Baltimore school principal tells how he looked back in history and found grandpa

Bertram Merritt, a Baltimore public school principal, tells in this unusual story how he miraculously found his family history and traced it back to his great - grandfather.

Here is a portion of his book "Gabriel Merritt, the Slave Who Ran Away."

By Bertram Merritt

Gabriel Newton Merritt was my paternal great-grandfather. Born a slave in New Hanover County, N.C. sometime during the 1840s, he was the first Merritt.

When the Civil War broke out in April, 1861, Gabriel was a teenager in Wilmington, N.C.

Various documents disagree as to his exact age, but he was somewhere between 15 and 18.

On Nov. 26, 1861 a United States Naval vessel, the U.S.S. Monticello, was blockading his home port on the Cape Fear River.

Somehow he ran away, got out into the water and entered the ship. On that day he joined the U.S. Navy and consequently served for three years. That act also led to my birth in Baltimore.

A lot of history happened before and after, but that is what this is all about, the story of how I came to find Gabriel Merritt the slave who ran away.

WHY LOOK?

Like other persons, I became involved in checking my roots a few years ago.

I haven't gone too far as such studies go, only to 1813, but the story of Gabriel Merritt is the most unusual one I have uncovered about my ancestors so far.

Equally unusual is the fact that no living member of my family knew the story of the slave who ran away.

Strangely enough it is also entirely possible that his own children, including my grandfather, may not have known about it.

It would seem that my great - grandfather would tell the story over and over again to his children, and they, in turn, would tell it to their children so that the story would have been passed down to me by word of mouth but this did not happen.

To understand why this tradition was not passed on you have to understand the psychology of the newly freed black men.

Unlike Alex Haley's family, most black families did not pass down the tradition of slave life from generation to generation.

When slaves left such times of degradation, they wanted to erase this period from their lives and leave all traces behind.

Even the beautiful Negro spiritual was abandoned after slavery.

Consequently, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers attempted to carry it on as a viable art form, many blacks objected, calling it the symbol of slavery they wished to forget.

It was this feeling about slavery and almost everything connected with it that prompted some not to pass on very much about their lives.

As a result, very few black families of today have much of a family tradition about their slave ancestors.

HOW IT STARTED

I really backed into my genealogical studies.

It all started with an assignment for the 25th reunion of my high school class, the Douglass High Class of '46.

Delving into the microfilm copies of the Baltimore AFRO - AMERICAN in the Pratt Library, I found considerable history on my alma mater.

There are copies of the AFRO dating back to 1893.

The historical information contained there and the idea of reading history as it happened became so interesting that I decided to read every copy of the AFRO - AMERICAN starting from 1893.

It is quite electrifying to be able to see such information about your family over 100 years ago.

The Historical Society librarian told me that every genealogist had to visit the Mecca of genealogical study – the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

On the first available Saturday I hurried over to Washington, D.C. and entered the building at 9th and Constitution, the National Archives.

LOST RELATIVES

I had several family branches to look up and soon I was discovering long lost ancestors that no living person even knew.

After a long wait the clerk brought out a large brown envelope several inches thick. Gabriel had been in the U.S. Navy – he had a military record and it was in my hands. I could not wait.

I opened the envelope. The first document was written by an Abigail Merrick living in North Carolina and dated 1904.

"Gabriel Merrick or Merritt was my brother. He was born in this county, New Hanover, N.C." Before the war he was a slave and owned by James Stokes Newton.

I had reached a slave owner. My hands trembled.

Timothy Dry was our father, but we did not take his name. Esther Merrick was our mother, and we took her name, except when Gabriel was in the Navy and for a short time after the war he went under the name of our owner.

Four slave ancestors, a slave owner and the explanation for the name Newton all in one paragraph.

I read on.

"Very soon after the war began Gabriel ran away and I never saw him again after that till the war was over. He was then going under the name of Gabriel Newton.

That was right here in this city but soon after that he changed his name back to Merrick or Merritt. He told me when I saw him that after he ran away he went and joined the U.S. Navy during the Civil War.

Why did Gabriel and Abigail receive the mother's name and not the father's?

Why did he change his

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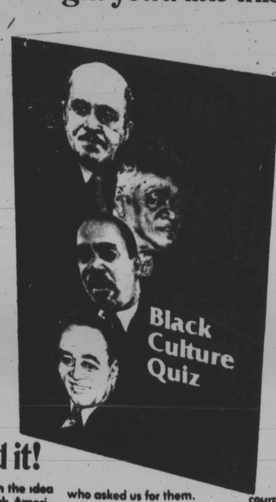
PHOTO BY MERRIT

THIS PHOTO STARTED IT ALL — Bertram Merritt, the author, found this picture of the Merritt family which was taken in 1884. From the 98 - year old picture came his interest in searching for his roots. L to R are Oliver Merritt, Della Merritt, Sarah Merritt, Mozella Merritt, Gabriel Merritt, Clarence Merritt and Eugene Merritt, the great grandfather of whom Bertram Merritt writes.

We thought you'd like this book.



You loved it!

Back in 1971, with the idea we might assist Black Americans to learn more about their heritage, we published this Black Culture Quiz booklet. It contains some 100 brief descriptions of achievements by and for Blacks in this country. It was developed for us by Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, now president of Bronx (N.Y.) Community College.

We printed a modest number of the booklets that year, and gave them away at conventions and to individuals who asked us for them.

We were surprised (and pleased) to find that we had a long-running hit on our hands. We've revised and updated it three times. More than 175,000 copies have gone to schools, colleges, church groups, businesses and individuals.* Perhaps this little booklet is our most visible involvement with the black community, but it is only one way we offer encouragement. We also support the United Negro College Fund, work closely with Opportunities Industrialization Centers (our chairman of the board, Frederick A. Collins, Jr., is a member of OIC's National Advisory Council and chairman of the New York Council). We support the black press through advertising and, of course, we are actively seeking minority employees — as we have been for many years.

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*If you'd like a complimentary copy of the booklet, write to:
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—Black Music

(Continued from Page 29)

European songs to entertain himself and others with some skill.

Newspapers of the time carried listings that refer to slaves for sale, hire or runaways who possessed the ability to perform well on various instruments. These ads indicated that the violin, fiddle, French horn, drum, life and flute were the most common instruments employed by the slaves. One such listing in The Virginia Gazette, May 14, 1772, ruefully states:

RUNAWAY . . . a Negro man named Derby, about 25 years of age, a slim black Fellow, and plays on the Fiddle with his Left Hand, which he took with him.

Much of the dance music was performed by black musicians, for dancing was the chief diversion for the aristocracy; however, here again, meager documentation does not present a definitive picture as to how a slave acquired the necessary skill to perform in a band.

To be sure, there are records that refer to this "slave fiddler," or that "Black musician," and an occasional diary will give a glimpse into how some were actually trained.

Army records indicated that there were more than a few Blacks who played the fife or drum and the distinction of being the earliest Black musician of record belongs to a slave named Nero Benson who served as a trumpeter with a Captain Isaac Clark of Framingham, Massachusetts in 1723; but only conjecture can lead one to conclude that they continued their musical career after the Revolutionary War was won.

In the southern colonies, it is evident that some household slaves learned through being present when itinerant musicians taught the children of the wealthy.

In more specific cases the more accomplished Virginia musicians may have gained virtuosity by attending classes with their young masters at the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Fiddlers such as Sy Gilliat, owned by the Royal Governor of Virginia, and John Stokes, who belonged to Charles Carrol of Annapolis, provided the call and music for reels, jigs and the like. Their abilities were such that they, and others, often provided additional income for their masters through being "hired out" for glittering affairs.

Some were fortunate enough to receive monies independent of the stipend paid to their owners. The more frugal saved until they could purchase their freedom.

Newport Gardner (1746 - c.1826) is one notable example. At the age of fourteen, he was sold to Caleb Gardner in Newport, Rhode Island. Early evidencing a propensity for music, he was allowed by Mrs. Gardner to study with a singing master after teaching himself to read.

His superior intelligence enabled him to quickly learn the rudiments of reading and writing music. He became a teacher of a fair-sized singing school at the city and was able to purchase his freedom in 1791. He then opened his own music school and composed many tunes. One of his anthems was performed in Boston in 1825.

During this century, one of the more unique forms of entertainment that the slaves performed for themselves (at first) was called the Jubilee. Generally, it was held on Sunday on the plantations, and it helped to relieve the tensions and tedious ignominy of the work week.

However, the high spirits, infectious humor and "primitive" steps afforded the master and his guests a different form of amusement. At this time, the slaves poked fun at their master's ways, attitudes and culture in an "innocent" manner that was reminiscent of the bards in that far-off home in Africa.

Apparently the meanings were obscure enough for the slaveholders not to recognize themselves. Here, improvisations and embellishments on standard themes was common: In addition, original songs were extemporaneously composed to fit an immediate situation.

"Call and response," a form which became common to gospel and spiritual music, with the soloist giving evidence to his or her importance, indicated the great complexity of African music, and the seemingly unlimited skills the artists possessed.

Typically, the whites would adapt this form into a caricature of the Jubilee, and take it on stage in the nineteenth century. Thus, the minstrel, with its cork-blackened faces, exaggerated dialects and insulting buffonery, was born.

THE FISK JUBILEE CHORUS toured America and Europe in 1870s, singing traditional spirituals and songs. Their performances helped introduce Black American music to the world. (The Bettman Archive)

Antebellum —1800-1865

After America fought for and won its freedom from Britain's tyrannical laws, it systematically set about to prostitute its Declaration of Independence, by proclaiming in Article 1, Section 2 (3) of the Constitution that three fifths of all other persons... shall be excluded from enjoying the emancipation so recently won.

No Person held to service or labor in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.

Thus even a free man was not safe; it was his word against a white man's that he was not to be returned to bondage. In the decade from 1790, when the first U.S. census was taken, to 1860, the last census before the Civil War, the Black population increased from some 750,000 to over 4 million.

Blacks constituted 19.3 of the total U.S. population in 1790, and 14.1 in 1860. Dramatic increases in white immigration served to lower the proportionate increase in the Black population.

In 1790 about 12 of all Blacks were free, but by 1860 the percentage dropped to about 8. Roughly half of free Blacks were found in the north. Those who were in the south most often were concentrated in the Urban centers of New Orleans, Charleston, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond and Petersburg.

Slaveholders were a small percentage of the white population, fewer than 25. Of this number most had less than twenty slaves.

Although a Congressional Act abolished the slave trade, on January 1, 1808 the invention, fifteen years earlier, of the cotton gin revitalized the need for slaves in a way that the founding fathers never visualized. Cotton was King, and the agrarian south became more determined to circumvent a useless law.

There was little to ameliorate the spirits of the slaves during these dolorous days. Each tedious day was replaced by another; it was inevitable that music would continue to be an important focus in their lives. Often, the insatiable need for beauty and order in a Sisyphean life could only be produced in song.

No where was this more evident than in the fields. Many of the work songs that the field hands sang or chanted were directly traceable to their former homes in Africa in their rhythms.

Because the rough workers sang songs that were not likely to interest "genteel" people, the intellectual snobbery of the aristocracy, as evidenced in the Jubilee, again prevented them from recognizing any irreverencies directed toward them from the fields. The only factor

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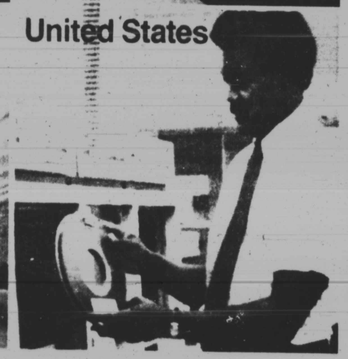

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