



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1976

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The Long Journey from the back of the bus...

It is ironic that two unrelated incidents resulted in my tracing of 200 years of Contributions Blacks gave this nation as part of our Bicentennial Celebration, but the incidents happened.

The first presented itself when Gordon Parks, the celebrated movie director and musician and photographer (whom I first met a couple of decades ago around the Harlem Y), and I retreated to a next door bar to relieve ourselves for a few moments from our duties as honorary pall bearers at the Bier of the late and great Duke Ellington, in the Third Avenue Funeral Parlor where our mutual friend was laid out.

We retreated to the bar only to be joined by a stack of great names in show business, who, too, wanted to cry in their beers and tell some tall tales about their acquaintanceship with the great Duke. As the sauce flowed up and down the bar and between telephone calls that the cats made to their home and to friends, the conversation got around to why someone should document for posterity not only what the great Duke had done, but also what others of the craft who had gone ahead, like Langston Hughes and Andy Rosaff and Fats Waller had done.

Gordon thought I should do the documenting because he argued "You had years of writing about our trials with that newspaper (Pittsburgh Courier) and you have seen us in action."

I felt suckered and retaliated by accusing Gordon of wanting to get some facts for a movie script - So, I shouted back, "no, you do it - you have the proper medium. You have films and you have your camera."

Our conversation came to an abrupt halt when Thelma Carpenter came into the bar and chased us back to our post at Duke's bier.

Gordon left town after the funeral to go on location to film his "Leadbelly" movie. I returned to the office of the Borough President.

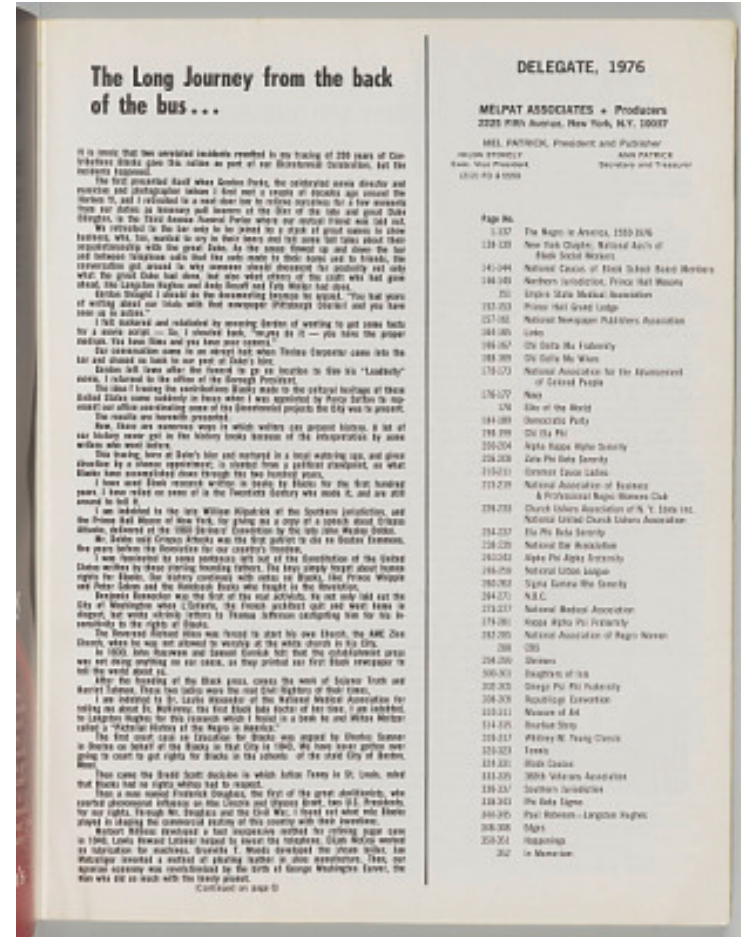
The idea of tracing the contributions Blacks made to the cultural heritage of these United States came suddenly in focus when I was appointed by Percy Sutton to represent our office coordinating some of the Bicentennial projects the City was to present.

The results are herewith presented:

Now there are numerous ways in which writers can present history. A lot of our history never got in the history books because of the interpretation by some writers who went before.

This tracing, born at Duke's bier and nurtured in a local watering spa, and given direction by a chance appointment, is slanted from a political standpoint, on what Blacks have accomplished down through the two hundred years.

I have used Black research written in books by Blacks for the first hundred years. I have relied on some of the Twentieth Century who made it, and are still around to tell it.



I am indebted to the late William Kilpatrick of the Southern jurisdiction, and the Prince Hall Mason of New York, for giving me a copy of a speech about Crispus Attucks, delivered at the 1960 Shriners' Convention by the late John Wesley Dobbs.

Mr. Dobbs said Crispus Attucks was the first patriot to die on Boston Commons, five years before the Revolution for our country's freedom.

I was fascinated by some sentences left out of the Constitution of the United States written by those sterling founding fathers. The boys simply forgot about human rights for Blacks. Our history continues with notes on Blacks, like Prince Whipple and Peter Salem and the Hancock Bucks who fought in the Revolution.

Benjamin Bannecker was the first of the real activists. He not only laid out the City of Washington when L'Enfante, the French architect quit and went home in disgust, but wrote vitriolic letters to Thomas Jefferson castigating him for his insensitivity to the rights of Blacks.

The Reverend Richard Allen was forced to start his own Church, the AME Zion Church, when he was not allowed to worship at the white church in his City.

In 1830, John Russwam and Samuel Cornish felt that the establishment press was not doing anything on our cause, so they printed our first Black newspaper to tell the world about us.

After the founding of the Black press, comes the work of Sojuner Truth and Harriet Tubman. These two ladies were the real Civil Righters of their times.

I am indebted to Dr. Leslie Alexander of the National Medical Association for telling me about Dr. McKinney, the first Black lady doctor of her time. I am indebted, to Langston Hughes for this research which I found in a book he and Milton Meltzer called a "Pictorial History of the Negro in America."

The first court case on Education for Blacks was argued by Charles Sumner in Boston on behalf of the Blacks in that City in 1843. We have never gotten over going to court to get rights for Blacks in the schools of the staid City of Boston, Mass.

Then came the Dredd Scott decision in which Justice Toney in St. Louis, rules that Blacks had no rights whites had to respect.

Then a man named Frederick Douglass, the first of the great abolitionists, who exerted phenomenal influence on Abe Lincoln and Ulysses Grant, two U.S. Presidents, for our rights. Through Mr. Douglass and the Civil War, I found out what role Blacks played in shaping the commercial destiny of this country with their inventions.

Norbert Rillieux developed a fast inexpensive method for refining sugar cane in 1846. Lewis Howard Latimer helped to invent the telephone. Elijah McCoy worked on lubrication for machines. Granville T. Woods

developed the steam boiler. Jan Matzeliger invented a method of pleating leather in shoe manufacture. Then, our agrarian economy was revolutionized by the birth of George Washington Carver, the man who did so much with the lonely peanut.
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