

Prometheus Circle Report On "Great Negroes"

FEBRUARY 13 THROUGH 19, 1966, has been set aside for the explicit purpose of paying tribute to the many Negro men and women who contributed to making the U.S.A. the great country it is today.

This article is designed to serve as an introduction to some of the accomplishments of the American Negro. It is not a comprehensive survey, for such a work would run into many pages and volumes of writing. Nor is it an apology, for the Negro needs none. Leonetta Price is a great singer. George Washington Carver was a scientist of the first rank. Both would have been important figures in American life whatever their skin pigmentation might have been. There is no correlation between race and ability. But just as Russian literature or music differs from French or American, so there is a difference in kind, though not in quality, between the cultural expressions of one race or people and another.

THE AMERICAN NEGRO, with African ancestry and his history of oppression, endurance, and accomplishment, has produced significant differences in temperament, artistic expression, and culture. These differences are valuable ingredients in our national life, for they contribute to it a pleasing variety. But they are an integral part of America, which would be a different and a poorer place without the spiritual, for instance, or Brer Rabbit, or Jazz.

The Emancipation Proclamation set down by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 included these two paragraphs:

"And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are and hence forward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

"And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages."

THIS WAS THE CHANCE for the American Negro to make himself known. Born out of slavery, he was determined to better himself, regardless of the struggle he may have, due to his race.

Negroes, past and present, have contributed, in a variety of occupations, trades and professions, to America's growth. Who were these outstanding people and what did they do?

In the field of literature, three, among many greats, are Langston Hughes, Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-) is a noted poet of today who wrote his first book of poems in 1926. He has published some seven volumes of verses, two collections of short stories, an autobiography, a book for children and several plays. Most of his books contain poems in Negro dialect depicting the struggle and joys of the Negro.

A slave girl who was sold on the docks of Boston became well-known for her poetry. At the age of 17, PHILLIS WHEATLEY had her poetry published. George Washington was so impressed with her poetry that he wrote a letter of commendation for her verses. She was the first Negro woman, and the second American woman to write a book.

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, called the "People's Poet", has won national acclaim for his poetry and short stories. His poems are written in conventional English and Negro dialect. Dunbar was 16 when his earliest poems appeared in the Dayton HERALD and 21 when his first book, OAK and IVY, was published. Dunbar traveled throughout the United States and London to recite his poems.

Of many noted educators, we offer, as examples, the names of Mary McLeod Bethune and A. G. Gaston.

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE was the founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Fla. Mrs. Bethune was one of the most powerful and influential persons in Negro life in America. She was founder of the National Council of Negro Women, a divisional director for the NYA and an advisor to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman.

A. G. GASTON (1892-) is now a millionaire

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who founded the Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association and the Booker T. Washington Business College in Birmingham, Ala.

There were also Negroes in science. One such man was CHARLES DREW (1904-1950) who is known for his research of blood plasma. He won the Spingarn Medal for his contribution to human welfare. Also he was an authority on the subject of blood plasma and was asked by the British to set up a plasma program. He set up blood banks to find ways of preserving blood plasma.

DANIEL HALE WILLIAMS (1856-1931) was the first surgeon to operate successfully on a human heart. In 1894, he was called to Washington, D.C. to become the head of the Freedman's Hospital. There he began the first nursing school for Negroes.

ERNEST E. JUST (1883-1941) was a biologist who was not only known for his speeches about the conditions of the Negro in the United States, but also for his work as a pure scientist. He made investigations into the mysteries of egg fertilization and the study of the cell. He was called the "scientist's scientist."

We all know GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER (1864-1943) was both a scientist and teacher who developed many products from the peanut, sweet potatoes, and soy bean. From the peanut he produced meal, instant and dry coffee, bleach, tan remover, wood filler, metal polish, paper, ink, shaving cream, rubbing oil, linoleum, synthetic rubber, and plastic. From the soybean he produced flour, breakfast food and milk. He also found over 500 different shades of dye from peanut oil.

Today there are many women in our government and in Congress. One such woman is CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY (1922-) who is the only woman of a State Legislature Upper House. As co-director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, she helped James Meredith into the University of Mississippi, the first Negro to enter that university. She is presently the president of Manhattan Borough in New York City, and was the senator of New York, the second Negro woman in the country to be elected as State Senator.

President Johnson's recent appointment of Constance Motley to the New York Supreme Court makes her the first Negro Judge of a State Supreme Court.


THURGOOD MARSHALL (1908-) was Chief Legal Counsel of the NAACP, Federal Judge of New York, and now a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. He once said, "My commitments have always been to justice for all people regardless of race, creed or color."


In the field of business, the first Negro woman to earn as much as a million dollars was MADAME C. J. WALKER who manufactured cosmetics and developed the "Walker System" of treating hair.

A well-known man in business was C. C. SPAULDING (1874-1952) founder of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company.

These are only a few of the Negro men and women who have made history. It is the hope of the members of Prometheus Circle that our findings on the American Negro will be used in the VOICE again, permitting us to present more famous Negroes, past and present.

Editor's Note: We would be delighted-- And may we take this opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate the Prometheus Circle, and its President, Otis Harris, for the splendid effort in coordinating community activities pertinent to Negro History Week.

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