

Hidden History

The Unsung Saga of the Black Man

as told by



John P. & C. Buck West

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Three Negroes and Success

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(Submitted as entry in the VOICE-sponsored Negro History Essay Contest.)

One hundred-two years ago April, Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered to General Grant. The ending of the Civil War still strikes deeply into the consciousness of Americans. "The country that has a 'history' dramatic, moving, tragic, has to live with it," wrote D. W. Brogan, "...with the problems it created not solved, with the emotions that it leaves as a damaging legacy, and the expensive past it fosters."

OUT OF this South came two men to greet the world, each in their separate ways. A third man from Africa helped start the Civil War.

These three men all were great. Philip A. Payton was great in the most common way. Nat Turner was great in the way he led his army, even though he led it to destruction. Cinque was great in leadership and because he obtained freedom for his followers. They are all examples of what men can do even though they have the disadvantage of their color. It is of these men that I speak in the following essays.

* * * * *

ONE OF THE most interesting and in some respects the most remarkable business enterprises undertaken by Negroes is the Afro-American Realty Company, of New York City. This company has perhaps been more widely advertised than any other business founded by colored men.

Some years ago a movement was started by a large white realty company to put the Negroes out of the houses occupied by them on West 135th Street, New York City, to rent them to white people. On this street the colored people lived without distinction. The respectable and the criminal, the healthy and the diseased were sometimes huddled together. The movement was started to force the Negroes out, into less desirable quarters.

At this time the Afro-American Realty Company came into existence. The man who originated this company was Philip A. Payton, Jr., who was then the president and general manager of the company.

Mr. Payton said:

I was born in Westfield, Massachusetts on the 27th day of February, 1876, the second of four children. My father was a barber and my mother a hairdresser. I received my education in the public schools of Westfield. My father taught all of my brothers and I the trade of the barber. He said, 'I am going to teach them a trade. The knowledge of it won't be a burden to carry, and when they become men they won't have to follow it if they are smart enough to follow another route.'

IN THE fall of 1893, during his junior year in the high school, his father conceived the idea that he had the wrong kinds of friends, and decided to send Philip away from home. From Westfield, he went to Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina. Philip was then in-

jured in a football game and kicked out of school. This ended his education.

After recovering from the football accident, he went in the barber shop of his father's to work and remained until age twenty-three, when he thought he would enter a new trade. So on April 10th, 1899, he left Westfield for New York.

In New York Mr. Payton was first a barber, from there he went into a real estate office as a porter. With the knowledge gained in the office, Philip A. Payton decided to open his own business. In October of 1899, he took the first successful step, along with a partner, naming the company Payton and Brown.

They opened an office on West 32nd Street near 8th Avenue. There they stayed all winter and though they took in less than \$125 their rent was \$20 per month. It doesn't take a wizard to figure out the condition of the company after running for six months. This condition encouraged Brown to quit, so in the spring of 1900, Mr. Payton took over his own business.

Times got worse for him but finally he swung a deal which netted him \$1,150. After that deal business picked up. In three years the company had title to \$250,000 worth of New York realty.

WHILE IN attendance at the meeting of the National Negro Business League in Richmond, Virginia, in 1902, he received the inspiration to organize the Afro-American Realty Company. The purpose being to buy the apartment buildings desired by the Negroes of that time.

Before he died he said: "I have not found my color and obstacle to my success. On the contrary, white people have been disposed to encourage me, and as soon as they learned that I was able to do the work they wanted done as well or better than others, there was no longer any question of color between us."

This man shows that when somebody, no matter their race, color or creed, wants to make something of themselves, they can, if they have the stamina and will power. His example also seems to show that his color helped instead of hindering his progress.

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NAT TURNER, INSURRECTIONIST

In reading HARPER (April 1965) I came across a man named Nat Turner. This quotation by a forgotten historian caught my fancy, "In 1831, a fanatical Negro slave named Nat Turner led a terrible insurrection in Southampton County, murdering many white people. The insurrection was immediately put down and for their cruel deeds, Nat Turner and most of the other Negroes involved were hanged."

The part of the "Black Belt" where this insurrection took place is in Virginia, where the Negro slave was taken for granted. On one hand the Negro was just part of the landscape noticed only as much as a mule or a tree. But at the same time they're ignored by the white people, they're thought of so much in the collective subconscious, that they form a monstrous dream, populated by dark identical faces of vagueness. Ralph Ellison said, "Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws of justice... without responding to the presence of the Negro."

TODAY many otherwise well informed people have never heard the name Nat Turner. There are several reasons for this ignorance. One is that the study of our history avoids such figures as blood-thirsty Nat. It disturbs our notion of the slave system. Another and a most important reason is the fact that there is little left of the Nat Turner record.

Nat Turner was born in 1800, which would have made him at the time of the insurrection, thirty-one years old. Although little is known for certain of Nat's childhood and youth, there can be no doubt that he was smart and that he learned to read and write. Thomas Gray, in a footnote to the "Confessions of Nat Turner" describes him as having the "true Negro face" and "for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, he is surpassed by few men I have ever seen."

At some time in his twenties, Nat, who had always been a Godly person became a Baptist preacher. His gifts for preaching, and prophecy, and his own magnetism seem to have been so extraordinary that he grew into a rather celebrated figure among the Negroes of this country.

AT ABOUT this time Nat began to withdraw into himself, fasting and praying, spending long hours in the wilds or in the swamp, where he thought he was being prepared for some great purpose.

Like all revolutions, that of Nat Turner un-

derwent many worrisome hesitations, false starts and delays; finally, however, on the night of Sunday, August 21st, 1831, Nat, together with five other Negroes in whom he had placed his confidence and trust, assembled in the woods near the home of his owner of the time, and commenced to carry out a plan of total annihilation. The final goal was the capture of the county seat.

There were guns and ammunition at the seat, and with these captured it was then Nat's purpose to sweep thirty miles eastward, gathering recruits on the way until the Great Dismal Swamp was reached.

On through the first day they marched, across the hot August fields, gaining guns and ammunition and a number of willing recruits. At mid-day on Monday their force had more than tripled, to the amount of nineteen, and nearly thirty white people lay dead. The Negroes, with now forty more by afternoon, pressed on toward the county seat, planning on the attack the following day.

BUT AT last resistance by the aroused whites and the appearance of the militia caused the rebels to disperse, only a mile or so from the seat.

Nat disappeared immediately after, and hid in the woods for two months, when near-starvation and the onset of autumnal cold drove him to surrender. He was executed, along with sixteen other Negroes who had figured large in the insurrection. Most of the others were transported south to the steaming fields of rice and cotton. On November 11, 1831, Nat was hanged from a live oak tree in the town square of Jerusalem.

Drewry in his book "The Southampton Insurrection" tells the final dispensation of Nat Turner: "The bodies of those executed, with one exception, were buried in a decent and becoming manner. That of Nat Turner's was delivered to doctors, who skinned it and made grease of the flesh."

THIS MAN met his death sooner because of (See HISTORY, page 11)

THIS WEEK IN NEGRO HISTORY

AN "NPI" FEATURE

- June 1, 1859 Henry O. Tanner, famous American Negro painter who achieved his greatest honors in Europe, was born in Pittsburgh, Pa.
- June 2, 1950 U.S. Supreme Court outlaws racial segregation in railroad dining cars in inter-state travel.
- June 3, 1887 Roland Hayes, noted tenor and concert singer who has achieved fame all over the world, now living in retirement, was born in Curryville, Ga., of a Cherokee Indian father and an American Negro mother.
- June 4, 1849 John Mercer Langston, lawyer, Congressman, from Virginia, abolitionist, minister to Haiti and acting president of Howard University, 1873-75, was graduated from Oberlin University.
- June 5, 1758 Frances Williams, one of the first Negro college graduates, startled academic world in the United States by publishing a poem in Latin.
- June 6, 1831 First annual national convention of "The People of Color" opened in Philadelphia.
- June 7, 1799 Alexander Pushkin, grandson of a noted African warrior who became Russia's foremost poet and writer, was born in Moscow.

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