National Era* (Washington), July 22, 1847.

⁸⁹ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Dec. 3, 1852.

⁹⁰ *Aliened American* (Cleveland, Ohio), Apr. 5, 1853.

ist crusade. Wendell Phillips applauded the book, adding that as good as it was it had not told half the story.⁹¹ John Greenleaf Whittier, in a letter to Nell, said that *Colored Patriots* had strengthened his conviction that blacks would eventually obtain the honor they deserved 'in spite of all the falsehoods and omissions of historians writing with the fear of "Massa" before their eyes.'⁹²

Theodore Parker appraised *Colored Patriots* as 'quite a valuable book' in a letter to George Bancroft, the historian. Parker's lengthy letter touched upon several of the blacks who served in the Battle of Bunker Hill, informing Bancroft that his data came not only from Nell's book but also from a personal request for additional detail. Parker's letter ended with a request: 'When you publish your volume I wish you would send Nell a copy. Negroes get few honors.'⁹³

To Nell, too, went the credit for enhancing the fame of Crispus Attucks. Nell headed the committee of seven Boston blacks who in 1851 urged the Massachusetts legislature to appropriate \$1,500 for a monument in memory of Attucks. When the request was turned down, an embittered Nell pointed out that the same legislature had approved a similar request for a memorial to Isaac Davis. 'Both promoters of the American Revolution,' wrote Nell, 'but one was white, the other was *black*.'⁹⁴

The events of the crisis-laden 1850s enabled Nell to keep alive the memory of Attucks. In response to the Dred Scott decision of 1857, Nell initiated Crispus Attucks Day. Appropriately enough the first of these annual observances, held on March 5, 1858, was held in Faneuil Hall, the building from which Attucks had been buried. On display for the occasion

⁹¹ *The Liberator*, Mar. 12, 1858.

⁹² Whittier to Nell, Jan. 29, 1858, in *Liberator*, Mar. 12, 1858.

⁹³ Parker to Bancroft, Mar. 16, 1858, in John Weiss, ed., *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker* (2 vols. in 1, New York, 1869), 2:234. The forthcoming volume to which Parker referred was volume seven of Bancroft's *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*. Published in Boston in 1858, this volume did mention the presence of blacks at the Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775 (p. 421).

⁹⁴ Nell, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1855), p. 18.

were a number of Revolutionary War relics, including a small cup allegedly owned by Attucks and a picture of Washington crossing the Delaware in which black Prince Whipple was seen pulling the stroke oar.

With Nell in the chair, the speakers included such abolitionist stalwarts as Garrison, Phillips, Theodore Parker, Charles Lenox Remond, and John S. Rock. The audience was treated to original songs, one of them by Charlotte Forten and another by Frances Ellen Watkins, whose literary gifts were already in bloom. Numbered among the singing groups was the Attucks Glee Club, a youthful quintet.⁹⁵ In similar fashion Fifth of March commemorations would be held at the same site in 1859 and 1860, the latter taking due note of a martyr more recent, John Brown.

To antebellum blacks bent on rescuing their past the War of 1812 offered no single figure comparable to Attucks. This did not mean, however, that the black role in that war was unworthy of mention. Indeed, according to their chroniclers, the blacks had played a role, however passive, in causing the United States to declare war against England. The war, wrote Nell, 'was undertaken because of the impressment of three seamen, two of whom were colored.'⁹⁶

As reported by these latter-day remembrancers, blacks acquitted themselves well, whether on the home front or in battle. 'In the War of 1812 what class of inhabitants showed themselves more loyal and patriotic than the free people of color? None, sir,' lectured Robert Purvis at a Cooper Union gathering.⁹⁷ Not to be forgotten was the gallantry of the blacks in Capt. Oliver Hazard Perry's notable victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, a major naval engagement. 'The splendid naval achievements on Lakes Erie and Champlain were owing mostly to the skill and prowess of colored men,' ran an address issued

⁹⁵ *The Liberator*, Mar. 12, 1858.

⁹⁶ *Anglo-African Magazine* (New York) (Jan. 1859), p. 30.

⁹⁷ *The Liberator*, May 18, 1860.

by New York blacks. Perry's fame was gained at the expense of their 'mangled bodies and bleeding veins.'⁹⁸

Out of the War of 1812 came the two most widely quoted documents in antebellum black historiography—the proclamations issued by Gen. Andrew Jackson to the blacks in Louisiana prior to the Battle of New Orleans. On September 21, 1814, nearly four months before the battle, Jackson issued a proclamation addressed 'To the Free Colored Population of Louisiana,' although he had in mind two black regiments that had a long and distinguished military record, including service in the Revolutionary War. Calling them 'sons of freedom,' Jackson summoned them 'to rally round the standard of the Eagle, to defend all which is dear in existence.' Jackson assured them that in 'pursuing the path of glory' they would be acclaimed by their countrymen.⁹⁹

Nearly three months later, on December 18, following a review of the black troops, Jackson issued a second proclamation. He told them that although he had expected much of them they had exceeded his expectations. The President, James Madison, would be told of their praiseworthy conduct. Jackson's proclamation concluded with a word of assurance. Our brave citizens are united, it said; 'Their only dispute is, who shall win the prize of valor, or who the most glory, the noblest reward.'¹⁰⁰ On January 21, 1815, nearly two weeks after the crucial Battle of New Orleans, Jackson issued an order thanking and complimenting the two corps of colored volunteers for their courage and perseverance and praising their commanding officers. It was, however, the first two pre-battle pronouncements, with their more stirring and exhortatory phrases, that antebellum black spokesmen would keep in circulation.

Portions of Jackson's proclamations were often forthcoming

⁹⁸ 'Address of the Convention of the Citizens of Color at Albany, August, 1840, to the People of the State of New York,' in *The Emancipator*, Dec. 10, 1840.

⁹⁹ *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore), 7(Dec. 3, 1814):205.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 7(Jan. 28, 1815):346.

at national Negro conventions, whether in gracing a speech, adorning a resolution, or in lending weight to an address directed to fellow-blacks or to the public at large.¹⁰¹ A reference to the Jackson proclamations, or an excerpt from them, was part of the repertoire of black orators like Hosea Easton and William J. Watkins, part of the schooling of black journalists like Nell and Douglass, and part of the literary background of authors such as Samuel Ringgold Ward and Martin R. Delany. In his reference to the proclamations, which his book carried in full, Delany appended a note commonly struck by its other publicists. It was, he wrote, 'a moral homicide—an assassination' to deny equal rights to men, and to their descendants, who were capable of such deeds as were acknowledged in the edicts of General Jackson.¹⁰²

Not confining their attention exclusively to those who took part in America's wars, history-minded antebellum blacks added the names of some half-dozen individual rebels and radicals along with a like quota of achievers in the more peaceful arts. Among blacks the most revered name in the Valhalla of the rebels was that of Nat Turner, leader of the bloody slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. At the time of the Turner outbreak black spokesmen did not believe that revolutionary violence was a prerogative open to them. But with the mounting dissension between the North and the South in the 1840s and 1850s black leaders began to reassess the possibilities of militant direct action against slavery, and hence to look afresh at Nat Turner.

Foremost among the black leaders invoking the memory of Turner was the clergyman Henry Highland Garnet. At a political party convention in Boston in 1842 he referred to the

¹⁰¹ The national conventions of 1833 and 1853 carried both proclamations in full. *Minutes and Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Free People of Colour . . . 1833* (Philadelphia, 1833), pp. 21–23. *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention, Held in Rochester . . . 1853* (Rochester, 1853), pp. 15–16.

¹⁰² Delany, *The Condition . . . of the Colored People*, p. 78.

Southampton outbreak as an occasion 'when the colored man rose and asserted his rights to liberty and humanity.'¹⁰³ A year later, at the Negro national convention held in Buffalo, Garnet characterized 'the patriotic Nathaniel Turner' as one whom future generations would remember for his nobility and bravery. At the conclusion of this ninety-minute, 'Address to the Slaves of the United States,' the convention, according to the official report, 'was literally infused with tears.'¹⁰⁴ Turner loved liberty more than he feared death, explained William Wells Brown, and he knew that his cause was just. He did not wish to kill; he only sought freedom.¹⁰⁵

After the hanging of John Brown on December 2, 1859, blacks inevitably linked his name with that of Turner. At the Attucks Day observance in 1860 John S. Rock expressed the opinion that the only events in American history that should be commemorated were 'the organization of the Anti-Slavery Society and the insurrections of Nat Turner and John Brown.'¹⁰⁶ *The Anglo-African Magazine* for December 1859 carried a detailed comparison of the two insurrectionists, its analysis preceded by a reprint of 'The Confessions of Nat Turner,' an interview given by the jailed leader as he awaited his sentence. In black circles the remembering of Nat Turner was sometimes accompanied by a reference to Denmark Vesey who was hanged in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822 for conspiring to overthrow slavery by armed revolt.

Not likely to be forgotten were those who struck for freedom while on the high seas. These included Madison Washington who in 1841 led a revolt of 130 slaves aboard the *Creole*, en route from Richmond to New Orleans. The brig was steered to Nassau, where the British authorities let the slaves go free.

¹⁰³ *Emancipator and Free American* (Boston), Mar. 4, 1842.

¹⁰⁴ *Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens Held at Buffalo . . . 1843* (New York, 1843), p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ *The Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1848), p. 55.

¹⁰⁶ *The Liberator*, Mar. 5, 1860.

People in bondage should follow 'the glorious example of Madison Washington,' ran a resolution adopted on October 1, 1850, at a mass meeting of New York blacks ('with a slight and visible sprinkling of white abolitionists') protesting the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.¹⁰⁷ In a four-installment article in his weekly, Frederick Douglass ran an account of the exploit, entitling it 'The Heroic Slave.'¹⁰⁸

Washington's seizure of a slave ship was outmatched, in drama as in public attention, by the revolt of fifty-four Africans aboard the *Amistad* in 1839. Led by Joseph Cinque, son of an African king, the slaves took control of the vessel off the coast of Cuba and attempted to navigate it back to their African homelands. The *Amistad*, however, wound up in a Connecticut port, and for two years the case of the imprisoned Africans was before the courts. It aroused great interest in abolitionist circles, and particularly among blacks. *The Colored American* carried accounts of the court actions and the lot of the prisoners and urged its readers to make cash contributions to help them.¹⁰⁹ Blacks shared in the joy of Cinque and his followers when, in March 1841, the Supreme Court ordered that they be freed.

In their hall of fame some blacks would enshrine those militants and resisters whose brave actions had received little or no public attention. Nominees in this 'unsung hero' category came from Frederick Douglass and George T. Downing, a Newport, Rhode Island, caterer. Named by both was Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed one of her children and severely wounded two others to prevent them from being recaptured by the pursuing slave-catchers. Garner should 'be honored as a benefactress,' wrote Douglass.¹¹⁰ Echoing this

¹⁰⁷ *Anti-Slavery Standard*, Oct. 10, 1850.

¹⁰⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Mar. 4, 11, 18, 25, 1853.

¹⁰⁹ *The Colored American*, Nov. 28, 1840; Jan. 2, 1841.

¹¹⁰ *Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass; one on West India Emancipation . . . , and the Other on the Dred Scott Decision* (Rochester, 1857), p. 22.

judgment, Downing would also endow the historical record with an even more obscure figure—a nameless Tennessee slave who was put to death after 700 lashes and his refusal to give the names of his co-conspirators in a plot to escape.¹¹¹

Of a different stripe, but clearly falling within the domain of history-makers as interpreted by antebellum blacks, were those Afro-Americans who had been achievers in the more peaceful pursuits. Although not as highly revered as those whose fame had been won in the martial arts, they too were to be counted among the black vanguard. They included two eighteenth-century blacks of diverse talents, the poet Phillis Wheatley and the scientist Benjamin Banneker.

The second woman in British America to bring out a volume of poetry, Africa-born Phillis Wheatley won attention on both sides of the Atlantic in her day, her work, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, going into five editions before 1800. Antebellum blacks would see to it that her name would not be forgotten. Addressing the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, William Hamilton praised her for having 'some original ideas that would not disgrace the pen of the best of poets.'¹¹² Her poems could be found in black periodicals, three such products appearing in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* for August 31, 1855. William G. Allen published five of her poems in his booklet *Wheatley, Banneker, and Horton*.¹¹³ (George Moses Horton, like Wheatley at one time, was a slave poet.) Black publications also reproduced the letter sent to her by George Washington, dated February 28, 1776, speaking highly of her 'poetic talents,' and inviting her to visit him if ever she happened to be near his Cambridge headquarters.¹¹⁴ Upon reading Wheatley's volume of verse Charlotte Forten

¹¹¹ Downing to Nell, Mar. 3, 1860, in *The Liberator*, Mar. 16, 1860.

¹¹² Hamilton, *An Address to the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, Delivered in the Universalist Church, Jan. 2, 1809* (New York, 1809), in Foner, ed., *Voice of Black America*, p. 35.

¹¹³ *Wheatley, Banneker, and Horton* (Boston, 1849), pp. 21–27.

¹¹⁴ Delany, *The Condition . . . of the Colored People*, p. 71.

pronounced her a 'wonderfully gifted woman,' one whose character and genius afforded a telling refutation 'that hers is an inferior race.'¹¹⁵

Born in Maryland but not a slave, Benjamin Banneker was America's first black scientist of note. By 1791, when he sent a copy of one of his annual almanacs to Thomas Jefferson, he had a reputation as a mathematician and an astronomer. Seeking to keep his memory alive, antebellum blacks named literary societies after him, and black speakers recited his story in lectures on racial self-reliance and self-help.¹¹⁶ Banneker had an especial appeal for black orators and writers because, as William G. Allen expressed it, 'he excelled in the department of the intellect to which the colored man has usually been regarded as being illy adapted.'¹¹⁷

Antebellum blacks would occasionally refer to contemporary well-known Europeans whose ancestry was partly black. Of these the most often mentioned was Alexandre Dumas, père, novelist and playwright, his father a French general, his mother a Negro. It was with the latter in mind that H. Ford Douglass numbered Dumas in the company of those who under adverse circumstances had elevated themselves 'to the highest point of moral and intellectual greatness.'¹¹⁸ *The Anglo-African Magazine* was distressed with the editors of *Appleton's Encyclopedia* because they could 'not find room' for Dumas in their 1856 edition.¹¹⁹

In summary, the history propounded by antebellum blacks was open to question in its documentation and tone. Their concept of history strong on the theoretically inferable, these black

¹¹⁵ Forten's diary, July 28, 1854, in Billington, ed., *Journal of Charlotte Forten*, p. 55.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, William Still's glowing reference to Banneker in his lecture 'Self-Improvement,' delivered to the students of the Colored Evening School in Philadelphia on Mar. 2, 1860, in *Weekly Anglo-African*, Mar. 17, 1860.

¹¹⁷ *Wheatley, Banneker, and Horton*, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, Aug. 31, 1850.

¹¹⁹ *Anglo-African Magazine* (Jan. 1859), pp. 4-5.

chroniclers did not, in general, deem it necessary to furnish their sources. Such a cavalier attitude toward documentation inevitably led to some unsupportable claims. In addition these black writers and speakers reflected the spread-eagle period in which they lived, with bombastic language the vogue. Chroniclers of the black past shared in this widespread penchant for overstatement, especially since they viewed Afro-American history as a form of shock therapy for whites.

Whatever the shortcomings of writers of black history they did not include an ignorance of the unusually formidable problems involved in such an undertaking. 'He who understands well the history of the colored people, and writes it . . . will be greater than he who leads an army to victorious battle,' wrote William J. Wilson. 'We constitute such a medley of incongruities. Such juxtapositions; so paradoxical! Without continuity, yet a life of continuity.'¹²⁰ To study blacks properly, wrote James McCune Smith, required 'an acuteness of vision and a patience in inquiry,' along with 'a freedom from prejudice, without which all efforts were vain.'¹²¹

The pre-Civil War blacks produced no great historian, no outstanding single volume of history, no significant repository of records. Their communication with the past was imperfect, their soundings somewhat shallow. But if their grasp of history was fragmentary and partial, it was neither lacking in vision nor devoid of a core of essential truth. If faint at the time, black history's antebellum accents had a resonance that would not fade away.

Aware of their limitations, these early chroniclers of the Afro-American experience yet pointed the way for others. In the preface to his pioneer black history James W. C. Pennington caught something of this spirit of looking backward and forward simultaneously, a dual searching so characteristic of a minority group in the complementary quest of a more usable

¹²⁰ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Jan. 4, 1855.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1851.

past and a more promising future. 'The writer,' said Pennington in the opening pages of *A Text Book of the Origin and History of Colored People*, 'has attempted to do what he has so long desired to see performed by some abler pen; and so far as he has failed, he hopes yet to see the subject explored, and full justice done to it by someone more competent.'¹²²

¹²² Pennington, *Text Book*, p. 3.

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