—Black Music

(Continued on Page 33)

toire included "Negro" songs of the era, he may well have played music that had been disseminated by a unique group of slave workers-entertainers: the Black watermen.

As noted earlier, worksongs were important to maintain a rhythm for the task being performed as well as to maintain spirits. Blacks were firemen and food handlers on the boats, and stevedores on land.

They moved along the Eastern seaboard and all of the major rivers: Mississippi, Ohio and Missouri. They moved as far west as Omaha, Nebraska, south to the Gulf Coast, and all along the East Coast. When their work day was over, the boatmen were often called upon to entertain the passengers with a show during dinner, and dance music afterwards.

Because these workers-slaves "enjoyed" the greatest mobility, it is entirely possible that they may be responsible for disparate segments of the Black population throughout the States having knowledge of the same songs. The handicap of slavery, then, truly produced a universal language in song.

Thomas Greene Bethune (1849-1908), known as "Blind Tom" suffered a double handicap, for he was born sightless to a slave named Charity Wiggins in Columbus, Georgia. When his mother was sold to a Colonel Bethune, Tom was "thrown-in" the purchase.

Before long, it was discovered that he could duplicate on the piano any music to which he had listened. As is common in individuals who must compensate for a missing sense, he early developed his very sensitive ear and memory for music performed in his presence. The discovery of this "gift" by Bethune was capitalized on by the owner and his family.

Tom's career began when he was but eight years old and presented in a recital in Savannah by his master. In the first year of the Civil War, he was required to perform in several concerts for the aid of veterans of the Confederate Army.

He performed at the White House; throughout the United States and in the European capitals.

His extensive repertoire included selections from the music of the masters: Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Rossini; from Heller, Liszt, Gottschalk, Hoggman, Thalbert; operatic arias from Verdi, Bellini, Gounod-popular ballads of the day; in short, anything that has been written and he had heard, he duplicated precisely. It was written by Trotter that he could duplicate over seven THOUSAND musical compositions.

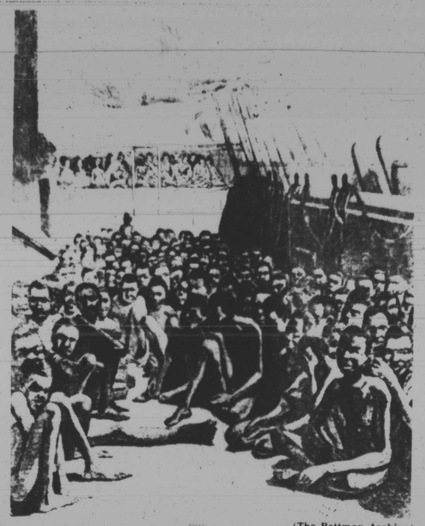
At times, his recitals assumed a somewhat carnival air. Three pianos would be placed on stage. While two pianists were "banging away" discordantly, at the third piano, twenty notes were sometimes struck in rapid isolation. Tom correctly produced the notes precisely as they had been delivered.

Another example of his showmanship was indicated when he proceeded to play Yankee Doodle in B flat with his right hand, Fisher's Hornpipe in C with his left, sang Tramp, Tramp, Tramp in another key; all in their respective tempo and without effort.

His owners also invited members of the audience to submit requests for him to play, which he did with ease. To increase his repertory, professionals were hired to play for him.

After the death of Colonel Bethune in 1883, his son took over Tom's management. Upon his death, his widow and new husband, Albert Lerche

Continued on Page 35)



SLAVE DECK of the barque "Wildfire," captured by the U.S. steamer "Mohawk," is from a woodcut that appeared in an American newspaper circa 1860. A steady flow of forced immigrants helped reinforce and keep alive an African tradition in American music. (The Bettman Archive)

In 1909, Black explorer Matthew Henson placed the U.S. flag at the North Pole.

—Baltimore school principal

(Continued from Page 30)

name to Merritt and not Merrick?

It suddenly dawned on me that Gabriel was the first Merritt in our family - he had taken on that name of his own accord.

How could a slave run away and join the Northern Navy in a Southern state?

Did he escape to the North through the Underground Railway? What happened?

I read on.

THE PICTURE

"The picture you show me is that of my brother Gabriel - his wife Sarah and their children."

Abigail and the government official had the same picture in 1904 that I now had in my possession.

That explained the government claim number on the back. It had been used in the military claim proceeding in 1904.)

"My brother told me that he joined the Navy somewhere near Fort Fisher, but just where he received his discharge I do not know."

GREAT GRAND-MOTHER

If that document could tell me so much, what extra morsels would the others bring forth? I eagerly pulled out the next. Lo and behold it was made by Sarah Merritt.

I reverently held the paper as my great - grandmother spoke to me. "I am about 65 years of age, a housekeeper and my address is 524 West Hoffman Street.

"I am claiming pension as the widow of Gabriel Newton who served in the U.S. Navy, was pensioned and died in this city June 14,,1903.

"I was freeborn and have lived in Baltimore all my life. I knew my husband between 3 and 4 years before we got married. He was then a sailor and had to sail to South America and foreign ports. **(Gabriel had become a merchant seaman after the war.**

"A merchant seaman makes good money and even a black merchant seaman could afford to dress his family in sartorial splendor and purchase a $2 family portrait to proclaim his status).

"Upon my first acquaintance with him I knew him by the name of Gabriel Newton and he was generally known by that name, but when we were going to be married we were talking things over and he told me that his right name was Merritt and I insisted upon his being married under his right name.

"After that he was known as Merritt and that is the name I have always passed under.

"We were married by the Rev. D. W. Moore, Minister of the A.M.E. Church on the 5th day of May, 1870 at the parsonage on Centre Street."

THE WEDDING

Another document in the envelope held the marriage certificate signed by Rev. D. W. Moore of the A.M.E. Church (now Bethel A.M.E.) attested to the fact that "Gabriel Merriott (misspelled) and Sarah E. Smith were by me joined on the 5th day of May in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and 70."

I was holding in my hand the document that began the present line of Merritts. If it hadn't been for great - grandma I would have been a Newton. Bethel A.M.E. Church was then located in the center of a black community in what is now downtown Baltimore. Douglass High School then Colored High School, was located a short distance away on Saratoga near St. Paul.

(More at a later date)

—Black Music

(Continued from Page 34)

became Tom's agent. His last performance was in 1904. At the time of Tom's death in 1908, he had made several fortunes for the Bethune family.

As noted, there was a continuing increase in the numbers of free blacks between 1790 and 1860, with roughly 50 or about 244,053 residing in the North.

Freedom guaranteed little for the Black musicians for competition was keen between blacks and whites, and the latter had established themselves as professional musicians in theaters, ensembles, and the like.

However, after the War of 1812, the formation of black brass bands in major cities by returning veterans created an area which they could basically monopolize.

Frank Johnson (1792-1846) of Philadelphia was a fiddler, horn player, bugler, bandmaster, and orchestra leader and composer who began his career with the organization of the Third Company of Washington Guards (Philadelphia).

MOST BLACK ALL-STARS AREN'T IN THE RECORD BOOKS.

Long before black Americans made headlines on the playing field, they were making history. Lots of it. In fields like medicine, exploration, industry, and on the field of battle.

The names of these early "all-stars" probably aren't on the tip of your tongue. That's because they aren't in most history books either.

A black man was the first to reach the North Pole. Matthew Henson, a member of Commodore Perry's expedition, raised the flag there in 1909.

Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, a black surgeon, performed the world's first successful heart operation almost one hundred years ago.

In 1761, Benjamin Banneker designed and built the first striking clock. It was also the first clock made entirely in America.

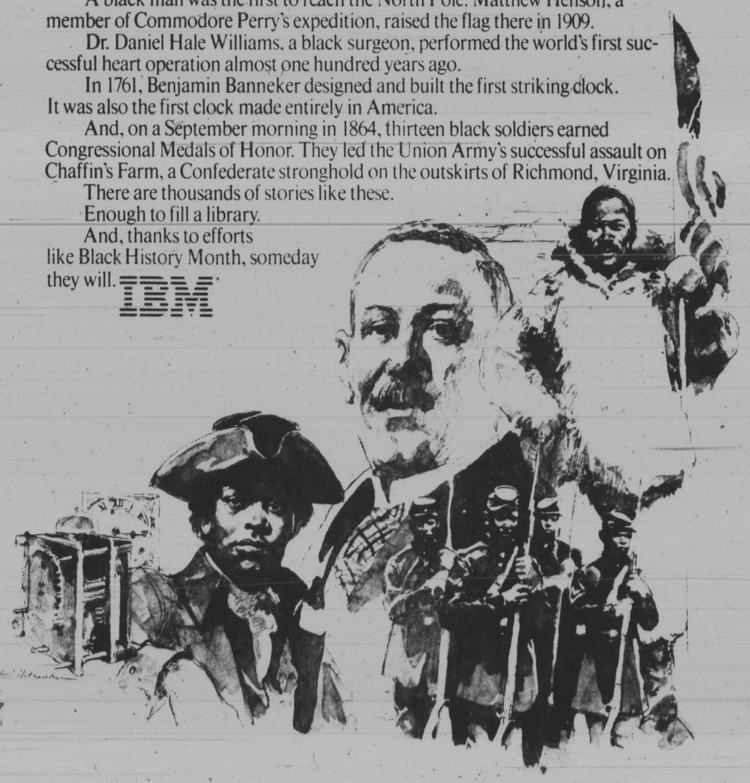
And, on a September morning in 1864, thirteen black soldiers earned Congressional Medals of Honor. They led the Union Army's successful assault on Chaffin's Farm, a Confederate stronghold on the outskirts of Richmond, Virginia.

There are thousands of stories like these.

Enough to fill a library.

And, thanks to efforts like Black History Month, someday they will.

IBM



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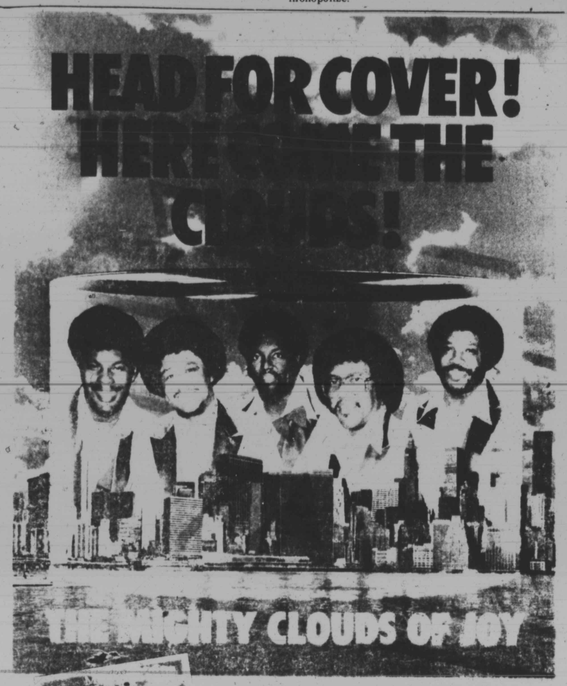

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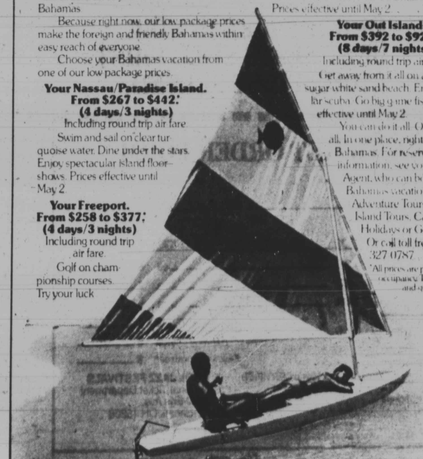

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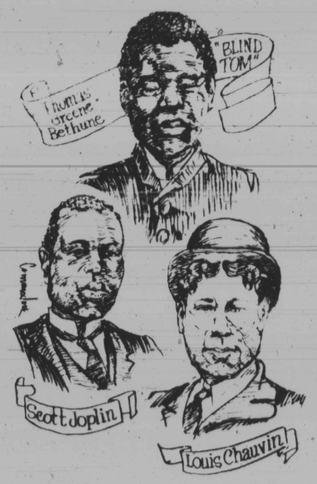

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