# Early black leaders in Maryland's history

By Alicia Benjamin

The story of black people in Maryland and the country is intriguing, and Baltimore educator Dr. Samuel Banks knows the story well.

When the first 20 Africans were brought to the shores of the American colonies in 1619, they were not slaves, they were indentured servants, Banks, Director of Social Studies for the Baltimore City School System said.

By 1661, Virginia institutionalized slavery in the Western Hemisphere, and three years later, Maryland followed.

"Slavery was as cruel and brutal there as it was in the deep south," Banks stated. Maryland was "up south" on the border of the South and the Union but favored southern attitudes, he said.

The state was the entry point for Union soldiers to gain access to the south.

"When the Northern troops came through, they were usually hissed at," said Banks.

Maryland had the largest number of free blacks than any other state before the Civil War. Blacks who owned property and who were literate existed in large numbers in the state," he continued.

But education was not institutionalized, so there was also a large number of illiterate blacks in the state.

Many blacks in Maryland were able to read and write because many were set free by their masters and many were taught by their masters' mistresses, to the chagrin of many whites.

Frederick Douglass, a Marylander, was taught by the wife of his master against the wishes of her husband, said Banks.

Whites in the nation believed that if blacks were taught to read and write, they would no longer conform to the wishes of their white owners, he asserted.

Another native of Maryland,

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(upper left) March from Selma, 1965 • (lower left) West Virginia, Early 50's • (right) Coretta King and daughter Bernice, 1968

## He sees the things we wish we'd seen.

You are looking at images of an era, photographs taken over 30 turbulent years of challenge and change. They are part of an extraordinary exhibition titled "Moneta Sleet, Jr.: Pulitzer-Prize Photojournalist" at the Martin Luther King Memorial Library of the District of Columbia Public Library from January 28 through February 29, 1988.

Since 1955, Sleet has been a working photographer for Ebony and Jet magazines, with an insider's ticket to great events and a magician's trick of snatching the timeless moment from the stream of time. It was he who isolated and rescued, from the devastating tragedy of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., an unforgettable image of enduring serenity and, from the terrors of the March from Selma, the forever blithe spirit of the woman marcher, clapping hands to the sound of singing in the rain. Wherever he goes, he sees things we would like to have seen, and now we can.

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# —Leaders

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Harriet Tubman, was born a slave and was illiterate but knew about freedom. She led 300 blacks to freedom and also served in the Civil War as a spy for the North.

"She was valuable because she knew the territory," he said.

Benjamin Banneker from Ellicott City was also a contributor to blacks and the country.

"He was an unusual man and a genius," Banks remarked.

Banneker invented the grandfather clock and also mapped out the plans for the city of Washington, D.C. He came to create the plans for the city when he was chosen by Pierre L'Enfant, a famous surveyor from Paris, to work on the Commission to serve DC. Banks said L'Enfant knew of Banneker through his studies in astronomy.

When L'Enfant returned to Paris after he came into conflict with Congress over the plans for the city, Banneker completed the designs for the nation's capital in the late 1700's.

Other black leaders came from the black churches, Banks said.

The story of the black church goes back to slavery, he added. On large plantations, the masters expected their slaves to sit in church every Sunday to hear "the word," he continued.

The primary attraction for blacks to the church was the Savior, he said. They hoped the Savior would deliver them from the brutality of slavery.

Blacks also were attracted to the church because they favored the idea of another world, where life would be better for them, he said.

But a problem arose from blacks attending church. If they were going to attend church, they had to know something about the word. And to know something about the Bible, they had to learn to read.

Whites thought if blacks were taught to read and write it would plant the seeds for rebellion, Banks said.

Blacks who started studying the Bible, started to preach themselves; whites became concerned that they would try to persuade other slaves to rebel. To ensure blacks would try to persuade other slaves to rebel. To ensure blacks would not rebel, whites created laws to control blacks.

An example of a controlling law is any law which required a white person to be present when blacks met at churches.

Many black preachers such as Frederick Douglass used thetoric to condemn whites and slavery, Banks explained.

Decades after slavery Marylanders have been restricted from enjoying equal opportunity, he said.

"Blacks here are in the majority but are still treated like the minority in this city."

It is astounding that the first black to be elected to Congress was not until the early 1970s with Parren Mitchell, Banks said.

The major boards and commissions are also controlled by whites, he pointed out. Meldon Hollis was just recently appointed as president of the School Commission, he continued.

"Blacks have almost been an invisible force in Baltimore in terms of power," he said.

But after all the adversity blacks in the nation and Maryland have suffered, Banks said, he still has hopes the future for blacks will be prosperious.

"I believe we are going to make it as a people because we are a highly resilient people and a strong people."

"Very few people in the world could have survived the most cruel system of slavery the world has ever known and still maintained a collective spirit and hope."

Photo courtesy of Enoch Pratt Free Library

GIFT TIME — This 1855 drawing illustrates the old custom of slaves receiving gifts from slavemasters.

Clarence Mitchell, Jr.

JAUNITA JACKSON MITCHELL and family

## —Modern political

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movement.

Joseph E. Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership contends . . . "We are still engaged in the struggle to replace violence and poverty with a system that will assure the dignity of every person.

"Much of our struggle, in our communities across the nation, is unhearlded by the media; struggles against racism expressed in ... unjust wages, high employemtn, inadequate housing and medical care, lack of economic opportunities and oppression in the criminal justice system."

Let us not forget from whence we came.

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