

Unique Black Women Cont'd.

were being raided by European slave traders. Consequently, her army grew larger and more powerful. During her reign of about sixty years, Angola prospered and remained free of European rule. Upon her death in 1663, the Portuguese were able to do that which they could not do while Nzinga was alive.



Queen Nzinga

"THE COLONIES"

Although millions of African women were captured and transported to western shores, the spirit of Nzinga and her predecessors was never completely lost.

On the "Middle Passage," as the Atlantic trip has been called, numberless nameless heroines jumped to their death when they were allowed on deck for air; suffered self-mutilation, or willed themselves to death by fasting or swallowing foreign objects. Those that embarked upon these shores found other ways to resist the negative impact that slavery placed upon the human soul.

Initially, however, it should be noted that Blacks were brought here as indentured servants; required to serve a specified length of time before they were given their freedom. Records indicate that in the first half of the 17th century, most Africans "enjoyed" this kind of servitude, and free Blacks were to be found in just about every colony. The numbers of white males and females in the early years of colonization also brought about intermarriages between the colonists and indentured Black women.

This freedom was short-lived, however, for the colonists found that the continuing importation of Africans greatly increased the agricultural output and Virginia became the first of the colonies to pass laws that sharply defined the status of Blacks.

In 1661, a Virginia statute recognized the institution of slavery, and in 1662 the most important statute affecting Blacks was passed in that state. It read:

Children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall bond or free according to the condition of the mother, and if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, he shall pay double the fines of a former act."

Because of the aforementioned shortage of white females, this statute had a terrific impact upon Black children, since only through the mother could they become slaves! Had mulatto children acquired the status of their father, they would have been born free. This allowed white masters to freely exploit their Black female slaves and to establish breeding farms.

Throughout this period, Blacks who had converted to Christianity were exempt from slavery once their term of indenture was completed. However, in 1667, a law was passed that declared baptism to be no deterrent to bring or remain a slave; and in 1669 the rights of free Black women were resisted. They would remain free, but they could not enjoy the same freedoms as white women. Finally, in 1723, free Blacks became disenfranchised: No longer could they vote or hold office.

And so slavery began with all of the colonies eventually enacting slave codes, so that by the time the 18th century began in earnest, slavery was the law of the land.

"THE NORTH"

As one goes further north in this country, it may be noticed that the climate is less conducive to the development of a strong agrarian economy. It was this factor that served to inhibit the growth of slavery in the northern colonies, and fostered a more tolerant attitude towards people.

This is not to say that slaves could not be found in the North, but they were nowhere in the numbers found in the South. Generally they were used in the domestic services and as artisans rather than as field hands. Although not free, they were ruled with a more relaxed hand and did not always suffer the kinds of degradations and cruelty that their southern counterparts withstood.

So, emboldened by this apparent freedom, in 1773 a petition was delivered by a slave to the House of Representatives in Massachusetts to eliminate slavery. Such a bill was drafted by Samuel Adams, John Hancock and John Pickering. It was passed by the House and Council. However, the governor did not sign the bill into law.

Jenny Slew was the next testor of New England tolerance, for she went to court in Essex, Massachusetts in 1776 to complain of having been forcibly enslaved since 1762 by a John Whipple. Her suit alleged that she had been "...held and kept in servitude... without any lawful right and authority...(and) did her other injuries against the peace and to the damage of (her)."

Whipple used as his defense that there was no such person as "Jenny Slew." He was acquitted and awarded four pounds. One wonders how one can receive an award from a non-existent person! Apparently the Judge of the Superior Court felt the same way, for when Jenny appealed, she won a reversal and her four pounds was returned.

Although Jenny won her freedom, it would not be until an act of cruelty against another slave in Massachusetts forced a real challenge against slavery in that state that did, indeed, speak to all persons and finally established a true Bill of Rights.

One Elizabeth Freeman, known as "Mum Bett," and her sister were owned by a family named Ashley. Angered over some action by Mum Bett's sister, the mistress attempted to strike the girl with a heavy implement. Bett protected her sister and received the blow instead, which left a deep scar upon her arms. Bett and her sister ran away and refused to return to the Ashley homestead.

Ashley then went to court to secure the return of his slaves, and Bett hired a lawyer. Sedgewick, her attorney, argued that the Bill of Rights declared that "...all (were) born free and equal." The jury found in Mum Bett's favor, and it awarded her money for damages. This case established the abolishment of slavery in Massachusetts, the first state to do so.

Lucy Terry Prince also sought justice. Born in Africa in 1730, she became a slave to a family in Deerfield, Mass. At the age of 16, she wrote, and had published, a poem about an Indian raid that took place nearby. This poem appears to be the only accurate detailed recording of the massacre. This marks Lucy Terry (Prince) as the first Black to publish in the U.S.

Married to Abijah Prince, he won his freedom and that of his wife either by service in the militia, where he fought gallantly against the Indians; or by manumission by his master. (The exact cause is unknown.) In addition, his master gave him some land in Northfield, Mass. Prince also applied to King George III and the governor of New Hampshire. He was one of 55 settlers who founded Sunderland, Vt. This was in addition to a 100 acre farm they owned in Guilford, Vt.

Lucy and Abijah were industrious and developed their property in Guilford into a model farm; so much so that it became a target of some of their white neighbors who sorely wanted it. The vandalism that the Prince's suffered caused Lucy to cross the state by horseback to appeal to the Governor's Council. She won, and the farm remained in their hands until Lucy's death in 1803.

When the Prince's son came of age to enter college, he attempted to enroll in Williams College, but this was denied. Ironically, the founder of the college had married Lucy and Abijah, but he had left instructions in his will that no Black student be admitted.

Once more Lucy's property was endangered, and once more she appealed to the court. When a boundary line on their Sunderland property was in dispute, she sued her white antagonist in Vermont's Supreme Court, pled her case, and won. The presiding judge said that Lucy "...made a better argument than he had heard from any lawyer at the Vermont bar." Until she died at

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MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

A statue of Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune has been erected in Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C.

She was born on a plantation in Mayesville, South Carolina, and worked in the cotton fields until she was fifteen years old.

A benevolent dressmaker financed her education in Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina, and she graduated from this institution in 1893. She went to Chicago, where she received a two year scholarship to attend the Moody Bible Institute with the intention of becoming a missionary in Africa.

Mrs. Bethune returned to the south to teach at Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia. An ambitious and dynamic woman endowed with much foresight and a yearning to start a school of her own, she journeyed to the east coast of Florida to set up a school for Black railroad laborers' children. Thus, the Bethune-Cookman College was established in Daytona, Florida in 1904 with one dollar and fifty cents, and five pupils.

She rang doorbells, sent out news releases to whoever would print them, distributed leaflets, and spoke to churches and clubs, for support to build a school for Black children along the squalor of the Florida Coast. The school grew to educate thousands of Blacks each year.

Mrs. Bethune became nationally known for her efforts to build, almost single-handedly, the Bethune-Cookman College. As a dynamic leader she was in demand as a speaker to organizations and colleges throughout the world. She was an advisor to President F. D. Roosevelt on Black affairs and was a consultant to the founding conference of the United Nations. She received many awards such as the NAACP Springarn Award in 1935 for distinguished achievement in education, the Gold Medal of Merit from the Republic of Haiti, the Thomas Jefferson Award, from the Southern Conference of Human Welfare, the African Star of the



Republic of Liberia and the Dorie Miller Award. She served as Director of the American Red Cross in the State of Florida and was the founder of the National Council of Negro Women. For many years she served as president of the Association for The Study of Negro Life and History. A great Black American, she came from the cotton fields of South Carolina, to heights achieved by no woman in the field of education and public services.

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