Before the Mayflower

A History of Black America

Sixth Edition

Lerone Bennett Jr.

PENGUIN BOOKS

BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

Lerone Bennett Jr. is a social historian and the author of nine books on the life and history of black Americans. A graduate of Morehouse College, he was visiting professor of history at Northwestern University in 1968–69 and Senior Fellow of the Institute of the Black World in 1969. He was named senior editor of *Ebony* in 1958 and executive editor in 1987. His articles have earned him an enviable reputation as one of the most eloquent, scholarly, and readable of American writers. In 1978 he received the Literature Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Mr. Bennett has served as advisor and consultant to several national organizations and commissions, including the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. His poems, short stories, and articles have been translated into French, German, Japanese, Swedish, and Arabic. Mr. Bennett is the author of *The Shaping of Black America*, also available in Penguin Books.
Highlight the two ways Bennett uses citations to help determine whether his analysis is valid.

- [ ] Formal Citations
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Find the SOAPSTone:
- Speaker / Occasion / Audience / Purpose / Subject / Tone

LEFT Side Notes:
- What does the author say?
- How does the author use logic?

RIGHT Side Notes:
- What does the author say?
- How does the author use logic?

A large proportion of the first generation of African-Americans entered America with Spanish names. For reasons that are not readily apparent, many black males were called Antonio, a name that quickly became Antoney or Anthony. Other popular names of the period included Michaela, Couchaxello, Mingo, Pedro, Francisco, Jibina, Maria, Worton, Tomor, Angol, and Tony Kongo. Shortly after their arrival in America, many blacks discarded African and Spanish names and adopted English titles. Thus within the span of a generation the black soul moved from Africa to England to Spain to America — from the X of the severed African family tree to Antonio and the William X or the William of the first native American black, who apparently had no surname at the time of his christening.

During the next forty-odd years, hundreds of Africans made that extraordinary cultural leap. In 1625 Brase, another victim of piracy, was brought into the colony. Four years later, in 1629, there was a substantial increase in the black population when the first ship from Africa arrived at Port Comfort, bringing blacks captured from a Portuguese ship off the coast of Africa. In the 1630s and 1640s approximately 160 blacks were imported. By 1649 colonial officials were able to report that “there are in Virginia about fifteen thousand English, and of Negroes brought thither, three hundred good servants.”
The “good servants” came from different backgrounds with different experiences. Quite a few, as we have noted, came from England, where blacks had lived since the middle of the sixteenth century. Many came from Spain, Portugal and the West Indies. Significantly, many were Christians, baptized either in Spain or Portugal or on the high seas. In 1624 John Philip testified in a Jamestown court and his testimony against a white man was admitted because he had been “christened in England twelve years since...”

In a limited but nonetheless significant sense, then, the Jamestown experience was an open experience which provided unusual opportunities for individual blacks. This comes out most clearly in the life and times of Anthony Johnson, who came to America in 1621 or thereabouts from England. Like many other blacks of the period, Johnson quickly worked out his term of indenture and started accumulating property. In 1651, according to official records, he imported and paid for five servants, some of whom were white, and was granted 250 acres of land on the basis of the headright system, which permitted planters to claim fifty acres of land for each individual brought to the colony.

The abstract of the deed reads as follows:

ANTHONY JOHNSON, 250 aces. Northampton Co., 24 July 1651... At great Naswattock Cr., being a neck of land bounded on the S.W. by the maine Cr. & on S.E. & N.W. by two small branches issuing out of the mayne Cr. Trans. of 5 pers: Tho. Bemrose, Peter Bughby, Antho. Cripps, Jno. Gesororo, Richard Johnson.

In the years that followed, Johnson and his relatives established one of America’s first black communities on the banks of the Pungoteague River. In 1652 John Johnson, who was probably Anthony Johnson’s son, imported eleven persons, most of them white males and females, and received headrights for 550 acres adjacent to Anthony Johnson. Two years later Richard Johnson imported two white indentured servants and received one hundred acres. Here are the records of the deeds:


The Johnson settlement at its height included only a handful of blacks with large holdings. Other blacks lived in integrated communities in other areas of the colony. In 1656, for instance, Benjamin Doyle received a patent for three hundred acres in Surry County. In 1668 John Harris bought fifty acres in New Kent County; and Phillip Morgan, reflecting the optimism of the age, leased two hundred acres in York County for ninety-nine years.

One can hardly doubt, in the face of this clear evidence, that the first generation of blacks had, as J. H. Russell noted, “about the same industrial or economic opportunities as the free white servant.” Additional evidence of the relatively high status of the first American blacks is to be found in colonial documents which indicate that they voted and participated in public life. It was not until 1723, in fact, that blacks were denied the right to vote in Virginia. According to Albert E. McKinley, blacks voted in South Carolina until 1701, in North Carolina until 1715, and in Georgia until 1754. Not only did pioneer blacks vote, but they also held public office. There was a black surety in York County, Virginia, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, and a black beadle in Lancaster County, Virginia.

Nor was this sort of thing confined to Virginia. The first blacks in Massachusetts—they arrived in 1638 on the Desire, America’s first slave ship—were apparently assigned the status of indentured servants. In his classic work, The Negro in Colonial New England, Lorenzo J. Greene said that “until almost the end of the seventeenth century the records refer to the Negroes as ‘servants’ not as ‘slaves.’ For some time no definite status could be assigned to incoming Negroes. Some were sold for a period of time only, and like the white indentured servants became free after their indenture.”
The available evidence suggests that most of the first generation of African-Americans worked out their terms of servitude and were freed. A very interesting and instructive case in point is that of Richard Johnson, a black carpenter who came to Virginia in 1651 as a free man and signed a contract of indenture. Within two years Johnson was a free man. Within three years he was acquiring pounds and property and servants.

In addition to Johnson and other blacks who were freed as a matter of course, the record lists other cases in which colonial courts freed black servants. Such a case was that of Andrew Moore, who migrated to Virginia and bound himself out for a term of five years. In October, 1673, the General Court "ordered that the Said Moore bee free from his said master, and that the Said Mr. Light pay him Corne and Clothes according to the Custome of the Country and four hundred pounds tobac and Caske for his service done him Since he was free, and pay costs."

Looking back on that age from our own, one is struck by what can only be called equality of oppression. Not the least among the things that startle us in this period is that the colony's power structure made little or no distinction between black and white servants, who were assigned the same tasks and were held in equal contempt. This has caused no end of trouble for latter-day white historians, who have tried to explain away a record that is understandably astonishing in view of the later practices of some whites. It is interesting, for example, to observe that many white historians deny that white women worked in the fields. But contemporary witnesses tell us in no uncertain terms that white women not only worked in the fields but were also flogged at colonial whipping posts. There are also court records in which white women asked the courts to relieve them of this burden. Historian Philip A. Bruce conceded this point and commented with disapproval: "The class of white women who were required to work in the fields belonged to the lowest rank in point of character; not having been born in Virginia and not having thus acquired from birth a repugnance to associations with Africans upon a footing of social equality, they yielded to the temptations of the situations in which they were placed."

There is contradictory testimony which indicates that character, Bruce to the contrary notwithstanding, had little or nothing to do with the status of white servants. "They became in the eyes of the law," J. B. McMaster said, "a slave and in both the civil and criminal codes were classed with the Negro and the Indian. They were worked hard, were dressed in the cast off clothes of their owners, and might be flogged as often as the master and mistress thought necessary." There is also the testimony of T. J. Wertenbaker, who said that "the indentured servants...were practically slaves, being bound to the soil and forced to obey implicitly those whom they served."

Working together in the same fields, sharing the same huts, the same situation, and the same grievances, the first black and white Americans, aristocrats excepted, developed strong bonds of sympathy and mutuality. They ran away together, played together and revolted together. They mated and married, siring a sizeable mixed population. In the process the black and white servants—the majority of the colonial population—created a racial wonderland that seems somehow un-American in its lack of obsession about race and color. There was, to be sure, prejudice then, but it was largely English class prejudice which was distributed without regard to race, creed or color. There were also, needless to say, prejudiced individuals in the colony, but—and this is the fundamental difference between prejudice and racism—their personal quirks and obsessions were not focused and directed by the organized will of a community. The basic division at that juncture was between servants and free people, and there were whites and blacks on both sides of the line.

Of all the improbable aspects of this situation, the oddest—to modern blacks and whites—is that white people did not seem to know that they were white. It appears from surviving evidence that the first white colonists had no concept of themselves as white people. The legal documents identified whites as Englishmen and/or Christians. The word white, with its burden of arrogance and biological pride, developed late in the century, as a direct result of slavery and the organized debasement of blacks. The same point can be made from the other side of the line. For a long time in colonial America, there was no legal name to focus white anxiety. The first blacks were called Blackamoors, Moors, Negers and Negars. The word Negro, a Spanish and Portuguese term for black, did not come into general use in Virginia until the latter part of the century.
A similar course of development was roughly characteristic of New York, where the black settlement preceded the English and the name New York. There are records from 1626 identifying eleven blacks—about 5 per cent of the non-Indian population—who were servants of the Dutch West Indian Company. The eleven black pioneers were males. Responding to the pleas of these males, the Dutch imported three women, identified as “Angolans,” in 1628.

In 1644, some eighteen years after their arrival, the “Dutch Negroes,” as they were called, filed a petition for freedom, the first black legal protest in America. The petition was granted by the Council of New Netherlands, which freed the blacks because they had “served the Company seventeen or eighteen years” and had been “long since promised their freedom on the same footing as other free people in New Netherlands.” The eleven blacks cited in the petition were Paul d’Angola, Big Manuel, Little Manuel, Manuel de Gerrit de Rens, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, Gracia, Peter Santome, John Francisco, Little Anthony and John Fort Orange. All received parcels of land in what is now Greenwich Village.

What is essential to grasp about the first blacks in New York is that they stood on the same footing as white indentured servants from the very beginning. “They had almost full freedom of motion and assembly,” James Weldon Johnson wrote in Black Manhattan. “They were allowed to marry; wives and daughters had legal protection against the lechery of masters, and they had the right to acquire and hold property.”

What has been outlined above with reference to New York and Virginia holds good also—though with minor variations—for other colonies, including Pennsylvania, where the system of black indentured servitude was so deeply rooted that black servants outnumbered black slaves at the time of the Revolution.