Black Sailors in Civil War (1861-1865)

By Carl Murphy

In the 17th Century black people, free and slaves were widely employed on privateers, trading vessels and fishing boats.

Some of the most distinguished black figures in history during the following two centuries earned their livelihoods at some point in their careers by a maritime occupation.

Black people were not uncommon in Continental and State navies during the Revolution and they played a conspicious part in the naval fighting of the War of 1812.

Almost 30,000 black seamen served U.S. ships in the Civil War. This fact was reported in the AFRO Magazine October 31, 1959.

The article was inspired by the AFRO's concern that black children in integrated schools were not being taught self-confidence and race - pride by the omission of blacks from history books.

Naval War Records

The task of approximating the number of blacks serving in the United States Navy during the Civil War was once tackled by the Superintendent of Naval War Records.

This event occurred because a Congressman from Maine, Charles Edgar Littefield, was moved for what precise reason is not known to write on March 24, 1902, the following note to John D. Long, Secretary of the Navy.

"I respectfully request that you furnish me with the number of colored men who enlisted in the Navy in the War of Rebellion, 1861-1865 and oblige."

On April 2, 1902, the secretary replied. He informed Mr. Littefield that his request has been referred to the Bureau of Navigation which reported no information on the subject, but the Superintendent of the Naval War Records Office sent the following request and informative response:

One-Fourth Black

"There are no specific figures found in this office relating to the number of colored men enlisted in the United States Navy 1861-1865. The total number of enlistments in the Navy from March 4, 1861 to May 1, 1865 was 118,044.

"During the War of 1812 and up to 1860, the proportion of colored men in the ships' crew varied from one-fourth to one-sixth and one-eighth of the total crew.

"During the Civil War the colored man was enlisted in the squadrons for one year. The regular enlistments at Navy Yards were for three years.

"In the absence of specific data it is suggested that as several vessels report during the Civil War having a crew of one-fourth colored men that the actual number of enlistments must have been about one-fourth of the total number given above, or 29,511.

A Check

As a rough check on the estimate just quoted, the muster rolls of three arbitrarily selected Civil War vessels were examined. These were the ship, New Hampshire for June 7, 1864; the steamer Argosy for December 31, 1863 and the rm Avenger for October 1, 1864.

Total - Crew - Colored
New Hampshire 969 - 242
Argosy 66 - 35
Avenger 115 - 15
Total 1150 - 296

Percentage Colored 26 per cent.

Medal of Honor Winners

Aaron Anderson, landsman of the Wyandank, was recommended for and awarded a Medal of Honor for bravery while serving with an expedition on Mattox Creek, Va., March 16-18, 1865.

A launch under Acting Ensign Summers whose "crew were all black but two" was dispatched with orders to clear the creek which (was done) most thoroughly; destroyed three schooners under a fire of musketry from 300 or 400 rebels, which fire in a few moments cut away half of his oars, piercing the launch in many places..."

Robert Blake

A second sailor to win the medal was Robert Blake, listed only as "contraband," a meber of the crew of Marbelhead.

In the bitter engagement with Conferate batteries on Stono River, S.C., Christmas Day 1863, Blake, "serving as a powder boy, displayed extraordinary courage, alacrity and intelligence in the discharge of his duty under trying circumstances and merited the admiration of all."

John Lawson

Landsman John Lawson, aboard the flagshop Hartford, in the battle of Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864, earned a Medal of Honor. To quote from the rcommendation and citation:

(He) was one of the six men stationed at the shell-whip on the berth deck. A shell killed or wounded the entire number. Lawson was wounded in the leg and thrown with great violence against the side of the ship; but soon as he recovered himself, although begged to go below, he refused and went back to the shell-whip, where he remained during the action.

Joachim Pease

A seaman aboard the Kearsage, Joachim Pease, earned his Medal of Honor on June 19, 1864 in the historic encounter that resulted in the destruction of the Confederate raider, Alabama of Cherbourg, France.

Captain Winslow of the Kearsage, in submitting Pease's name to the Secretary of the Navy for special attention, declared that he had exhibited marked coolness and good conduct."

His immediate superior officer, Acting Master Summer, reported to the ship's Executive Officer, the day following the battle, that:

"... no one could be distinguished from another in courage or fortitude. Among those showing still higher qualifications (was) Joachim Pease (seaman) loader of same (no. 1) gun.

"The conduct of the latter in battle fully sustained his reputation as one of the best men in the ship."

(Photo by Ida Peters)

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the new Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall shows from (L) Meyerhoff, Comptroller Louis Goldstein and former conductor, Sergiu Comissiona.

If You Ask Me

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Joe Meyerhoff

"Joseph Meyerhoff singularly built Provident Hospital. He supervised every brick that was laid. He was present at the site every day, rain or shine. On Saturdays, he and I flew to Detroit to consult with the engineer and personally made changes required during construction.

"The community owes him a debt of gratitude because there would not have been a Provident Hospital without Joe Meyerhoff.....he assisted in fund-raising and was chairman of the building committee.."

The words are those of George L. Russell Jr., attorney and former chairman of the board of trustees of Provident Hospital. He was referring to the contributions of Joseph Meyerhoff, the multi - millionaire builder and philanthropist, dead this week at the age of 65.

Mrs. Victorine Q. Adams, another former Provident Hospital board member, describes Joseph Meyerhoff as "a wonderful person."

She remembers, "he sat in with the architects and helped correct things—he knew of mistakes that had been made at Sinai which he helped build. We thought it fine that he would take the time..."

Tildon says:—

Charles G. Tildon, president of Community College of Baltimore, and former Provident Hospital development director, reminisces:—

"When the bid for Provident Hospital came in $3 million over our budget, it was necessary to revise the design. Along with George Russell, Henry White and myself, Joe Meyerhoff travelled every Saturday for several months to Detroit to meet with the architect and Hilyard Robinson. When the hospital went out for bids the second time, we were able to begin construction because of Joe Meyerhoff's expertise.

"Further, he was the overseer of the construction and met weekly at 7:30 in the mornings during the early days, and monthly thereafter, until construction was complete to his satisfaction.

"The outstanding physical facility that is now Provident Hospital, (at Liberty Heights and Towanda), exists because of his contribution. In addition, he made significant personal financial contributions and was able to get others to do the same (Provident Hospital, a $16 million facility, opened in December 1970).

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Dr. Benjamin Mays
President Emeritus
Morehouse College

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Learn black history by making it a family project

By R.B. Jones

One of the main objectives that many people have to the study of history is that the subject is a dull, dry recitation of names, dates, and places that have no relevance to modern times.

Often black history is taught as a series of biographical sketches of heroic figures taken out of context and lifted from the flow of human struggles.

History, especially black history, is a chronicle of the efforts of black people to assert their humanity despite numerous setbacks and adverse situations. It is a story of of success in the midst of severe opposition.

As Black History Month is at hand, many families will commemorate the celebration by attending lectures, exhibitions and artistic performances. Some families will read various books that elaborate on the subject.

One way that history can be made more palatable, especially for children and young adults, is to personalize it.

Living history is the best source of information. One way to learn is to listen to older members of the family when they talk about their life experiences. Grandparents and aunts and uncles can often give young people an authentic sense of times past.

If the older people have pictures, artworks or clothes from earlier permits they can be used to illustrate a point about life in other eras. Comparing a picture of a relative with one from a history book that discusses a previous period of history can give a young person some idea of the social strata and occupation or recreational tastes of an ancestor.

A family heirloom such as a quilt, a piece of jewelry or even a recipe can be used to teach a young person about black history. Sitting down and tracing the family tree is another way to give a youth a sense of continuity with the past and some sense of the importance of everyday objects and ordinary people's lives.

A tour of a particular area relevant to black history such as churches built by black people or colleges or designated historical areas can give young people a sense of the amount of effort that has gone into the building of black institutions. It can also give them a sense of the need to preserve black institutions in both a physical and philosophical sense.

There are a number of games on the market with a black history theme that can be both fun and a learning experience. Playing these games provide both knowledge with competition and a family activity.

There are many ways to learn black history aside from reading a textbook. History does not have to be deadly dull as so many people perceive it. It can be learned in as many ways as one imagine through all the senses. This February try some of the alternatives suggested above.

ASALH launches $1M fundraiser 'to sustain black history'

By Carolyn Dennis

A million dollar fundraising drive to help place the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History on "firm financial" footing was announced by executive director Bonnie J. Gillespie at a Black History Month-off banquet recently.

Maryland Congressman Parren Mitchell and syndicated columnist Carl T. Rowan were the keynote speakers at the function held at the Washington Plaza Hotel.

The Reagan Administration's treatment of black people in the U.S. and South Africa, the need to support black organizations, and the "spiritual strength" of the black community were themes addressed by the speakers.

Gillespie said that the organization, which has national and international membership, will begin soliciting "yearly for donations to be placed in an endowment fund for the association." The goal of $1 million dollars will be set for each year.

The organization founded by the late historian and educator Carter Godwin Woodson in 1915, receives a significant amount of money from the publication of the "Journal of Negro History" and the "Negro History Bulletin". Currently, both publications are at least a year behind schedule.

According to Gillespie, however, the establishment of an endowment would greatly help to lessen the association's financial problems. Noted Gillespie, "When our cash flow is low, interest payments from the endowment could be used to tide us over."

Gillespie said that if all go well with the association's fun draising activities, the organization hopes to have raised, by 1986 "700,000" for the endowment fund.

On the same note, Congressman Mitchell told the audience, "surely we can find a million dollars to sustain our history...our spirit."

After completing a trip to Libreville, Gabon, sponsored by the African American Institute which focused on South Africa and apartheid, Mitchell drew a parallel between the treatment of black people in the United States and South Africa.

The establishment of bantustans homelands in South Africa and urban areas controlled by black people in the U.S. is often done without providing citizens with the adequates resources for "growth and development," said Mitchell.

—Early city blacks

Continued from Page 7

It would be irresponsible to say no bondmen dared clamor for political rights, even as the colonists proclaimed the nobility of their right to be done with the tyranny of their British overlords. Legally, though, slaves were not recognized as citizens; could be ignored, controlled, sometimes watched, often utilized, and disregarded politically ... unless their numbers tended to increase white legislative representation. In short, for those blacks, who, through circumstance or another, had managed to obtain their freedom-and hold on to it - their role in the colonies, even under the "best" conditions was nebulous.

Though Baltimore was an important center for the slave trade, a sizable free black community existed before the civil insurrection.

"Wherever free blacks found themselves, during the antebellum era, they lived somewhat precariously upon the goodwill of whites. Their legal status had been fairly high during the colonial period and was strengthened somewhat during the revolutionary period. After that time, however, their status deteriorated, until toward the end of the slavery period, the distinction between slaves and free blacks had diminished to a point that in some instances was hardly discernible," concluded John Hope Franklin in "From Slavery to Freedom."

It is difficult to cite when the first black person actually set foot in Baltimore Town.

To proclaim, however, that upon founding of the original Baltimore Town, followed by the Jones Town 1745 merger, and the later expansion to a roomier Baltimore Town, that no blacks, chattel or free, were on the scene would be reckless.

Given the intinerant migratory patterns of the first Maryland white settlers, from 1634 to 1729, when the mulatto, Mathias de Sousa, arrived with them at St. Mary's City, it must be determined that blacks emigrated here, bonded or free, silhouetted in the background in supportive roles.

Supporting this determination with the unearthed remnants of times past whets the appetite of the scholar and provides the foundation for his future excavations.

The tapestry of all peoples' past - black as well as white - in America and Baltimore must be woven from artifacts and observations - observations from the past in contemporary eyes.

No one observer or scholar will put together all the pieces; jointly we may find the truth. What follows here is offered as observations and recollections with the hope they will prove revealing.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The above article is from the Prologue to Mr. Evans's book, CITY LIFE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM BALTIMORE, 1968-1978. Copies are available at Pratt Library or by writing for further information to P.O. Box 502, Columbia, Maryland 21045.

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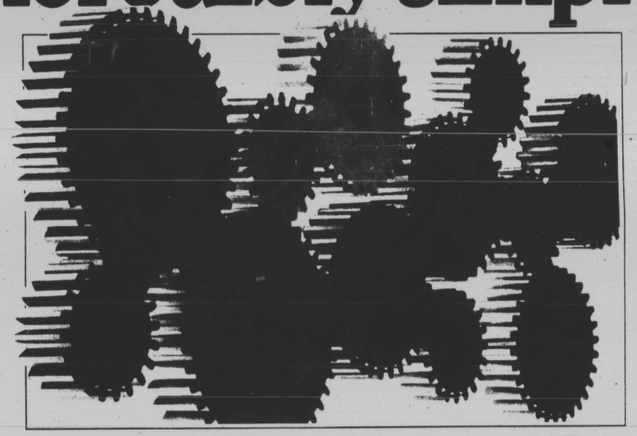

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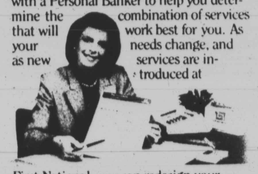

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